

Local Governance for Early Childhood: Lessons from Leading States

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Local governance structures help several states implement high-quality systems of early education and care. Yet, no such structures exist in Massachusetts currently. Though Massachusetts was the first state in the nation to establish a Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) in 2005, and is perceived as a leader on early childhood, we still have significant gaps in our system—many children don't have access to or can't afford early education programs, program quality varies greatly, the early education workforce faces low pay and high turnover, and school readiness is undefined and unmeasured. As the state agency responsible for addressing these challenges, EEC is making steady progress. However, local community leaders, serving through formal local governance structures, could share in these responsibilities, provide additional support, and help address the persistent gaps in our early education system.

The purpose of this policy brief is to learn from other states with a history of local governance and support structures in early education and care, to find out more about the pros, cons, and “must haves” of local governance. This paper will identify options for early education governance and make recommendations for Massachusetts.

Massachusetts History

Massachusetts was the first state in the nation to launch an independent, consolidated department with a primary focus on early childhood learning and care—The Department of Early Education and Care (EEC). EEC was established in law in 2005 after several years of work by advocates, policymakers and many stakeholders from across the early education field.

EEC's primary goal is to support healthy growth and development of all children by providing high-quality programs and resources for families and communities. The agency is responsible for the licensing and monitoring of programs and creating state standards for early education. It works to establish formal quality and performance standards to allow for continuous program improvement.¹ EEC has a Commissioner, Board, and Advisory Council, all dedicated to developing of a coordinated early education and care system. EEC is part of the Education Secretariat in Massachusetts, which also consists of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Department of Higher Education, and the Executive Office of Education.

As part of EEC's responsibilities in the Act Relative to Early Education and Care (Chapter 215 of the Acts of 2008)², the EEC Commissioner is required to create a regional coordination system and to maximize statewide coordination of services. EEC is responsible for supporting the development of community plans by local early education and care

Why Local Governance Matters

“Early education governance is a local organizational structure that promotes a coordinated and efficient early education system that can promote equity and quality in early childhood education.”

Regenstein and Lipper, 2013

“Governance is necessary to ensuring that an early childhood system works in a way that is greater than the sum of its parts.”

Goffin, Martella & Coffman, 2011

“Organizing local coalitions statewide, is the best strategy for getting outcomes for children.”

Karen W. Ponder, Build Initiative, 2018

See endnotes for source details.

councils. These councils will address communities on how to build on and improve access to the local array of services, increase quality, support comprehensive services, collaborate across agencies, and provide services for hard to reach populations.

As of 2019, EEC has partially addressed this mandate. Statewide, EEC operates five regional offices that are responsible for regulating EEC-licensed programs, mainly for safety and health issues.³ However, this solution does not address larger topics related to program quality and school readiness. Furthermore, it does not reach children who participate in license-exempt public school preschool classroom, informal non-licensed child care programs, or those who don't attend any early education program.

As part of the Educational Reform Act of 1993, the Community Partnerships for Children (CPC) program was created. It was designed to build a collaborative system of early childhood programs within communities to improve the quality of early education.⁴ Though popular in local communities, over time this initiative was perceived as ineffective by state policymakers, who lacked an accountability and evaluation framework to assess the impact of spending. Many CPCs sprinkled small amounts of funding across many partners and initiatives, making it difficult for them to demonstrate impact. CPC funding was split into two different line items in fiscal year 2008 state budgets, and then phased out in FY2009 and FY2010, partly due to grant consolidation and cost-savings measures implemented by EEC during the Great Recession.⁵ Some functions of CPCs were preserved by the smaller-sized Coordinated Family and Community Engagement Grant (2010-present), with 89 local/regional grantees covering the entire state. But CFCEs have a limited scope in the B-5 system, focusing primarily on children/families who are not enrolled in any formal programming.⁶ EEC has also incentivized local community collaboration through competitive grant programs.⁷ But these grants are often temporary, and, covering a few “early adopter” communities, reach only a small portion of the entire state.

Components of Local Governance

Local early education governance is essential for creating a coordinated early care and education structure. This structure can promote a shared, community responsibility to achieving better results for all children, and create shared goals.⁸ Although the governance model differs from state to state and from community to community there are a number of key components that have been found similar across the different models.⁹

Component 1: Coordination

Creating collaboration and coordination across sectors and programs. Implementing a joint vision and mission with clear short-term and long-term goals. Facilitating the collaboration on an ongoing basis.

Component 2: Alignment

Creating an aligned service delivery across health, early care and education, and other service systems. Ensuring alignment between local and state goals.

Component 3: Sustainability

Establishing a joint commitment and responsibility for the development and success of all young children in a community. Creating structures for tasks such as data collection, quality standards, expected outcomes, teacher training.

Component 4: Efficacy

Allocating resources thoughtfully, reducing duplication of efforts and consolidating funds as appropriate.

Component 5: Accountability

The governance model should be accountable for the early childhood system and its stakeholders in terms of quality, equity and performance.

Lessons learned from other states

The five components of governance were recurring themes in our conversations with researchers and advocates in other states, who offered practical advice. We heard several helpful lessons for Massachusetts, or any state, seeking to add a layer of local governance to its early education and care system, including:

- Think clearly about functions—what exactly do you want local councils to do?
- Build on local structures already in place.
- Make sure any new entity is seen as helping fill a need, not competing for resources.
- Ensure good geographic fit—local boundaries must make sense to community participants.
- Fund local structures at sufficient capacity to fulfill their mission.
- Ensure state capacity to provide oversight and technical assistance.
- Think about advocacy—different local entities (i.e., school districts vs. nonprofit organizations) have different priorities and limitations to advocacy. How can statewide advocacy campaigns collaborate with local coalitions?
- Cultivate local champions such as parents, health care providers, and business leaders.

Local Governance Models in Other States

A growing number of states have developed different models for local early education governance. By creating an aligned early education system, these states have **created** conditions for state and local policy to be mutually reinforcing, for the benefit of children and families. The results from these states show improvement in several areas: the quality of the education, children’s readiness for school, and greater outreach to and engagement of families, which increases children’s participation in the early education system. Local governance can create new partnerships and local solutions for improving the quality of early education and care.

LOCAL GOVERNANCE	ACCOMPLISHMENTS
NORTH CAROLINA	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Smart Start was created in 1993 as a public and private partnership founded by the state legislature. This partnership is a network of 75 local nonprofit partnerships that serve all 100 North Carolina counties. It was a natural fit to have local (county) governance for early childhood in North Carolina given its strong county-level government. ▪ Smart Start ensures accountability for locally controlled budgets, and coordinates a statewide network to create 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increase of the number of children participating in early education programs, from 33% of children participating in 2001 to 64% children participating in 2018. Increase in percentage of children attending high-quality (4- and 5-star) programs from 33% in 2001 to 72% in 2018.¹¹ ▪ Child care was made more affordable by consolidating child care subsidy funding through a single agency. ▪ Longitudinal studies have shown both Smart Start and NC Pre-K have an effect on child outcomes in

LOCAL GOVERNANCE	ACCOMPLISHMENTS
<p>better outcomes for children and families. Each local entity uses data to determine how to improve the development of their children, based on the needs and resources of their local communities.¹⁰</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Smart Start addresses school readiness by serving children and families from birth. It is complemented by North Carolina Pre-K for four-year-olds. 	<p>elementary and middle school (increased math and reading scores and reading scores, reduced special education placements, reduced grade retention.)¹²</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ As an early pioneer for governance, Smart Start has become a model for other states looking to develop local and regional governance to complement the work of the state agency.
COLORADO	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A 2007 state law created Early Childhood Councils (ECCs), charged with “increasing and sustaining the quality, accessibility, capacity, and affordability of early childhood services for children five years of age or younger and their parents.” There are 31 ECCs that serve 58 of Colorado’s 64 counties.¹³ ▪ Early Childhood Council Leadership Alliance (ECCLA) was established in 2007 as a nonprofit membership organization. ECCLA provides a hub for partners, providers, caregivers, policymakers, and business leaders to coordinate, collaborate, and align resources. ▪ Colorado has a history of local control and strong county government. ECCs can interact with county and school district administrators. ▪ The statewide advocacy network, It’s About Kids, utilizes the ECCs to build its network, recruit members, and inform state policy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ECCs are supporting state efforts to raise the quality of the B-5 system, through workforce initiatives and the state QRIS. ▪ High-quality social, emotional, and mental health training to support, early education environment. ▪ Early identification and mental health consultation. ▪ Family Support and Parent Education creating a supportive home environment for child development, including the availability of quality parenting and child development information, services and supports. ▪ ECCs vary considerably in size and scope. For instance, in fiscal year 2015, ECC budgets ranged from \$45,000 to \$4,068,614 and their average number of staff ranged from two to 24.¹⁴ ▪ The most successful ECCs are seen as partners filling a need, not competitors for scarce resources.¹⁵
ARIZONA	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ First Things First was established in 2006 as a state agency led by the Arizona Early Childhood Development and Health Board. ▪ The First Things First has a state board that is comprised of nine members chosen to represent the state’s diversity. All members are appointed by the governor and confirmed by the State Senate. ▪ Arizona is a strong “local-control” state, so local governance is essential to the success of First Things First. On the local level there are 28 First Things First regional partnership councils—each made up of local representatives of unique Arizona community: parents, educators, business leaders, tribal representatives, health professionals, philanthropists and leaders of faith communities.¹⁶ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An increase from 25 percent in 2013 to 74 percent in 2018 in preschool programs meeting or exceeding quality standards. ▪ Community teams have increased their level of engagement with the early education system—“Communities are now beginning to talk less about how to fund programs and more about what the community needs are, how to address those needs and strengthen services.”¹⁷

LOCAL GOVERNANCE	ACCOMPLISHMENTS
MICHIGAN	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The Office of Great Start (OGS) was established in 2011 by the Governor. OGS is within the Michigan Department of Education. It partners with two statewide networks, the 54 Great Start Collaboratives (GSCs), local coordination bodies housed at county-level Intermediate School Districts, and the 70 Great Start Parent Coalitions (GSPCs) made up of families who are actively engaged in advocating and promoting early childhood. ■ The Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC), a quasi-governmental nonprofit that utilizes public and private funds, designed Michigan’s local governance structures. Design was informed by systems science and the notion that a high-quality system needs more than programs and services, but connective linkages between program leaders, shared understanding of the root causes of social change, and the ability to adapt over time. ECIC provides ongoing training and consultation to community leaders.¹⁸ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Continued progress towards the outcomes of the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Grant. ■ Implement expansion of Great Start Readiness Program. ■ Execute Child Development and Care Program enhancements. ■ Ensure intentional OGS contributions to third grade reading proficiency. ■ ECIC staff deliver systems-change training to local GSC and GSPC members. ■ Strength, enthusiasm, and commitment of each GSC varies, based on variation in local leadership (school district employees with additional responsibilities).
OREGON	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The Early Learning Hubs were established in 2013 through state legislation. They coordinate early learning services to the community served by the Hub. An inter-agency 12-member coordinating council provides state-level oversight of all Hubs. ■ Hubs modeled after North Carolina Smart Start. ■ There are 16 regional hubs, which work across five sectors: early education, department of education, health and human services and business.¹⁹ The original vision was to co-locate Early Learning Hubs with local health care hubs for more integrated service delivery to families, and a few hubs are fully integrated in this way.²⁰ ■ Predating the hubs were 36 county-level local commissions on children and families, indicating a long history of buy-in for local governance structures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Creating the Hubs in Oregon resulted in setting common goals for Kindergarten readiness and helping the hubs and their partners orient toward this goal. ■ Having Hubs in place helped Oregon pass Preschool Promise—state-funded, free, mixed-delivery preschool—in 2016, and advance the state QRIS.²¹ ■ Not all Hubs received Preschool Promise funding, but the ones that did had established stronger collaborative relationships across a wider range of public and private early education partners.

Policy recommendations for Massachusetts

EEC is now 14 years old, and the historic Act Relative to Early Education and Care celebrated its 10-year anniversary in 2018.²² Now is a good time to rethink the design of the early education system, and intentionally develop an ideal model. Based on the examples and lessons from other states, local governance should be part of that ideal model, and is likely to improve our early education system and lead to greater alignment/cohesion between state and local policies.

Legislation: Fully implement EEC’s local councils mandate in An Act Relative to Early Education and Care. File new legislation to amend the original law, adding greater detail for local early education governance.

- Current legislation states that there shall be local plans, created by local councils, who work in coordination with regional resource and referral agencies. But, the law does not provide detail as to the number, membership, authority, or funding of these councils.
- The amendment should clarify that local councils shall be numerous enough to cover the entire state. It should define the goals and process for choosing members of the local councils. It should include the funding for staffing the local councils. Additional funds should be provided for state oversight, technical assistance, and system-building expertise and training. Local councils should have authority given to them by the state to make decisions regarding early education and care that are aligned with EEC’s goals, and in this way would serve as an extension of EEC’s state-level governance.
- The parameters of local plans should also be defined, with a schedule for creating plans, submitting them for state approval, and updating plans.

Implementation: Develop adequate state-level capacity to support local councils, and a timeline for phasing in councils to reach the entire state.

- Create a new team within EEC that is solely responsible for providing oversight, assistance, and training to local councils. This could be done by expanding or combining current teams that oversee local grants, including Preschool Expansion Grant (PEG), Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative (CPPI), and Coordinated Family and Community Engagement (CFCE).
- Phase in local councils over time, to ensure adequate quality and oversight. Start in year one with current “early adopter” communities. For example, 19 communities currently have local early childhood committees, thanks to state grants for preschool planning and expansion. This list covers most of the “Gateway Cities” and a few rural areas of the state. However, there are 351 cities and towns in Massachusetts, so many areas with need and interest are currently not receiving grants. Launch 20-30 local or regional councils each year, and ensure coverage of all 351 cities and towns after five years.
- Special note on CFCEs – Given their limited scope, but valuable function in reaching families who are not enrolled in formal care, CFCEs could continue in their current form, merge into larger local governance bodies, serve as subcommittees of those bodies, or become those local governance bodies. Since there is such a wide variation in CFCEs statewide, it would be best if each CFCE could co-determine, with EEC, how it would like to evolve under any new system. A one-size-fits-all policy may not be appropriate.

“Local control helps to tailor the system to the individual needs of the community: 1. Providing access for all families, regardless of income, 2. Aligning curriculum and practices in public and private sites.”

*Lisa Kuh, director of early education,
Somerville, Massachusetts.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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 - 2 Act Relative To Early Education And Care (2008) .Retrieved from: <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2008/Chapter215> Section 4A. (a) In order to facilitate the licensure process, the commissioner, with the approval of the board, shall establish sub-state regions within which all licensure or approval of child care centers and family child care homes, large family child care homes, and family child care systems, under sections 6 to 10, inclusive, shall be carried out. (b) The department shall support and work with local early education and care councils in the development of community plans that address how the councils and communities will: (1) build on the local array of services and improve access to services for additional families or increase services for families already receiving services; (2) increase quality; (3) support comprehensive services for children and families; (4) collaborate across agencies; and (5) provide services for hard to reach populations. Local plans shall be reviewed and evaluated using board-approved criteria to assess the quality of collaborative planning, the effectiveness of the plan in addressing community needs and the quality and cost-effectiveness of proposed services. (c) In order to ensure regional coordination and to maximize local participation in the programs and services of the department, the department shall support and work with regional child care resource and referral agencies in the development of region-wide improvement plans. (d) The commissioner shall attempt to maximize statewide coordination of services by ensuring that the geographic service areas of the regional child care resource and referral agencies and the local early education and care councils are similar to each other and to the regions created by subsection (a). These regional agencies and local councils shall work together to provide and coordinate a broad range of services to promote access to high-quality early education and care programs to children and families throughout the commonwealth including, but not limited to, acting as local points of access for families seeking information about and financial assistance for early education and care and supporting professional development opportunities for early education and care providers.
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- QUOTE BOX 2: Strategies for Children interview with Lisa Kuh, director of early education, Somerville Public Schools., December, 2018.