

THE NEXT PHASE FOR CT'S EARLY CHILDHOOD STATE-LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS:

Building a Strong Statewide Early Childhood Network
through Early Start CT's Local Governance Partners

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THE CT EARLY CHILDHOOD FUNDER COLLABORATIVE

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The Next Phase for CT’s Early Childhood State-Local Partnerships:

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CONNECTICUT’S CHALLENGE

Connecticut has an incomplete state network of local early childhood collaboratives that have a long history of:

- Providing families information and serving as navigators to community services and supports
- Supporting and monitoring state-funded child care (School Readiness)
- Raising family and community voice about their challenges and how well state and community resources are meeting their needs
- Providing input at the state level not only of how our families and communities are faring but also sharing local solutions so that as a state we can better support Connecticut’s young children and their families.

As a state that strives to be family friendly, how does Connecticut not only maintain the capacity of the current state-local partnership network, but also build it into a **robust statewide early childhood network of Local Governance Partners** that leads to better outcomes for our youngest citizens and their families.

Introduction

The Connecticut Early Childhood Funder Collaborative (CT ECFC) and its members have had a long history and interest in state-local partnerships to inform and strengthen Connecticut's early childhood system. Many of our members have been long term supporters of Local Early Childhood Collaboratives. The Graustein Memorial Fund, a founding member of CT ECFC, played a pivotal role in helping to establish Local Early Childhood Collaboratives and providing substantive support for almost 15 years.

More recently CT ECFC commissioned a 2016 report by Karen Ponder, *Framework for Connecticut's Statewide System of Early Childhood State and Local Partnerships*¹ which laid out recommendations for further development of Connecticut's current network of local early childhood collaboratives and the creation of a state level intermediary.

The Connecticut Office of Early Childhood is currently leading efforts to implement Early Start CT (ESCT) which includes the creation of Local Governance Partners (LGPs) to 'engage families, support programs, and conduct a local needs assessment to understand a community's needs' starting July 1, 2025. The LGP network will replace the current network of School Readiness Councils and Local Early Childhood Councils (many one and the same).

This position paper reflects CT ECFC's ongoing commitment to work in partnership with the CT Office of Early Childhood and other key stakeholders to "build and sustain a comprehensive early childhood system that works for all children, families, communities and the workforce in Connecticut." We believe that strong, well-defined state-local partnerships are key to the healthy development and school readiness of our youngest residents, ages birth to 5 years old, and an indispensable support to their families who are all facing challenges on multiple fronts.

This paper has drawn on (a) publications about past work in our state around local early childhood collaboratives/councils, (b) the experience of other states, and (c) recent input from key stakeholders in Connecticut, especially School Readiness Liaisons and the Local Early Childhood Collaboratives, as well as what we learned from families last year in the CT ECFC sponsored survey project.² Our intent is to help shape the vision, purpose, functions, and structure for a reorganized and expanded network of local early childhood collaboratives that are responsive to community and family needs and adequately resourced to be an effective, long-term part of our state's early childhood system.



1. Vision and Purpose of Early Childhood State-Local Partnerships

“Local partnerships are created to convene their communities around early childhood issues to assure that all children have their developmental, health, and early learning needs met and that their **families are supported and engaged as leaders**. The local partnership table is the place where planning, coordinating, and problem solving takes place, where family voices are heard and local assessments of the needs and challenges of all children within a defined geographical area are understood.”

Ponder, *Framework for Connecticut’s Statewide System of Early Childhood State and Local Partnerships*

In the 1990’s several states started to create local early childhood councils/collaboratives. The two most common reasons they sought to connect state and local work were: (1) to respond to parents and providers who were frustrated with trying to navigate the myriad of programs and services that operate with different rules and guidelines; and (2) to address the challenges and gaps in services due to a lack of alignment between the state’s programs and services.³ More than 20 states have put in place state-local models of early childhood governance.

Most of these state-local partnership systems seek outcomes around:

- Improving early care and education: including increasing access (both in terms of availability and affordability) and improving quality,
- Increasing coordination and alignment among a broad array of public and private stakeholders who provide services and/or engage with families with young children
- Engaging and supporting families by connecting families with needed services and information leading to improved developmental outcomes of children and encouraging families to have a voice in developing program and policy solutions to improve local and state systems.

Connecticut has a state-local partnership network that has developed over the last thirty years, but has never covered the whole state. Today, this network includes 91 towns (of 169) which accounts for just over half births in the state.⁴ Legislation was passed during the 2024 session creating Early Start CT (ESCT) to consolidate the state funded early care and education system. It also calls for the creation of Local Governance Partners (LGPs), a new structure for state-local work.

This restructuring provides an opportunity for our state to keep what has been effective to date, develop a more clearly articulated and aligned system that is statewide, and build a plan to ensure that all families in the state’s 169 communities are represented in this network. Key to the success of this effort is to clearly define goals and outcomes and to develop data systems that can help measure the impact of state-local partnership work. The Ponder Framework report stressed that, early in the process of organizing or reorganizing a statewide system of local partnerships, it is critical to address ‘how to measure the success of the local work, both statewide and as individual partnerships.’

RECOMMENDATIONS

1.1. A **clear vision and purpose** for Local Governance Partners needs to be defined, including the articulation and alignment of the expected outcomes to which all partners, including state partners, will work towards.

1.2. The scope of Connecticut's state-local partnership should also be clearly defined including that:

1.2.1. It not be limited to early care and education, but include a focus on the broader early childhood system including promotion of child development (including health and mental health), family supports, and family engagement and leadership.

1.2.2. It only require a minimal threshold of ALL Local Governance Partners, but give individual LGPs the authority to address any early childhood system areas that emerge as priorities in the communities served

1.2.3. It define the age range (birth to five, required? birth to eight, optional?)



2. History of Early Childhood State-Local Partnerships in Connecticut

Connecticut has a long history of early childhood state-local partnerships. Our state's efforts started in the 1990s – as in several other states – and has involved ongoing public-private collaboration in the process. To understand the current network of local early childhood collaboratives and School Readiness Councils, and to effectively plan moving forward, it is important to understand how Connecticut's state-local partnerships have evolved. Despite the impressive work in the past almost thirty years, the network of state-local partnerships has never been a statewide system and has created imbalances and inequities.

Work of the Graustein Memorial Fund

In 1995 the Graustein Memorial Fund engaged seven communities in its Children First Initiative (CFI) to promote local planning and engagement of a broad array of local stakeholders. One of the primary goals of CFI was to engage parents and citizens with systems designed to enhance children's development, school readiness, and health outcomes.⁵

Based on the lessons learned in that process, Graustein expanded that work in 2001 with the Discovery Initiative, which “provided multi-year support for local early childhood councils in 46 communities, which eventually grew to 54 communities across the state.”⁶ The focus of their work was on children birth to 8 years old.

Creation of Connecticut's School Readiness Program and School Readiness Councils

In 1997, the state of Connecticut enacted the School Readiness Program in 63 of the state's 169 communities and established local School Readiness Councils (SRC) to guide the implementation of this program.⁷ This was an innovative program not only because it created a significant number of new state funded preschool slots for three and four year olds, but because it gave local Early Childhood Councils the authority to allocate and administer this new funding for local early childhood providers. The School Readiness Liaison, as a required position, was tasked with “coordination, program evaluation, and administration of the School Readiness Grant” and to serve as contact between the local or regional SRC and the OEC⁸. Their focus has been on children up to 5 years old, but mostly on 3- and 4-year-olds.

Development of Local Early Childhood Councils

Throughout the early 2000's, the work around early childhood in communities with a Discovery Initiative and/or a School Readiness Council took hold and were showing results (e.g., increased percentage of children entering Kindergarten with pre-school experience; improved health forms and data collection to track health outcomes; addressed issues affecting chronic absenteeism and improved attendance). The idea of local early childhood councils, to be implemented across the state, became an increasingly supported state policy strategy.⁹

Notably the *Connecticut Early Childhood Partners Strategic Plan 2006-2008* facilitated by Connecticut's Department of Public Health emphasized the importance of local early childhood collaboratives to “ensure the provision of integrated services” and recommended that state resources be invested in the early childhood collaboratives and that they be engaged in state agency planning and service design.

That plan also reinforced the role of families emphasizing that parents (i) should be involved as partners in the planning and delivery of all early childhood services, (ii) be provided skills and knowledge to nurture their children's development, (iii) have access to information and services to effect optimal child health and development as well as access to economic, social support and education services to promote self-sufficiency.

A 2012 Graustein report summarized the importance of LECCs.

Local Early Childhood Councils understand that services to children and families in Connecticut, as in many states, are fragmented or siloed. Accessing the support a family needs to raise healthy, successful children is challenging, particularly for the most vulnerable families. Not only do families have to deal with many organizations, but the services themselves may be riddled with inconsistencies or rife with redundancies. Institutional barriers often impede providers from sharing information or resources....

Community experience indicates that solutions that are categorical, have a narrow program focus, or are based in a single organization cannot achieve large-scale change with respect to complex social problems such as early care and education. The focus needs to be on child outcomes.

To overcome these barriers and effectively support young children, local councils have brought together residents, parents, and a broad range of service providers for a common purpose: to develop birth-to-age-eight community blueprints...(that) create a local framework for collaboration and accountability in response to family needs across the domains of early care, early education, social, emotional and physical health, and family support.¹⁰

Initially there was little cohesion between the School Readiness Councils and the Discovery Community Councils. But from 2010-2012, the Memorial Fund in partnership with the State Department of Education and the Children's Fund of Connecticut invited all the Discovery communities to develop a community plan and establish a single Local Early Childhood Council (LECC) by aligning Discovery and School Readiness Councils (SRC).¹¹ This work led to the joining together of these efforts in the majority of communities that had both an LECC and an SRC.

The Graustein Memorial Fund ended up investing \$50 million in the Discovery Initiative from 2000-2016, which was also supported in part by the State of Connecticut, as well as substantial investment by state and local philanthropy and local government.¹² Local philanthropy and local governments have continued to invest in these local collaboratives, often leveraged by School Readiness funding; but current blended funding has not been adequate to sustain the network of local collaboratives which peaked at 54 around 2010. As a result, today there are 37 remaining Local Early Childhood Collaboratives.

Creation of the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood

Established in 2014 and developed through a public-private partnership with the Connecticut Early Childhood Funder Collaborative, the Office of Early Childhood (OEC) was created as a cabinet-level agency to "improve the delivery of early childhood services for children in Connecticut," incorporating early childhood programs from the Departments of Education, Social Services, Board of Regents, Developmental Services, and Public Health.¹³

The OEC assumed responsibility of the funding and oversight of the School Readiness Program and, at the same time, benefitted from the relationships with the local early childhood collaboratives to implement and support OEC programs such as developmental screening (Sparkler), home visiting, and others.

COVID brought to light the value of the local early childhood collaboratives as they were able to provide a critical ground view of the impact of the pandemic and were instrumental in distributing sorely needed resources and information to families and providers. Nationally, responses to the economic, racial and health crises catalyzed by Covid-19 appear to have been more robust and tailored in states that had developed infrastructure at the community level.¹⁴

However, apart from School Readiness, there has been limited state funding invested in the Local Early Childhood Collaboratives. The hope with the creation of the OEC was that there would be greater investments in the state-local partnerships, as philanthropy was looking to the state to take on more responsibility for

sustaining this network of state-local partnerships. From 2019 to 2023, the OEC was able to provide support to 24 collaboratives using monies from a federal Pre-School Development Grant (PDG) including the development of a network of Parent Ambassadors affiliated with each Local Early Childhood Collaborative. The OEC invested ARPA monies and limited state funds in 2024 to maintain the existing, but fragile network of local collaboratives.

There were also concerns about how to provide ongoing technical and networking support of this network as well as a desire that the network be expanded across the state. In 2016, the Connecticut Early Childhood Funder Collaborative commissioned a paper by Karen Ponder – *Framework for Connecticut’s Statewide System of Early Childhood State and Local Partnerships*.¹⁵ Most of the recommendations in that report are still valid today and should inform the work of creating the Local Governance Partners.

Creation of a Statewide Intermediary

One of the primary recommendations in that report that was implemented with support of CT ECFC was the creation of a statewide intermediary. In 2018 CT ECFC selected and funded the Connecticut Network for Children & Youth (then the Connecticut After School Network) to help plan and create a new statewide intermediary – the Connecticut Children’s Collective - to support the existing network of Local Early Childhood Collaboratives. (See Section 6: Support for the LGP Network for more on the role of a state intermediary and the creation of the Connecticut Children’s Collective)



3. State-Local Partnerships Systems in Other States

Many other states recognize the value of state-local partnerships – the experience of at least 20 states have been documented in numerous studies.¹⁶ States use different terms such as public-private partnerships, collaboratives, councils, hubs, but regardless of the name, all have a commitment to make connections to and among families, programs and the state’s early childhood governance system.¹⁷

To help inform this report, CT ECFC, in partnership with the Connecticut Children’s Collective, invited representatives from two statewide networks – North Carolina’s Smart Start Partnership for Children and Colorado’s Early Childhood Council Leadership Alliance (ECCLA) – to share with their Connecticut peers how North Carolina and Colorado operate and their experiences working with communities and public partners at the county and state level. *

COLORADO¹⁸

Early Childhood Councils serve as the hub for local early childhood services, “connecting the dots” between agencies and service providers, coordinating needs assessments and strategic plans to ensure services meet local needs, supporting professionals and families, and bringing resources to their communities.

History: In 1997, the state focused on building strong public-private collaboration by piloting the Consolidated Child Care Program in 12 communities to strengthen and align resources, and effectively serve young children.

In 2007 legislation renamed the pilot communities to “Early Childhood Councils” allowing for coverage of all 64 Colorado counties through an application and funding process. The legislation established a common purpose for Councils to develop and implement a comprehensive system of early childhood services to ensure the school readiness of children 0-5 years old in the areas of early care and education, family support, mental health, and health.

By 2014, 31 Councils were serving 58 Colorado counties (Today 35 Councils serve all 64 counties). Also in 2014, the state intermediary ECCLA - created by the councils - became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit membership association.



* Our thanks to Maegan Lokteff, PhD, Executive Director of the Early Childhood Council Leadership Alliance (ECCLA) in Colorado and Heather Adams, Executive Director of the Guilford County Partnership for Children – a partner in the Smart Start Network in North Carolina.

Core functions of Colorado Early Childhood Councils

- Partnerships and Engagement – Convening community partners to share info and resources, identify issues and problem solve while advancing robust public engagement
- Capacity Building and Sustainability – Providing continuous community-wide assessments, strategies, planning, data collections and monitoring to build and sustain local capacity for improvement of early childhood systems
- Advocacy and Policy Development – advocating and educating the community, policymakers, and families
- *Professional Development and Leadership* – Advancing the knowledge and skills of early childhood providers, educators, and families to support the healthy development of young children
- *Grant and Fiscal Management* – Stewarding funds to improve local early childhood services and supports¹⁹

The Councils seek impact in the following areas:

- improve the quality of early learning environments to prepare young children to enter kindergarten;
- build the resources and skills of families;
- ensure that families have access to social, physical, and mental health services; and
- deliver resources to increase the effectiveness of early childhood professionals.²⁰

Structure

Councils are locally governed and coordinated with local partners. About half of these councils are non-profits and about half have fiscal agents. Of those that have fiscal agents, about half are housed in county or municipal government. In small areas, a council might have 1-2 employees, but larger ones have as many as 15-20 people.

Funding

Every Council receives base funding for “system building” (has been approximately \$2.3 million annually excluding stimulus dollars) which ECCLA and the councils have pushed to be higher to provide “a meaningful minimum.” They also manage state dollars to address quality improvement (an additional \$4 million), providing coaching and materials to providers. Almost all of the Councils receive funding from the county or municipal government and, when possible, also from philanthropy.

NORTH CAROLINA

History

North Carolina was one of the first states to establish a system of state-local partnerships. Former North Carolina governor Jim Hunt launched Smart Start in 1993 with legislation that also established the North Carolina Partnership for Children, a nonprofit organization that provides technical assistance and oversight for Smart Start statewide. He believed that if you did not start supporting children early, the state would not have a qualified workforce. The intent was that each county would have enough money to meet 25% of the unmet need in the county. Starting with 18 counties, Smart Start expanded each year and now encompasses all 100 counties in the state.²¹

Functions of North Carolina Local Partnerships

- Working with community organizations to improve coordination and alignment of services for children and families
- Ensuring early education is high quality, child-focused, family-friendly, and more easily accessible to families
- Providing financial assistance to help families access early education
- Supporting the increase in compensation of the early childhood workforce, particularly child care providers and teachers

- Supporting the local infrastructure of North Carolina Pre-K with financial resources and training
- Advancing child health and development through partnerships with early care and education programs and medical practices
- Supporting families with programs that improve parenting skills and encourage family engagement in children’s development and education
- Promoting early literacy with programs that assist parents, teachers, and medical providers²²

North Carolina’s system has been used as a model for many other states in large part because it has proven effective. “The power of Smart Start is that it delivers outcomes by giving communities local control to determine the best approach to achieving them.”²³

Structure

All 100 counties in the state are covered by 75 local partnership which vary in size serving anywhere between 1000 – 35,000 children age 0-5. All local partnerships are independent non-profit organizations.

Smart Start’s success is based on a few key elements: local decision making, community planning and collaboration, and a comprehensive approach to reach all children. Each local partnership develops a comprehensive plan that targets the community’s greatest needs across three core service areas: child care (quality, affordability, and availability), health, and family support. Each part of this plan must connect to measurable outcomes, and services must not duplicate existing statewide or local efforts.

Bryant and Ponder, North Carolina’s Smart Start Initiative: A Decade of Evaluation Lessons

There is a statewide umbrella organization – The North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC) – that guides and facilitates the Smart Start Network, supporting the work of local partnerships and connecting them to the statewide early childhood system.

In the 2022-2023 fiscal year, Local Partnership expenditures of state Smart Start funds totaled \$150.7 million. Of this \$150.7 million, \$65.4 million was spent on subsidy; \$39.7 million towards early care and education expenses such as child care, teacher technical assistance, and professional development supplements; and \$22.4 million on family support programs and strategies.

Federal, local, and private funders have invested millions of dollars in Smart Start to support children and families. In the 2022- 2023 fiscal year, NCPC and Smart Start Local Partnerships leveraged an additional \$56.8 million for the state’s young children, including \$48.4 million in cash contributions and \$8.4 million from in-kind contributions.

Smart Start Impact Report for 2022-2023

Funding

The State of North Carolina has been providing about \$150 million annually in funding for the Smart Start network. There is an allocation for each county based on the population of children 0-5 and other assessments of need. Allocations range from \$200,000+ to \$13 million. Local Partnerships use a combination of state, federal, local, and private funds to provide comprehensive services and programs that support and strengthen early development.



4. Functions of Local Governance Partners

Early Start CT

Legislation was passed during the 2024 session which created Early Start CT, a state-funded early care and education program that combines three existing funding streams: School Readiness, Child Day Care, and State Head Start Supplement.

That legislation (Public Act No. 24-78) also calls for the creation of Local Governance Partners (LGPs) and defines the role and responsibilities of a local or regional governance partner to include, but not be limited to:

- (1) conducting and administering a data-driven needs assessment for its respective community or region
- (2) employing strategies to solicit parental engagement and membership
- (3) providing periodic technical assistance regarding best practices in early childhood and family engagement for its town or region
- (4) jointly sponsoring with the office, professional development opportunities
- (5) ensuring that community outreach is regularly conducted and maintained with community stakeholders

Past Recommendations to Build out a Statewide Network of State-Local Partnerships

Ponder's Framework report described similar functions, but with more emphasis on convening stakeholders and being a source of information for families.

- Convenor of local systems that serve young children (cross-sector) by creating a table where community leaders, volunteers, and families come together for ongoing planning, learning and action
- Be a source of contact for families to learn what they need, to advise about available programs, and to refer them to community services that meet their child's needs
- Support and advance state policies and programs that improve outcomes for young children and work in partnership with state agencies and a state intermediary/coordinator to achieve better results. This includes facilitating periodic needs assessments.

Initial Framing of Local Governance Partners and Areas for Further Development

At a 9/10/24 OEC listening session, the OEC defined Local Governance Partners (LGPs) as "Early Start CT's community-based support, bringing together the entire ECE system, from children and families to providers and the broader community. LGPs will engage and support each community in identifying and addressing the early childhood and Birth to Five needs of the children and families." This statement would suggest that the scope should be broader than just early care and education and that the LGPs would focus on children birth to five.

"... the unique role of local partnerships may not be in delivering the direct services that young children and their families often need to thrive, but in coordinating between and among those programs and services to increase the effectiveness and to ensure that they are reaching the children who need them. **The local partnership is the glue ...**"

Ponder, Framework for CT's Statewide System of Early Childhood State-Local Partnerships



However, in other forums and on the OEC website, there is more emphasis on sustaining the current role of the School Readiness liaisons and the relationships with providers.

- Providing coaching and resources
- Conducting compliance monitoring
- Engaging the community
- Connecting providers with the Office of Early Childhood (OEC)²⁴

In fact, a 9/18/24 OEC presentation suggested that that LGPs might be limited to communities or regions with Early Start CT providers. (“LGPs, the new governance body that will represent each community receiving Early Start CT funding.”) While this may be an appropriate starting point in reorganizing the current system, Connecticut should not lose this opportunity to (1) include areas that have LECCs but no state-funded providers and more importantly (2) **explicitly plan for a statewide system supporting ALL families no matter where they live**. A continuation of the limited coverage of current state-local partnerships will not address the inherent inequities in such a system.

There should also be clarity about **which providers will be supported by the LGPs and how**. Is the intent that LGPs will work ONLY with state-funded providers or with all licensed providers? And if they are to support all licensed providers, is the level of supports different with state-funded providers? Will LGPs be expected to support home-based providers, and, if so, how? The scope of work required with providers will affect staffing needs.

Moving forward, it will be important to highlight more prominently **the functions around “engaging the community.”**

- The framing of the responsibilities of the LGPs should explicitly and consistently state the requirement to work with and engage families both as consumers of services and as leaders in their communities.
- The governance of the LGPs should require convening on a regular basis a broad array of stakeholders in the local early childhood system with an eye to gain a better understanding of the community’s services and supports for families with young children. In addition, this work and the relationships cultivated will help ensure meaningful community needs assessments.

In undertaking the required periodic needs assessment, Local Governance Partners should not only be looking at the **needs** or deficits of their communities, but also understand the **assets** of their communities to support families and young children, in keeping with language of the Early Start CT legislation: *Identify the specific service needs and unique resources available to particular municipalities* (Section 25 (4))

Input from LECC and School Readiness Liaisons on the Role of LGPs

Local Early Childhood Collaboratives have highlighted the functions that they think the new LGPs should continue to do:

- Provide resources and referrals to families—LECC staff serve as an information hub for families in a community or region, providing workshops and acting as navigators to services for families
- Solicit and raise parent voice - Parent voices change systems. Policymakers need to know how state policies help or hurt families on a local level. All LECCs are required to have Parent Ambassadors and many of them also sponsor Parent Leadership training.
- Convene local partners - This helps communities to identify needs and assets, prevent duplication of service, and increase collective impact.

- Address local needs - LECC's have 20 years of experience and a history of creating programs that serve the local communities. LECCs are creative in their problem-solving approaches.
- Provide support to early care and education providers – Communities with School Readiness (SR) Liaisons are doing monitoring and coaching mostly of state funded programs; current LECCs and SR Liaisons believe they should continue to support state-funded providers and that there should also be some support of all licensed providers, including home-based childcare.
- Raising awareness of local issues at the state level - LECCs and SR Liaisons provide the OEC with “boots on the ground”. LECC's are the eyes and ears of the OEC.

Other parts of the system they highlighted included:

- The need to convene at the state level. They cited the importance of a “state intermediary” that brings together all the stakeholders- OEC staff, Parent Cabinet, CT Children's Collective Staff, LECCs, and Parent Ambassadors - to share and learn from each other, which can “accelerate Collective Impact.”
- The ability to collect and access timely, accurate data at the local and state level: They recognize that data is critical to understanding the impact of the state-local partnership work.

In a meeting with a representative group of School Readiness Liaisons, the liaisons summarized their role as responsible for the coordination, program evaluation and administration of the School Readiness, Child Day Care, and Quality Enhancement grants. They clearly take pride in their work and shared some of their specific responsibilities they should continue to do as work that is vital to the health of the community.

- support (including coaching & professional development) and evaluation of early care and education sites receiving state funding
- Note: The workload varies depending on the number of centers, classrooms, and slots to be monitored and that sometimes the PD and monitoring could be overwhelming
- link those programs to state and local resources
- support recruitment and enrollment of children in local programs
- support transition to kindergarten efforts in the community

Most of them understand the rationale of no longer directly managing School Readiness grants and said it may be easier not having the accompanying financial responsibilities, but they expressed concerns on two fronts:

- 1) Will the OEC have sufficient capacity to effectively manage contracts and monies in a timely manner and provide adequate technical support to providers?
- 2) Will there be unintended consequences that put local support and positions housed in local government at risk if they are no longer managing these monies.

On the second point, they felt strongly that there should be flexibility of who might serve as an LGP – including school systems, city government, and non-profit organizations – to preserve current local investments. One liaison added: *“Let communities decide where the council “lives” so it’s most responsive to community needs.”*

They also recognized the importance of community outreach and supporting families; but especially in communities with large numbers of state-funded center, classrooms and slots, they were concerned about the capacity of one person to handle all these functions. In fact, several of the larger communities talked about already having another person to assume that role

Other concerns

While not expressed explicitly, there was an underlying unease about what “power” the Local Governance Partners will be recognized to have so that they can continue to have positive impact on the lives of young children, their families, and the providers that support them. A specific concern in this regard was around monitoring or evaluation of state-funded providers – how effective can the LGPs be if they do not have control or influence over the funding providers receive?

Local Governance Partners need to know that their input can influence decisions made at the state level – whether it be about the distribution of state funding of early care and education in their communities or modifying state policies and practices that are having unintended negative consequences at the local level. There should also be consideration of an ongoing pool of monies that can be invested directly by LGPs. (As an example, in some states, local partners are provided flexible quality enhancement monies.)

As pointed out in the Ponder report, it is **“important to validate this important work by giving the local partnership some kind of formal authority.”**²⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. Local Governance Partners basic required functions need to be clearly defined around each of the following areas:

4.1.1. Convening of early childhood stakeholders in the LGP’s geographic area to coordinate and align services, as well as leading periodic required needs assessment as well as local asset mapping

4.1.2. Engaging and supporting parents/families to connect with needed services and promoting family involvement in the work of the LGP including their input to shape policies and practices to benefit all families

4.1.3. Promoting and supporting parent leadership with training and supports

4.1.4. Monitoring and supporting providers to improve quality (only for state-funded providers? any role with other providers in their area)

4.2. LGPs should be given the authority to address local issues, especially those that emerge from the Local Needs Assessment.

4.3. The OEC should have clear processes of how LGPs can influence policy and practice such as assignment of state-funded early care and education funding to providers in their area.

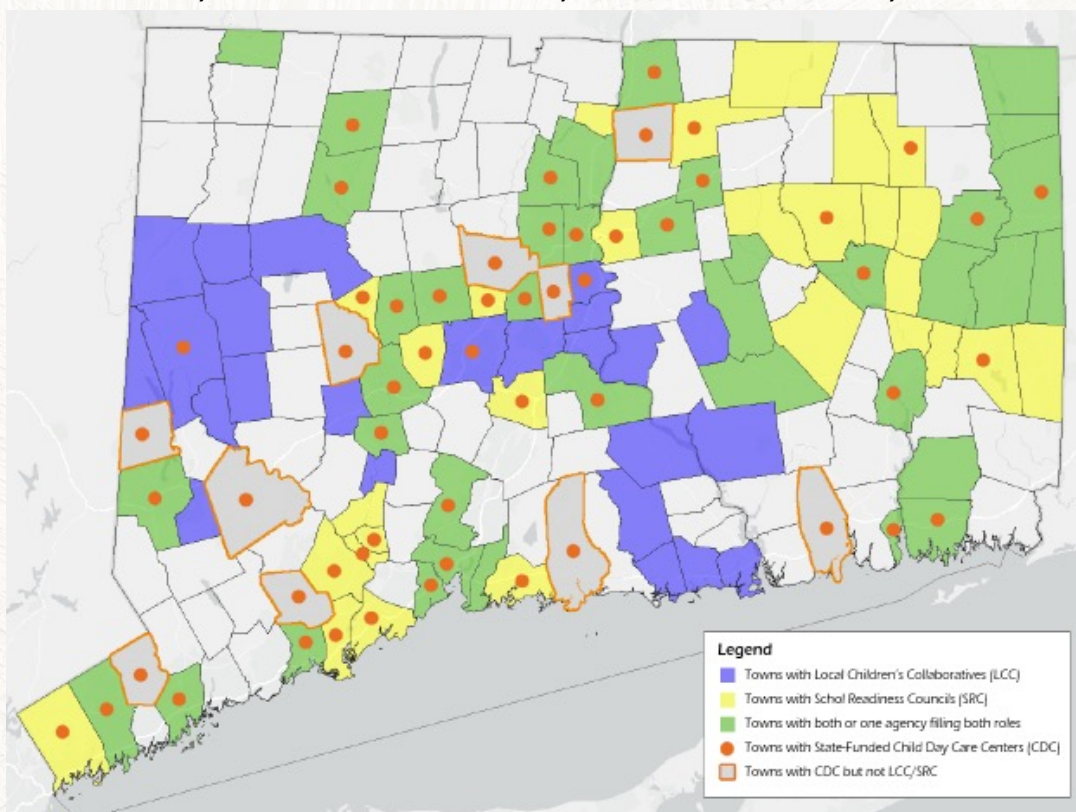
4.4. The OEC might consider some funding that could be distributed locally (e.g., quality enhancement).

5. Structure and Cost of an Integrated State-wide Network

“A different set of challenges presents itself when local coalitions, which have evolved over a period of time and have been funded by different funders, transition to a full statewide system of local partnerships.” Ponder Report

The map below illustrates there are currently (a) at least three variations of local early childhood entities, (b) communities that have state funded childcare centers but no council, and (c) large swaths of the state with communities that do not have any type of early childhood coordinating body.

Current LECCs, School Readiness Councils, Communities with both, and CDCs



- There are **24 towns that only have a Local Early Childhood Collaborative (LECC)** (purple). Overall, there are 37 LECCs covering 63 towns & cities; 9 are regional LECCs
- There are **28 communities that only have a School Readiness Council (SRC)** - (yellow). Overall there are 50 School Readiness Liaisons covering 67 School Readiness Councils in 67 towns (13 Liaisons work for more than one town/city);
- **39 towns have a combined entity** or high level of coordination between the LECC & SRC (green)
- 10 communities have a Child Development Center (CDC), but no LECC or SRC (gray)
- Orange dots – Child Development Centers

91 towns or cities have either an LECC or an SRC or both, and 78 have neither (some of those 78 communities have state funded child-development centers - CDCs). While those with neither type of council are primarily rural and/or wealthier towns, the population distribution shows that 46% of all births in 2021 are to residents in these 78 towns with neither an LECC nor an SRC.

Source: CT Children's Collective under the CT Network for Children and Youth

Building a Statewide Network

In starting a new Local Governance Partner Network, it is encouraging to see that there is a desire to build on the structures already in place, taking advantage of current capacity and the network of experienced professionals that have been supporting this work in the field for many years usually with limited funding. Therefore, funding for the current network – especially for those LECCs that have limited or no School Readiness monies - must be sustained until the LGP structure is put into place. Without that continuation, not only will current capacity be lost, but also the opportunity to transition with experienced professionals that have been working in their communities for many years.

At the outset, starting July 2025, the network will need to expand coverage of the current network if it is to include support and monitoring of state-funded Child Development Centers (CDCs) that are in areas currently not included in the LECC/SRC network. This will add to the workload of current collaborative that incorporate the additional communities with CDCs - not only for the work with new ECE providers, but also to develop relationships in these new communities and adapt the governance of the current collaborative.

Over time the network should be expanded to include all communities. Not only is the current state funded system unevenly distributed across the state – leading to inequities – but, without including all communities in the state, many families will not be served and needs assessments will only provide a partial picture of the early childhood system and the children and families served by it. A clear stated goal of the LGP network should be to build that state-wide network within a specific period of time – perhaps 5 years.

This raises the question of how, over this transition period of 5 years, Connecticut should define the criteria for the total number and size of LGPs. As a state system, the Ponder Framework report suggested that a minimal size of the population served by an LGP be set – for instance, using the number of births (the report suggested 750-1500). If one takes the total number of annual births in the state and divides by 750, this would translate into about 50 LGPs in the state. (For comparison's sake, there are 59 local health agencies.) There would have to be a gradual implementation of this type of requirement and consideration if a lower level of births per year might be set to qualify a geographic areas as an LGP (without exceeding an acceptable maximum number of LGPs across that state).*

The size of the geographic area to be covered needs to be considered so that the coverage area of an LGP is not so expansive that the Local Governance Partnerships are unable to establish meaningful, trusted relationships at the local level or that travel to cover the area becomes an impediment. There also needs to be consideration that large rural areas may not be able to meet a population minimum so that population density should also be taken into account.

Staffing

The adage that “form follows function” should apply as the roles and responsibilities of the Local Governance Partners are more clearly defined and developed. If the LGPs are to have appropriate staffing to fill the variety of roles described in the previous section, both the amount of time and the skill sets needed to carry out those functions have to be taken into consideration.

Monitoring and supporting providers require an experienced, well-trained early care and education professional who can effectively engage with providers. A person with that skill set will not necessarily be well suited for convening community partners involved in the broader early childhood system nor working with families both to help with navigation and promoting parent involvement. More generally, there has been concern that the work and structure of School Readiness has not always been able to effectively or meaningfully engage parents.

In addition, the workload related to the number of state funded slots/classrooms/centers needs to be taking into consideration. In communities with large numbers to monitor and coach, a full-time person is needed for that work alone; another person often leads the convening and work with families. In smaller communities with a limited number of School Readiness slots, talented School Readiness liaisons have successfully carried out both roles. However, they are only able to do so with adequate funding and often need to work full time which requires considerably more funding than the current School Readiness administrative support. In other cases, communities have split these functions between two part time professionals.

The desire to prioritize the monitoring and support function at the local level may negatively impact an LGP's capacity to fulfill its other required functions unless there are sufficient resources and flexibility for communities to find solutions that work for their LGP. The bottom line is that each Local Governance Partner will need a minimum of 1.0 FTE – and in most cases 2.0 FTE – which can be allocated as best serves each LGP. A number of stakeholders have recommended a target salary of \$75,000 for each role.

Many of the current LECCs also emphasized the need to continue the role of the Parent Ambassadors who need to be remunerated for their time. Given the commitment of the OEC to this role, stable state funding and support need to be provided to maintain and further develop this role.

With Early Start CT, new responsibilities are being added, most notably for periodic community needs assessments (which should include asset mapping). While this may not require additional staffing, LGPs will need supports from experts, particularly around data. This and other supports should be provided by statewide entities.

Funding

School Readiness/LECC's are leveraging other funding sources, especially from municipal government, local boards of education, and philanthropy. Several School Readiness/community liaisons expressed concern about how changes with the new LGP structure might put that funding at risk. Flexibility in whom may serve as the LGP is important to help communities maintain current sources of funding outside of state funding in order to not lose current capacity, but all expressed that more state funding is needed.

There should be transparency – especially during this transition – of how much and what sources of state funding will be available to invest in LGPs, and what are the criteria of how it will be distributed. While there is some rationale that the number of slots/classrooms/centers to be monitored and supported will determine part of the workload for each LGP, there should also be a guaranteed base for all LGPs, to ensure that they are able to cover those functions in addition to the monitoring and coaching.

The community needs assessments will require more staff time and access to consistent, reliable data. Funding will be needed for an established, experienced state partner or partners to provide core data in easily accessible and digestible formats for communities to prepare their needs assessments, and also track their impact on prioritized areas in each community. There should be further discussion about other areas for shared services and support, most of which should be provided by the statewide intermediary.

For an effective and vibrant LGP network, there should be ongoing discussions of what an LGP needs for staffing and all related costs to fulfill state requirements. There will be learning as the LGP network is built and budgets should not remain stagnant as costs change and responsibilities are adjusted. This work might be included as part of the required needs assessment process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. There should be a clear plan to build a statewide early childhood Local Governance Partner system that:

5.1.1. Covers all 169 towns/cities in Connecticut within 5 years; Early Start CT should NOT be a system defined by the current coverage of state funded early care and education.

5.1.2. Provides each LGP a “meaningful minimal” that pays for adequate staffing to fulfill the required functions of an LGP. A minimum of 1 FTE in funding should be provided - and in many cases 2.0 FTE will be necessary - through sustainable state funding.

5.1.3. Funding should be provided for current LECCs that do not currently have School Readiness Councils so that current capacity is maintained through FY25 until the LGP network is established.

5.1.4. Over time, state funding should **incentivize LGPs to cover multiple towns** (and that those decisions be made by the communities) with a goal of creating a network that does not exceed **a certain number of LGPs statewide**. If a threshold were set that each LGP represent a contiguous area with a minimum, for example, of 750 births each year (with flexibility for rural areas), a target might be a maximum of 50 LGPs to cover the entire state.

5.2. A mechanism should be created to **regularly review the required responsibilities of an LGP and the cost to provide those services;** state funding should be adjusted accordingly.

5.3. There will be **additional costs related to statewide supports**, most notably a statewide convener and technical support organization (the statewide intermediary) and a reliable, easy to access data source with timely data sets for individual communities.



6. Support for the LGP Network

Statewide LGP Intermediary

Ponder's Framework report recommended the need for and a process to create a state level intermediary in Connecticut. The report described key functions of a State Intermediary including:

- convening among local partners and with state entities,
- promoting effective communication vertically and horizontally,
- providing technical assistance and training,
- promoting common messaging, and
- helping to develop data systems for the network.

Following the recommendation in the report, in 2018 CT ECFC, through an RFP process, selected the CT Network for Youth and Families to assume responsibility for the newly created **CT Children's Collective (CtCC)**. The Collective currently works with and represents 37 LECCs, and describes its role as follows:

The Connecticut Children's Collective is a network of local partnerships creating positive outcomes for Connecticut's children and families. Only by working together can we identify the local needs of children, provide outreach to families, and improve local programs and services. Local leaders, parents, educators, and providers know best what works in their community, and working together can dramatically improve outcomes for all Connecticut's children.

The Collective has already proven its value in:

- Convening 37 Local early childhood collaboratives at least quarterly and making regular connections among the LECCs with the OEC and SDE
- Supporting "Parent Ambassadors" from each of the LECCs and facilitating convenings with state Parent Cabinet members. This includes its support of a new project to gather input from families with young children living in the 70 poorest census tracts in the state
- Providing opportunities for professional development and learning on topics relevant to LECCs
- Producing two annual data reports to start documenting the impact of member LECCs
- Helping co-ordinate work with LECCs during COVID ensuring that EC providers and families had access to emergency supplies

The Collective faces some challenges and could be further developed in some areas:

- **Funding for the intermediary** has been mostly from a federal Preschool Development Grant (ended 12/31/23) and private philanthropy. The state intermediary needs **sustainable funding** from the state to help ensure the health and effective functioning of the LGP network.
- The state intermediary might develop more **capacity to help LGPs tap into additional sources of funding by** a) providing LGP technical assistance for grants and/or b) promoting examples of leveraging local resources.
- CtCC's relationships with state agencies other than OEC and SDE that work with young children and their families (e.g., DCF, DSS, DPH) are limited. The OEC should include the **state intermediary in the cross-sector tables** it hosts – in particular, the CT Early Childhood Cabinet.
- CtCC's **capacity to collect data** and support LECCs in this regard is limited. With the new requirements for periodic needs assessments, this will be an increasingly important support role that needs to be filled. The state intermediary needs to be an active participant in helping to develop a statewide data agenda and system that can be easily accessed and used by LGPs. However, a statewide intermediary probably does not have the technical capacity to undertake that role given the challenges in the state's current early childhood data systems.

Support from the OEC

The Ponder Framework report also described how the CT Office of Early Childhood should support the network of local early childhood collaboratives:

- Have dedicated staff and resources in OEC to support state-local coordination cooperation and feedback
- Provide financial support to local partnerships
- Develop common statewide accountability measures together with local partnerships, the state intermediary, and other state agencies
- Ensure ongoing communication on policy and programmatic issues and ongoing feedback loops
- Develop a plan to consolidate the School Readiness Councils, the Discovery/Local Early Childhood Councils into one local community partnership
- Develop strategies to assure that over time all communities are included in an organized local partnership so that ALL children are covered; start with establishing a total number of partnerships needed statewide

The Early Start CT program is already explicitly addressing some of the recommendations above, most notably the consolidation of School Readiness and LECC functions into one local community partnership financially supported by the state –Local Governance Partners (LGPs). Moving forward, during planning and the early phases of implementation, the other recommendations from the report can be addressed, especially:

- Accountability measures – it is crucial that they be developed together with local partnerships, the state intermediary and other state agencies
- A plan to ensure adequate financial support for the Local Governance Partners and the intermediary to meet the current and future requirements of the new system
- A commitment and plan to build out a statewide system that covers ALL children in all communities throughout the state.

Data System to Support the LGP Network

The data needs of the LGPs will take on greater importance, not only because of the required needs assessments, but also for ongoing input to understand the impact of their work. LGPs should not be expected to gather data from multiple sources that may not be aligned. In the short to medium term, the OEC may not have the capacity to create that single source portal. Instead, a state supported data intermediary could be contracted to fill that role.

A team made up of representatives from the OEC, the LGPs, and the state intermediary should discuss and reach an understanding on the accountability measures as well as the baseline needs assessment data that should be required. Once the data needs are clearly defined, the OEC should partner with the LGPs and the statewide intermediary, and draft technical input from leading state data partners (e.g., United Way of CT, the CT Data Collaborative, CT Voices, etc.) as well as the State Department of Education, to develop a framework for a data dashboard, a single platform to access that data.

Throughout this process, it will be important to keep the data needs simple and manageable, and grow over time as priorities emerge. Supports will also be needed on how to use and interpret data.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1. The **state intermediary needs sustainable funding from the state** to carry out its essential functions as convener of the network, provider of technical assistance and training, and promoter of clear communications among LGPs and with the OEC and other state partners.
- 6.2. The state intermediary should be **included as part of a state level cross agency body** – ideally the CT Early Childhood Cabinet - and develop relationships with state agencies whose work is prioritized in communities.
- 6.3. The OEC will need **adequate capacity** to support the relationships and contracting with LGPs and the state-funded ECE providers in the Early Start CT system. **Clear and consistent communications are key.**
- 6.4. There should be a **statewide data organization** or a partnership that could include the CT Data Collaborative, CT Voices for Children, United Way of CT, the OEC and other state agencies (especially the State Department of Education) to create an ongoing data dashboard with core data that all LGPs should be able to easily access and use for the needs assessment and to assess the impact of the work of the LGPs.



7. Next Steps: Planning & Implementation

Collaborative planning and implementation at the outset will set a strong foundation for the state-local partnerships work moving forward. Changes, especially at the scale of reorganizing a system like the network of local early childhood collaboratives - can cause stress and anxiety for all involved, but it can be lessened by transparency, collaboration, and clear communications.

In discussions with current local stakeholders (LECCs and School Readiness liaisons), they expressed their interest and commitment in participating in the planning and rollout of the LGPs. They raised the following points to guide that planning and start-up:

- Clear, consistent communication between the OEC and the local stakeholders.
- Incorporating, as much as possible, the current stakeholders and assets into the new system
- Ensuring adequate resources to support the new Local Governance Partners so they are able to do the work that they are required to do

The OEC has made a point of having “listening sessions” to inform how Early Start CT is being developed and implemented, including upcoming discussions about the new Local Governance Partners. Local stakeholders need to understand that the OEC will not have all the answers as planning and implementation start; but trust will only be built to the extent that the OEC can be transparent as possible about their thinking and plans, and, most importantly, to be sure local stakeholders feel heard. This might be done by providing regular feedback loops to confirm what the OEC has heard and expects to incorporate or address moving forward.

The CT Early Childhood Funder Collaborative is also committed to partnering with the OEC and other stakeholders in this process to maximize our collective success in this transition.

Connecticut has a long history around early childhood state-local partnerships and has done important work to build from. Let’s rise to the collective challenge to develop the robust statewide early childhood state-local partnership system that uses our resources wisely and brings improved outcomes for our state’s young children and their families.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1.** Engage the current LECC/School Readiness networks together to help in planning for this transition. In addition to the planned listening sessions, an independent party might facilitate more in-depth discussions to help create greater understanding of the nuances of transition planning - “the devil is in the details.”
- 7.2.** Improve communications among the current LECCs/School Readiness Networks (horizontal) and with the OEC (vertical). Actively engage the current state intermediary – the CT Children’s Collective – for this work.
- 7.3.** Roll out new functions over time and ensure there is capacity at the LGP level and at the state level to carry out these functions.
- 7.4.** Ensure there is a plan and timeline to build a statewide network that includes all Connecticut communities. Engage communities and LGPs to build multi-town LGPs that can work together well and will ensure statewide coverage.

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The Connecticut Early Childhood Funder Collaborative (CT ECFC) is a diverse coalition of members of the Connecticut philanthropic community committed to bringing the collective voice and resources of philanthropy to build and sustain a comprehensive and equitable early childhood system that works for all children, families, communities and the workforce in Connecticut.

CT ECFC is a project of the Connecticut Council for Philanthropy, for which the Council serves as a fiscal sponsor.

Learn more at ctphilanthropy.org/ecfc

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