



Research Brief

Early Care and Education Partnerships

State Actions and Local Lessons

by Diane Schilder, Ellen Kiron, and Kimberly Elliott

Introduction

Today, more than 13 million children in the United States under age six, including children whose mothers do not work outside the home, are cared for daily by someone other than their parents.¹ Despite dramatic early care and education funding increases in recent years, low-income parents continue to have difficulty finding accessible, high-quality services that meet their needs and ensure their young children are prepared for school.²⁻⁵

To better meet families' needs, locally-based early care and education providers such as child care, Head Start, and prekindergarten (preK) are joining forces to improve services and reduce the fragmentation that results from separate, publicly funded programs.^{6,7} By blending funds and resources, such partnerships are positioned to provide full-day, full-year comprehensive early education services with continuity of care.^{8,9} Numerous reports describe partnerships and the policies that support them,⁸⁻¹¹ yet questions remain about the nature of these partnerships and their relationship to high-quality, accessible services.

Research Design and Methodology

To address questions about early care and education partnerships, researchers at the Center for Children & Families (CC&F) are undertaking a three-year research project. In the first year of the project, researchers analyzed qualitative data to explore the nature of partnerships. This research brief summarizes findings from the qualitative analysis. (Researchers are also collecting and analyzing data from a random sample of providers to examine the relationship between partnerships and high-quality, accessible services. Subsequent briefs will describe findings from that inquiry.)

To learn about the nature of early education partnerships, researchers used the standardized case study approach to analyze qualitative state and local provider data in an existing database. The database included detailed interview summaries with state and local leaders, documents produced by states and local providers, and survey data. Two research questions framed the qualitative analysis and writing:

- How are states across the country supporting and promoting early care and education partnerships?
- How are early care and education providers engaging in partnerships?

Both the state and local data in the existing database are from a convenience sample. Research was designed to ensure methodological soundness to control for biases and to meet the criteria for credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

About the brief

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CC&F briefs provide information on a range of issues affecting young children and their families. CC&F seeks to strengthen programs by bringing together research and practice with the aim of improving the lives of children and families. Our briefs serve as a vehicle for informing research and practice.

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How States Support Early Education Partnerships

In recent years, the role of state governments in determining early care and education policies has increased.¹² In light of this increased authority, state leaders are in important positions to make decisions that affect the ways that child care, Head Start, and prekindergarten providers form and sustain partnerships.

The research analysis revealed that state leaders across the country take a variety of actions to support partnerships. Leaders undertake these primarily to:

- provide accessible early education programs that meet the needs of low-income parents, especially those transitioning from welfare to work
- ensure all families have access to high-quality, comprehensive, early education services that prepare children to succeed in school

State leaders use a variety of funding sources to offset costs such as direct monetary incentives or salaries that are associated with actions to promote partnerships. Sources of funding include Head Start-State Collaboration Grants, Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) funds, general revenue funds, tobacco taxes, lottery funds, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds, and support from local and regional foundations, national foundations, and United Ways.

State Actions to Support and Promote Partnerships

State leaders support and promote early education partnerships through:

1. **Review, research, and dissemination activities.** Review and research efforts can ensure that strategies to support partnership are tailored to state context and address the unique needs of local early education providers. Dissemination activities can ensure that local providers have access to research.
2. **Coordination among state agencies.** Such efforts are designed to improve efficiency and to ensure that state agencies provide consistent messages to local providers engaged in partnerships.
3. **Professional development, training, and technical assistance.** Such efforts can ensure that early education staff have comparable professional development standards—eliminating differences that can be barriers to partnership at the provider level.

4. **Legal and regulatory actions** that authorize funding, require or encourage partnerships, or provide policy clarification. Such actions can facilitate the creation and smooth operation of provider-level partnerships.
5. **Incentives** to encourage providers to engage in partnership. Incentives take many forms including grants that require providers to partner; increased reimbursement rates for providers in partnership who meet quality standards; designated partnership slots; and direct funding to providers in partnership.

The range of actions indicates that there is no set blueprint that states follow in supporting the development of early care and education partnerships. Implemented in accordance with a state's current context and needs, each action illustrates how states are working to address fragmentation of services and to ease the formation of provider-level partnerships.

How Local Early Education Providers Engage in Partnerships

The local analysis revealed that local providers engage in partnerships primarily to maximize funding and cost-effectiveness, meet parents' changing needs, and improve the quality of children's education services.

Partnerships vary by:

- **Organization:** Providers in partnership include nonprofit and for-profit organizations, school districts, and individual family child care providers. Providers' organizations range from large agencies that serve more than 600 children to small centers that serve fewer than 15 children through their partnership.
- **Setting:** Providers offer partnership services in child care centers, public housing sites, schools, family child care homes, Head Start/Early Head Start sites, and centers affiliated with a higher education facility.
- **Duration:** Some providers have delivered full-day, full-year services through partnerships for decades, while others have just begun to implement their partnership services.
- **Demographics:** Providers serve children of diverse races and ethnicities, children of migrant parents, and children in programs administered by tribal nations. Some providers serve infants and toddlers, as well as preschool-aged children in their partnerships. Others offer care to school-age children. Providers are located in rural areas, small towns, suburban areas, and cities.

Partnering organizations vary in the services and expertise they offer to children with disabilities and their families.

- **Leadership:** Partnership leaders include partnership managers, executive directors, and other management staff; early childhood teachers; and Head Start family support staff and education coordinators.

Factors that Support Local Partnerships

Providers in partnership reported that they can stimulate development and maintain partnerships through:

1. **Improved opportunities for teachers, families, and children.** Such enhancements include improved educational and professional development opportunities for teachers that support the development of effective teaching strategies; benefits that spill over and enhance education and family services for non-Head Start eligible children; and increased capacity to meet parents' changing needs.
2. **Start-up activities that create a foundation for partnership.** Such activities include planning that enables partners to learn more about each other's practices and regulations and anticipate the partnership's impact on operations; and the development of partnership agreements that capture important elements of the partnership and clearly document expectations and roles.
3. **Strong relationships between partners.** Such relationships involve a shared educational philosophy and partnership vision, and can result in a culture of mutual respect and benefits among partners characterized by bilateral decision making, tolerance, flexibility, respect, and equity.
4. **Management practices that keep the partnership running smoothly.** Such practices include communication procedures within and across partnering organizations; financial know-how to plan for and manage income received from different payment mechanisms; staff involvement at all phases of partnership planning, development, and implementation; ways to address staff pay differentials; and continuous quality improvement systems.
5. **Resources and allies that strengthen the partnership.** These include technical assistance that offers expert advice and consultation throughout the partnership's lifecycle; and external support from federal, state, city, and community agencies through federal legislation, state-

sponsored partnership information sessions, or advocacy by community allies.

Despite the variation among provider-level partnerships, this analysis found that when historically separate programs blend resources from different funding streams, they must make major paradigm shifts in theory and in practice. In that regard, partnership can serve as a change agent—driving individuals and programs to examine and modify their practices. In doing so, partnering providers demonstrate a willingness to grow and to venture outside familiar territory to expand services to better serve children and their families.

Conclusion

A consistent theme emerged from this analysis—state and local leaders perceive that the advantages of partnership outweigh the challenges. Many respondents reported that partnerships provide clear and worthwhile benefits to early care and education programs, to teachers, and most notably, to low-income children and their families. State and local leaders engage in partnership activities, despite the challenges, because they perceive partnerships can result in the following benefits:

- enhanced educational curriculum at the classroom level
- added services such as medical, dental, mental health, nutrition, and parental involvement activities for children and families
- expanded services including additional hours per day, and days per year to support low-income families' self-sufficiency
- increased availability of slots to a larger number of low-income children
- improved quality at all program levels



Despite these benefits, state leaders reported that due to budgetary shortfalls, funding for some of the state actions is in jeopardy. While leaders continue to support partnerships and recognize their value, some states are reducing or eliminating incentive funds for partnerships.

As policy makers and administrators consider decisions that affect partnerships, quantitative research on the influence of partnerships on program quality and families' access to services will be even more important. To fill this need, CC&F researchers are continuing to examine the influence of different partnership approaches on desired outcomes.

End Notes

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