



Sustaining Comprehensive Early Childhood Systems Building

An ECCS Evaluation Results Brief

Comprehensive early childhood systems building involves efforts to create a more effective system of resources and services for children ages 0–5 and their families.¹ Since 2003, the Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB) has funded the State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Initiative (ECCS), which supports State efforts to build such systems. Although ECCS is not the first or only early childhood systems-building initiative, it is unique in its reach and scope. Currently, 47 States and five jurisdictions have ECCS grants. Unlike previous systems-building initiatives, which targeted States or jurisdictions that were already leaders in early childhood systems efforts, ECCS has provided resources to all States and jurisdictions that apply and meet its criteria.

ECCS also has a broader scope than do most other efforts. In many cases, although systems initiatives were designed to spur collaboration, they focused on a particular sector, such as early care and education or mental health. However, ECCS required grantees to focus simultaneously on systems building across several different sectors, including early care and education, health care, mental health, family support, and parenting education. ECCS grants expanded this focus, going beyond collaboration and particular substantive issues to support efforts within a set of systems elements that include governance; financing; communications; family leadership development; provider or practitioner support and professional development; and monitoring and accountability, including data development.

This results brief examines ECCS’s accomplishments and the prospects for sustaining its efforts. The brief is intended to inform future discussions about the investment of resources in comprehensive systems building. Much of the data for the brief come from interviews with ECCS Coordinators conducted as part of the ECCS Evaluation. Interviews were completed from December 2010 through March 2011 with Coordinators from all but one State and one jurisdiction. In many cases, ECCS Coordinators invited key partners to participate in the interview. The interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and covered a wide range of topics, including the State’s accomplishments, challenges in comprehensive systems building, and prospects for sustaining comprehensive systems building. In order to maximize key informants’ willingness to be frank and open, they were promised that their names and States would not be linked to specific comments. In addition to the interview data, data are reported from the ECCS Coordinators Survey, which was conducted between July and October 2010. This Web survey was completed by representatives from each of the 52 grantees.

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¹ Some State and community efforts extend the maximum age to 8.

ECCS's Role in Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Building

During the key-informant interviews, respondents were asked to highlight some of the key contributions that ECCS had made to their early childhood systems building efforts. The majority could cite significant contributions in multiple sectors and systems elements. Some of the most common examples are highlighted below:

State plans and frameworks spurred innovative efforts. As part of ECCS, States were asked to develop comprehensive systems plans covering the key components and systems elements. Most of the States reported that having a plan was a central factor in making progress in early childhood systems building. The plan served as a guiding framework for their efforts and helped their partners to think about ways to build connections across sectors and services. In many places, the plan served as a tool for communicating the importance of comprehensive systems building to policymakers and other stakeholders and helped build public and political will around investing in early childhood. Plans were based on environmental scans, which included an examination of current efforts in the State, as well as on a review of evidence about what works in early childhood and a consideration of how that evidence could best be incorporated into practice. As a result, ECCS has played an important role in helping to infuse evidence-based practice into early childhood.

Examples of how the plans spurred innovation across the components and elements of the early childhood system are included below:

- **ECCS contributed to extensive progress on developing a system of social and emotional support for children.** ECCS efforts have emphasized early childhood mental health and social and emotional development. Spurred by strong encouragement from Federal partners and a growing base of research and evidence showing its importance, States looked for ways to strengthen their early childhood mental health efforts. ECCS has played an important role in helping States develop mental health consultation systems. Indeed, the initial idea to develop such a system was often first fully articulated within the ECCS plan. In some States, ECCS provided funding for pilot efforts that have since grown. Funding and support for early childhood mental health came from a variety of sources within the Federal Government and other sources. ECCS played an important role in helping to connect the pieces and in developing an integrated approach. Support, such as that provided through the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning initiative (SEFEL), was incorporated into a larger plan to implement systems of support and, through ECCS, was used to reach a wider variety of early childhood practitioners and providers.

State teams played an important role in looking for opportunities to use Project Launch, which was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) but developed by a Federal interagency partnership team as part of its integrated efforts to build a comprehensive system of support in mental health. A few States used their ECCS efforts to develop State Systems of Care grants from SAMHSA, while others provided the framework that served to ensure that State Mental Health Transformation Grants, also funded through SAMHSA, would be used to help support the

development of a system of care for early childhood, an area that has not traditionally been a strong focus of State mental health agencies. While many agencies and individuals have contributed to the remarkable development in the practice of early childhood mental health that has occurred over the last decade, ECCS certainly deserves credit for helping to make sure that the investments were part of a well-thought-out approach and built on each other.

- **ECCS helped spur efforts in systems building in family support and parenting education.** Family support and parenting education are highly fragmented sectors in which funding comes from a variety of sources and is often channeled directly to communities rather than through States. Funding has not typically been tied to evidence- or research-based criteria. This fragmentation, combined with the fact that authority over these initiatives is so dispersed, meant that ECCS faced challenges in developing initiatives covering these sectors. ECCS grantees have made various efforts in systems building in these areas, including developing core competencies for providers and practitioners; developing networks of providers and practitioners who can provide peer support; and working to integrate the research-based protective factors identified by the Strengthening Families Initiative into family support systems, including the child protection system. ECCS has played an important role in efforts to create and support developmental screening initiatives. More than 50 percent of the Coordinators report that their ECCS initiative was involved in efforts to develop standards and core competencies around developmental screening. Successful implementation of a screening and referral system requires the kind of cross-sector collaboration that ECCS is intended to foster.
- **ECCS spurred progress in early care and education.** While the early care and education component was generally the most developed and advanced when ECCS began, the initiative has made significant contributions in this area. In at least two States, ECCS was the spark that helped spur the development and implementation of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems; in other States, it provided the forum for efforts to continue and strengthen the development of such systems. Two other States noted that ECCS helped support the implementation of the development of training initiatives and standards directed at family childcare providers who are exempt from licensing but who receive public subsidies. These unregulated providers are an important source of care upon which the most vulnerable families often rely. These efforts have begun to ensure that these providers have some minimal knowledge about health, safety, and child development.
- **ECCS helped strengthen systems-building efforts at the community level.** Though focused on the State level, ECCS played an important role in helping systems-building efforts at the community level. A report by Project Thrive found that more than three-fourths of the States (37) had or were developing structures to support local integration.² In more than a dozen States, community-level systems-building coalitions have developed. Some of these local coalitions have substantial funding from dedicated tax revenue, State general funds, and foundations. Others have very limited or virtually no State funding, although technical assistance and support are provided. ECCS's role has varied in these community-level efforts, but in a number of cases, it has helped to spur their development or provided the framework under which they operate. In their responses to the ECCS Coordinators Survey, 60 percent of respondents indicated that their ECCS initiative

² Columbia University, Mailman School of Public Health, National Center for Children in Poverty. (2007, July). *Short Take No. 5: State of the States ECCS Initiatives*. Retrieved May 17, 2011, from http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_748.pdf.

had made a moderate or large contribution to developing a technical assistance system for communities engaged in early childhood systems building.

Some States have used ECCS funding for small grants to communities to fund pilot projects and to support innovative efforts. One State, which provides no direct funding to the communities, reported that the ECCS plan has provided the strategies that guide investment of community-level foundations in community systems-building efforts. While communities themselves would have struggled to marshal this support, the existence of a State evidence-based plan helps raise the visibility and credibility of the community-level efforts. In another State, the ECCS State team serves as the link between community efforts and State agencies. As communities carry out their work, they uncover roadblocks created by State policy and practice and are able to take their concerns to the State Team, discussing policy changes that could lead to improvements at the community level.

- **ECCS has helped spur family leadership development efforts.** Parents and other family members have a vital role to play in building support for investment in comprehensive early childhood systems among the public and policymakers. To this end, developing family leadership is an important focus of early childhood systems building, which depends on input from the people whom they serve. Almost 70 percent of respondents to the ECCS Coordinators Survey reported engaging in training or technical assistance activities designed to encourage parent and family leadership. In their interviews, grantees acknowledged that they have struggled to find ways that families can make meaningful contributions to systems-building efforts, but quite a few of them have made important progress in this area. Incorporating family leadership development into their efforts has already paid dividends in terms of building political support for early childhood investment. In addition, ECCS has played an important role in helping to develop the Parent and Community Café approaches, which seek to expand family input on early childhood policies and practices by engaging families and other key stakeholders in the planning and development of comprehensive systems that meet the needs of children and families. One State has focused on support for a family leadership institute that has enabled parents to develop the skills and knowledge that they need in order to directly engage in high-level policy debates.
- **ECCS has encouraged States to examine financing for early childhood systems.** ECCS requires States to conduct a financial scan examining funding for early childhood programs and initiatives. In the Coordinators Survey, 46 percent of respondents indicated that a financial map or scan has been completed, and 25 percent said that one was currently being conducted. States have varied in the particulars of how they have responded to the financial scan requirement. At least two States have developed models estimating the cost of a truly comprehensive early childhood system, and a few others are beginning to explore this possibility. Some of these States are working on dynamic models in which assumptions can be changed to estimate the cost of various innovations in order to inform policy debates. Other States have examined funding streams to identify Federal funds that had been underused and/or could be directed to support cross-disciplinary training in areas such as social and emotional development. Some States are beginning to look at needs and opportunities for private funding to bridge gaps in the early childhood system. They are working with private partners to build understanding and commitment to the importance of investment in early childhood initiatives. Assuming that this progress can be maintained, there are opportunities for exciting developments in this area as States learn from each other and as the national organizations that have been supporting these efforts learn from experience in applying their expertise.

ECCS Helped to Leverage and Coordinate Early Childhood Funding.

One of ECCS's most important roles has been to coordinate early childhood efforts in terms of planning and investment. This has led to greater coordination and more efficient use of resources at the State and community levels with regard to State and Federal resources. Two key informants, who each had many decades of experience in State government and who represented States with very different political cultures, independently cited this aspect of the grant:

"It is the single most logical and cost-effective thing I've seen the Federal Government do in my 39-year career."
—ECCS partner

"We do the same things that I guess the Feds are doing for us at the local level. I mean, we provide [counties] often very small sums of money, almost embarrassed to say how much, but it is amazing what you get for it. I think it is amazing what the Feds got from ECCS."
—ECCS Coordinator's supervisor

In the Coordinators Survey, 92 percent of respondents indicated that their ECCS State Team collaborated on applications for funding or support. More than two-thirds of the grantees secured other Federal funding, more than half secured State or local funding, and 45 percent obtained foundation funding. Many efforts went beyond obtaining funding, and included a focus on the strategic use of resources.

- **ECCS leveraged and guided funding of private foundations and philanthropists.** State plans have served to guide the funding decisions of private foundations. Four States explicitly noted that private foundations or philanthropists in their States use the State plan to make investment decisions, and other States implied that this takes place. ECCS also has been used to leverage funding to community coalitions focused on systems building. Leveraging funding helps to ensure that investment in early childhood is a coordinated part of a long-term vision and plan.
- **ECCS funding has filled gaps and encouraged other agencies to commit resources as part of projects that require the blending of funds.** Many key informants mentioned the role that ECCS plays in making contributions to systems-building efforts that involve multiple agencies. Often, ECCS contributed a small amount of funding that helped to fill a key gap in a collaborative effort. One grantee pointed out that ECCS provided funding that enabled the State to pilot a project that proved to be successful and eventually became a statewide screening system. Another key informant described how limited contributions can grow, indicating that while ECCS cannot provide a great deal of funding, it often inspires contributions by other agencies.

"I think one of the things that happens when you are willing to put funding there and then when partners at the community level see that there is a willingness for other agencies to put funds; [they] are more likely to contribute and partner instead of having to come up with all of it themselves."

—ECCS partner and Executive Director of a State entity that supports comprehensive systems building at the community level

- **ECCS helped coordinate Federal investments in early childhood and make them more effective.** A critical ECCS achievement has been to enable States to plan for Federal investments in early childhood. Such planning was especially important at a time when there was an influx of such resources. ECCS has also provided a venue in which multiple agencies and organizations can come together to consider how to make the most effective use of such investments.
 - ▶ **ECCS has provided States with a framework for investment for their State Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) funding.** In more than a dozen States, the ECCS plan is serving as the framework to guide the investments being made with the funding that was made available from the State ECAC. The availability of a comprehensive framework allowed States to assess the environment and discuss the key implementation issues related to the areas in which funding was available, and then to use that funding to make substantial progress, rather than to focus purely on assessment and planning.
 - ▶ **ECCS helped States to effectively spend the influx of funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) and to plan for spending on Affordable Care Act (ACA) initiatives.** States used additional ARRA funding to advance the goals of building comprehensive systems. One State reported that it had developed a matrix showing the crosswalk between ARRA funding opportunities and the goals of its ECCS State Plan. They then used the funding to support those goals. This process ensured that short-term funding could be used as part of a larger process of improving the early childhood system. ECCS helped States get a head start on planning their investments in the home-visiting funds that resulted from passage of the ACA. Many States had already done extensive work examining their home-visiting systems as part of their ECCS efforts, and others were able to do so when it became apparent that the Federal Government was going to invest funds in this area. The result has been plans based on more thorough research with a strong collaborative focus.
 - ▶ **ECCS has served as a conduit for connecting different opportunities that are unlikely to have been as effectively coordinated in the absence of a comprehensive systems-building effort.** Nine States mentioned that they used ECCS to ensure that the work that they conducted as part of SEFEL was integrated into an overall effort to build a stronger early childhood mental health system. States also cited examples that included efforts related to State Mental Health Transformation grants, Project Launch, and Community Based Child Abuse and Prevention grants. Key informants used such examples to illustrate that in the past, funding had been fragmented, limiting their ability to build on earlier work in a way that led to the overall development of the system.

ECCS is an important conduit for ensuring that health issues have a prominent place in early childhood discussions and planning. One of MCHB’s key reasons for funding ECCS was a sense that while health is a critical part of school readiness, it had not received the same level of attention as had cognitive development, primarily because the discussions around the early childhood table were largely taking place within the early care and education sector. ECCS played an important role in increasing the prominence of health issues, including physical health; social and emotional health; and, in some States, oral health. Since its beginning, ECCS has included a focus on the concept of the medical home; with the passage of the ACA, opportunities related to this have increased. Key informants mentioned that as a result of their efforts, early childhood partners are now more likely to raise issues related to the health of young children when discussing school readiness and child development.

Prospects for Sustaining Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Building

Grantees were asked about the prospects for sustaining comprehensive systems-building efforts. The context in which they answered the question is important. Grantees are well aware that ECCS has been funded for 8 years and that there is no guarantee that funding will continue beyond 2012. Key informants addressed two issues in their answers regarding sustainability: (1) the prospects for finding alternative sources of funding to support the coordination of their comprehensive systems-building efforts and (2) what aspects of their ECCS initiative they would and would not be able to sustain if ECCS funding ended.

Prospects for Finding Alternative Funding Sources for Comprehensive Systems-Building Work

Key informants recognize and respect the contribution of other funding sources and programs to progress in various early childhood sectors. However, they were skeptical regarding the possibility of finding funding sources that could fill the gap created by the loss of ECCS funding. Some of the issues discussed in this area are outlined below:

- **Can ECAC take a lead role in comprehensive systems building?**

Grantees are extremely excited about the funding that is available for the State ECAC. For many, it represents an excellent opportunity to implement various aspects of State plans that did not previously have a significant funding source. According to the ECCS Coordinators Survey, the contribution that ECCS had made was recognized in 15 States (29 percent) in which the ECCS State Team was designated as the ECAC. In six States (12 percent), the ECCS State Team serves as a subcommittee of the Council; the same number reported that there is a great deal of overlap in the membership of the Council and the ECCS State Team. Even in States in which there is a limited shared membership, ECCS State Teams have had an influence on the Council, because of the extent to which Councils have borrowed from the ECCS State Plan in setting their agenda or because the State Team is expected to serve in a key role implementing the Council’s plan. However, in more than a dozen States, the

"It [the ECAC Grant] is a 3-year [grant] very specific to four goal areas, so I think it's going to help move a lot of the work forward that we haven't had funding through ECCS to move forward. But it's certainly not a replacement."

—ECCS grantee

Advisory Councils tend to focus heavily on early care and education rather than comprehensive initiatives. Grantees are also very conscious of the fact that ECAC is short-term funding while the need for coordination of systems-building efforts will continue beyond the end of the ECAC funding. Finally, many grantees talked about ECCS and the Advisory Councils as being complementary rather than duplicative. In many States, Councils have helped provide a link between State plans and higher-level decisionmakers. However, State teams will still be needed to implement and further develop their approaches in the component areas of an early childhood system. Coordinators are still needed to serve as staff, advisors, or participants in Councils that help ensure that there is a link between efforts undertaken by the Councils and other initiatives that are taking place in the State. Decisions will have to be made regarding how to sustain and build upon the efforts that are completed using the funding available to the Councils. These roles require an investment in a coordinator or another person or entity who is focused on comprehensive systems building; grantees are concerned that the Councils will not be able to play that role in the long run.

■ **Is State funding available to support comprehensive systems building?**

The vast majority of key informants noted the tremendous challenge of working in environments in which conversations revolve around budget cutting, not investment. State funding and investment in early childhood are generally being reduced, sometimes by very large amounts. Some coordinators speculated on whether the agencies represented by various State team members could contribute to funding a coordination position, but most thought that in the current climate, such an effort would be unlikely to succeed because of the tremendous pressure to maintain core services.

■ **Are private funds available to support comprehensive systems building?**

Many grantees have been able to work with partners to find private funding for various systems-building initiatives. Some have gone further, exploring ways to generate extensive and long-term commitments of private philanthropists to support early childhood development in their States and communities. However, none felt that private funding was currently a realistic option as a replacement for ECCS funding. Private funders are very willing to support substantive efforts and specific initiatives that can be directly linked to the well-being of children and families. They do not, however, tend to support efforts focused on planning, coordination, framing, and strategy development. Grantees also indicate that they need more time to build the commitment and public will that will spur further private and possibly public investment in early childhood.

"Not a lot of people fund systems building and development, because it is a hard concept to understand and it doesn't directly translate to immediate payoffs. So that is a really big challenge. I think we're trying [to] work more and develop partnerships with business and philanthropic organizations...but I think that is so far down the road that it's not really a realistic opportunity for sustainability at this point."

—ECCS grantee

ECCS has helped spur progress in a great number of areas, and many of those gains are likely to be retained. Infrastructure and relationships have developed that could continue once ECCS ends. However, grantees are concerned that, absent a dedicated funding source devoted to continuing to nurture and support these relationships and this infrastructure, innovation will slow significantly and relationships will erode. Partners will focus more of their energy on the day-to-day challenges of administering programs and running or serving institutions in very challenging economic and political times.

What Key Informants Thought Would Be Lost or Erode if ECCS Funding Ended

Key informants were asked to describe what would be lost if ECCS funding were to end and no alternative source of funding to support comprehensive systems building emerged. Their responses are summarized below:

- **The role of the ECCS Coordinator as connector and convener.** A key role of ECCS is providing the funding for someone in the State to play the role of connector and convener. There are many ongoing efforts to address issues in early childhood, some of which predate ECCS and will continue should it end. ECCS has been instrumental in providing the ability to link these efforts and, in some cases, to combine them. It provided resources devoted exclusively to connecting and coordinating the various efforts with the goal of making them more effective. If anything, this role has become more important as budget cuts eliminate State staff and stretch staff abilities to manage their various roles. A few grantees explicitly mentioned that staff are now doing jobs that were previously filled by multiple persons. Without dedicated funding, it will be very difficult for someone to assume the role of connecting early childhood initiatives and efforts and bringing stakeholders together to plan and implement needed change and innovation.
- **The Federal Government's endorsement of comprehensive systems building.** ECCS represents the Federal Government's most explicit endorsement of the need for a comprehensive early childhood system with a broad focus on all aspects of a child's development. This endorsement is a powerful tool that helps encourage State partners, public and private, to join together around a common table to develop comprehensive strategies for addressing the needs of children and families. The tool could be more effective if the Federal Government were more consistent in incorporating this focus into grant guidance. Grantees felt that this approach was taken for Project Launch but not as effectively for the State ECAC grant guidance. Regardless of the extent of efforts to extend the focus on partnering and collaboration into other Federal initiatives, grantees felt that it is important to have Federal funding, even a relatively small amount, dedicated to comprehensive systems development.
- **The comprehensive focus of State early childhood efforts.** Early childhood partners are increasingly likely to raise health as an issue related to early childhood without prompting. However, many States and jurisdictions expressed concern that, absent someone whose focus is to promote comprehensive approaches to early childhood, the focus on health issues will not be retained. In addition, this is an ongoing challenge in those States in which efforts to encourage a broad focus for the ECAC were unsuccessful. The Councils in such States have a strong early care and education focus and the ECCS State team is the only early childhood coalition at the State level with a comprehensive focus. But while the integration of health issues has been an important part of ECCS, it is not the only area of

"We seem to be the glue that is keeping people together. Because we aren't attached to a program or have much money, we can push people in a positive way that others can't, because they feel they have too much at risk."

"The ECCS funding: While it is small, it is considerable enough in that it helps keep a person's attention on the things that they need to do to keep the system moving. Otherwise, then all gears grind to a halt. If a person isn't in that position with funding, then the question is, 'Where is that funding going to come from?' ECCS keeps that motor going."

"Without ECCS funding, you would lose the point person who can hook people up, who can connect the dots on a day-to-day basis."

—ECCS Grantees from three different States

importance. ECCS has provided the mechanism that has encouraged States to make sure they are taking a broad perspective when engaging in planning and coordination.

"ECCS is constantly [saying], 'Well, let's focus on this; let's make sure we are looking at parent education; let's make sure we are looking at the family; let's make sure we are looking at mental health; let's make sure that we are looking at all of these social determinants that play a key role in making sure those children are academically prepared and ready to succeed.' So I think that [without ECCS, that] comprehensive picture would dwindle."

—ECCS Coordinator

The Future of Comprehensive Systems Building

ECCS Coordinators made a strong case for the need for dedicated funding designed to support comprehensive early childhood systems-building efforts. Certainly many Coordinators have a personal stake in the issue, but the arguments that they made were not about concerns over job security or self-interest but rather the need to continue the progress they have made with their partners, which has contributed to the development of systems that are more responsive to the needs of young children and their families. They suggested that although the work has been significant, the needs are ongoing. They appreciate that these are challenging economic times; a few offered ideas about how additional support might be found. Some ECCS grantees suggested that Federal agencies might want to jointly fund State comprehensive systems building as a statement of their commitment to collaboration and cross-systems work. If Federal support is to continue, the grantees are very clear that they want to build upon what already exists and be involved in discussions of how best to move forward.