

## POLICY BRIEF

## BUILDING A STATEWIDE SYSTEM TO SUPPORT EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM INTEGRATION WITH COMPREHENSIVE SERVICES: A POLICY BRIEF FOR STATE LEADERS

## BOSTON COLLEGE CENTER FOR THRIVING CHILDREN

## INTRODUCTION

Building an effective and functional system of comprehensive supports for children in early childhood settings is now more urgent than ever. This brief summarizes the adaptations that state policymakers can make to bring best practices for comprehensive support into their own state's unique early childhood education context.

## WHY COMPREHENSIVE SERVICES CAN IMPROVE CHILD AND FAMILY WELLBEING

Researchers from the fields of economics, education, neuroscience, and psychology have found that growing up poor -- or during a pandemic -- affects child development and school readiness for two primary reasons. First, a long line of [research](#) has shown that children in poverty have less access to the types of materials, resources, and enriching everyday experiences that we know promote learning. This is true at home, in their communities, and in their schools. Second, the often chaotic experiences associated with poverty, a public health crisis, or the effects of systemic racism may create prolonged periods of stress for children and their families, which can become [toxic](#) to children's brain development. As the [Harvard Center on the Developing Child](#) explains, over-activation of the body's stress response can keep a child in "fight or flight" mode with harmful consequences for brain growth and readiness to learn in school.

The solution is to replace scarcity and stress with enrichment, safety, care, and opportunity. Comprehensive services may include resources that address a child and family's strengths and needs, including health and mental health care, social services, playgroups, educational and cultural enrichment opportunities, and connections to positive relationships. Resources, relationships, and opportunities are part of a comprehensive approach to supporting children's healthy development and thriving. They are part of a [continuum](#) of services that promote and support mental health. When implemented effectively, comprehensive supports can reinforce and build strengths within a child's developmental context, enriching and supporting the positives experienced in quality early childhood programs, community settings, and at home.



## Impacts of COVID-19

Contexts supportive of healthy child development and learning are more crucial now than ever. Families across the country are hurting during the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2019 and January 2022, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) caseloads increased by [24 percent](#), and food prices are on the [rise](#). Families of young children are also experiencing difficulty accessing [early education and care](#); and are experiencing higher levels of [stress and trauma](#) than families with older children. Parents [report](#) concerns about the social, health, and learning consequences of remote learning and lack of child care for their young children, and [family survey data](#) noted associations between parents' emotional distress due to material hardships and their children's emotional wellbeing. Low-income, undocumented, [Black and Latinx families](#) are disproportionately affected. In addition, early education providers [report](#) concerns about their own [physical and mental](#) wellbeing.

## State priorities

Many states are prioritizing improvement of access to comprehensive services for young children and their families.

- The recent five-year strategic action plan of the [Massachusetts](#) Department of Early Education and Care highlights the need for “comprehensive supports to meet the complex and changing needs of children and families” in early childhood.
- One of the goals of [Illinois's](#) strategic plan is “to support systems building and improve cross-system connections among programs to ensure that every community has a system for helping families access the coordinated supports they need.”
- The strategic plan of [California](#) includes the intention to “deliver comprehensive services” as part of their goal to strengthen their system of early learning and care.
- The [North Carolina](#) Early Childhood Family Engagement and Leadership Framework includes a focus on “coordinated, integrated, and comprehensive service,” and the state's Building Healthy & Resilient Communities Across North Carolina [plan](#) aims “to ensure North Carolina comprehensively promotes healthy and resilient children, families, and community environments.”

## Federal funding

A recent influx of federal funding, dedicated in part to early education and care infrastructure building, provides an historic opportunity for progress.



The idea of meeting the comprehensive needs of young children and their families is not new. It is intrinsic to high quality early childhood programs, and robust models such as Head Start and Educare, have invested heavily in credentialed personnel to help families access comprehensive services. Non profits supported by federal, state, and philanthropic funds provide a range of services, including playgroups and community connections, parenting support groups, diaper and clothing banks, food banks, and economic mobility supports. Federal and state governments have similarly created a multitude of programs to address the comprehensive needs of young children and families, including the [Women, Infants, and Children Nutrition Program](#), [Temporary Assistance to Needy Families](#), the [Child Care Development Block Grant](#), [Head Start](#), the [Earned Income Tax Credit](#), [The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting \(MIECHV\) Program](#), [Healthy Start](#), [Bright Futures](#), and the [Pediatric Mental Health Care Access \(PMHCA\) Program](#).

These programs and approaches to addressing the comprehensive needs of children and families are part of the ecosystem of supports available to young children and families and provide important insights that illuminate a course forward. Below are brief summaries of three comprehensive services models and their implications for statewide system building.

### Head Start

[Head Start](#) programs for 3- and 4- year olds and [Early Head Start](#) programs for infants, toddlers, and families, serve over 1 million children in over 1,600 agencies across the nation. Using a [framework](#) developed by the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning, the programs aim to provide nurturing, responsive interactions, and engaging environments by (a) implementing research-based curriculum and teaching practices; (b) using screening and ongoing assessment of children’s skills; (c) embedding individualized teaching and learning; and (d) engaging families and [community](#) stakeholders, including through connections to comprehensive nutrition, health, mental health, and family engagement services consistent with the Head Start Program Performance Standards. Programs include [family services staff](#) who “work directly with families on the family partnership process,” and are required to have at least “a credential or certification in social work, human services, family services, counseling, or a related field within eighteen months of hire.”

At the request of the Administration of Children and Families, MDRC is [undertaking](#) an extensive study of the ways in which Head Start and Early Head Start programs provide family support services. This study will provide important insight into implementation, including a literature review, development of a theory of change, and qualitative review of practices in use. In January 2020, Start Early [reported](#) on Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, which include comprehensive family support services. They noted that some states used federal funds to expand early childhood mental health services, provide diapers and formula to infants while in care, and improve inter-agency collaboration, such as providing preventive health screening to children in Partnership programs.

Other reports on Head Start point to promising indicators relative to access to comprehensive services. For example, in FY2019 Head Start increased participants’ access to childhood immunizations and health insurance coverage; connected approximately 69,000 families to housing assistance; and connected about 151,000 families to adult education and job training services.

## Educare

The [Educare model](#) for children ages 0-5 has four pillars: high-quality teaching practices, embedded professional development, data utilization, and intensive family engagement including on site family services and a Master's level social worker serving as Family Support Supervisor who oversees a Bachelor's trained Family Support Specialist to address comprehensive services needs. Most Educare schools are also Head Start or Early Head Start programs, around which additional public early childhood funding is woven to allow for [sustainability](#).

The [Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#) is leading an ongoing implementation study of the Educare model. [Findings](#) thus far indicate that children enrolled in Educare programs develop improved vocabulary and social-emotional skills, that earlier enrollment and longer participation are tied to greater growth in receptive vocabulary, and that the majority of parents engage at least three times per week in positive interactions with their children around their day at school, teaching them letters and numbers, and reading to them.

## Smart Start

[Smart Start](#) was developed in North Carolina in 1993 so that every child birth-to-five "receives the care and nurturing they need to thrive" and enters kindergarten ready to learn. Smart Start serves all 100 North Carolina counties through 75 local partnerships, led by the North Carolina Partnership for Children, using both public and private funding to coordinate resources for children and families. Investment decisions in the areas of early education, family support, health, and literacy are made locally to best meet the needs of the specific community being served.

A [study](#) published in 2017, which looked at the effects of both Smart Start (SS) and More at Four (MAF), found "that state investments early in life in North Carolina's SS initiative and MAF program are associated with higher math and reading standardized test scores, reductions in special education placement rates, and reductions in being grade retained in Grades 3, 4, and 5," and that Smart Start "leads to improvements in children's educational outcomes through age 11." Additionally, the authors noted that the strengths of Smart Start are its ability to "saturate communities" through its focus on "addressing the community-wide quality of early childhood education and care."



## City Connects

[City Connects](#) is an intervention that creates a personalized network of resources and opportunities for each child in a school or program by coordinating resources drawn from existing school-, program-, and community-based services. Originally developed as an elementary school model, it was adapted to early childhood settings in 2009 and presently operates in 71 early childhood sites, including school-based pre-k programs and free standing early childhood centers serving children ages 0-5.

City Connects supports Master’s level social workers or school counselors to serve as coordinators who work closely with teachers and families to create a customized plan to address the unique constellation of strengths and needs of each child and family. The coordinators are responsible to ensure delivery of the services in the plan. They may also support program implementation of social-emotional curricula and coordinate community and family engagement events. Coordinators may work full time in a single program or part time across multiple programs.

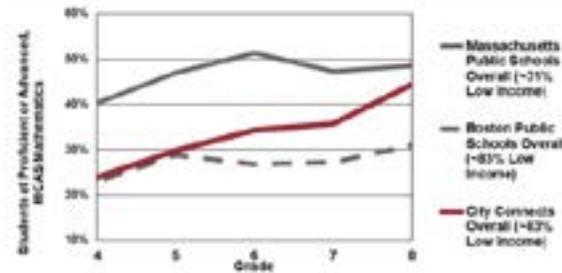
Although a longitudinal evaluation of City Connects’ early childhood adaptation has not yet been conducted, a growing body of evidence demonstrates a causal effect between the approach in elementary schools and positive child outcomes. [Peer-reviewed studies](#) have shown that students who receive City Connects in elementary school have better effort, grades, attendance, and [test scores](#). After leaving this intervention, when followed into middle school, they close up to [two thirds](#) of achievement gaps on MCAS Math and [up to half](#) of the achievement gap on MCAS ELA. They are less likely to be [chronically absent](#), [experience grade retention](#), or to [drop out](#) of high school. These benefits accrue to [Black and Latino boys](#), [students learning English](#), and new immigrant students. A [recent study](#) has found that students who experience City Connects in elementary school are more likely to enroll in and complete post-secondary programs.

The University of Pennsylvania Center for Benefit Cost Studies in Education [found](#) that City Connects’ effective approach to resource coordination yields cost savings to taxpayers: every dollar currently invested in education, social services, health and mental health care for children and families could yield triple the benefits if effective coordination of comprehensive services were widespread. In a follow up [study](#) published in *Prevention Science*, researchers found that elementary schools implementing City Connects accrued an additional \$5400 per student in services dedicated to child wellbeing, as compared to similar schools without City Connects.

A [study](#) submitted but not yet published in a peer-reviewed journal looks at the impacts of pre-k followed by City Connects in elementary school. Its findings show strong dynamic complementarity between the interventions, as children who receive both pre-k and City Connects outperform peers who received only pre-k or only City Connects.

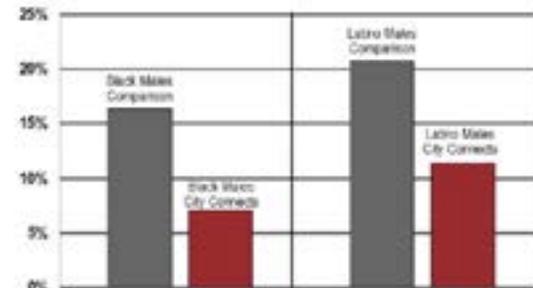
Governments at the national, regional, and local levels are scaling City Connects practices and tools to become their approach to integrating comprehensive services in schools and early childhood programs.

## Higher scores on statewide tests



Students who received City Connects comprehensive supports during elementary school took the Massachusetts statewide test, known as the MCAS, in 8th grade, three years after leaving the intervention. Students who had City Connects closed about two-thirds of the achievement gap on MCAS in Mathematics.

## Reduce dropout rates for sub-groups



Students who received City Connects comprehensive supports during elementary school were about half as likely to drop out of high school compared to peers who did not receive City Connects at any time. Reduction in the high school drop out rate holds true for important sub-groups, including Black and



## Benefits outweigh costs

For every dollar invested in City Connects implementation, and the resources to which children and families are connected (i.e. social services, health and mental services, education, child care, and youth development) effective resources coordination yields \$3 in benefits to society.

Although critical questions remain to be answered about the impacts of comprehensive services on early childhood outcomes and how to effectively implement resource coordination across the early childhood mixed delivery system, and in urban, suburban, and rural communities, some important lessons are already available. Judicious gleaning of insights and know-how can be used to guide the development of an infrastructure to support effective and efficient coordination of resources dedicated to promoting the wellbeing of young children and their families.

### Developmental sciences point to best practices

The [developmental sciences](#) make clear that: (1) protective factors can be bolstered and risk factors addressed, making it possible to change a child's at-risk developmental trajectory in a positive direction; and (2) child development is influenced across contexts that include home, school, and community. The [research](#) suggests that to be a maximally effective intervention, support for young children and families should be: (a) customized to address the strengths and needs of each child and their family, since the assets of families and the experiences of poverty, or a pandemic, vary; (b) comprehensive across all domains of development; (c) coordinated in partnership with service providers, early education programs, and families; (d) continuous or systematic so that supports can respond to changing developmental needs or family circumstances; and (e) data-informed.



### A combination of investment in, and coordination of, services is needed

The ecosystem of resources available to young children and families is often less robust than those for older children and varies significantly across communities and regions. In rural communities compared to urban areas, community resources related to housing, food, and child care may be fewer, and there may be limited transportation infrastructure to help residents reach needed services.

Importantly, there are often fewer programs and resources dedicated to young children and families as compared to the resources and services available to school-aged children. City Connects coordinators working in early childhood settings in Boston, Springfield, and Salem, Massachusetts, for example, report that they identify specific family needs, but sometimes cannot find community agencies or programs to meet those needs. They attest that this happens more frequently for children and families ages 0-5 than for school-aged children.

While improved coordination of resources and supports for children and families is key to producing improved outcomes in a cost-efficient manner, strategic targeted investments responsive to actual demand will be a necessary part of a responsive and effective system capable of promoting child wellbeing and school readiness.

### Integration within early childhood programs likely contributes to positive outcomes

In elementary school contexts, an integrated system of student support that is part of the daily functioning of a school and consistent with best practices seems to be [key](#) to driving outcomes. Comprehensive services that are [co-located](#) or tacked on in an add-on or modular fashion may not be sufficient to shift the student's context to promote positive development, particularly for students experiencing the compounding effects

of poverty and systemic racism. Integration into day-to-day functioning includes regular communication and engagement with educators, opportunities for observation of children both inside and outside of the classroom, opportunities for informal relationship building and communication with families, support for implementation of social-emotional curricula and trauma-informed practices, and the capacity to adjust and leverage school or program-based resources to be responsive to children’s strengths and needs. This has implications for how a system of comprehensive services may intersect with states’ early childhood program quality and educator development systems.

## Stable funding is key

Stable funding, as through the federal Head Start grant, is a prerequisite for building capacity to connect children and families with comprehensive wraparound services. Head Start, Early Head Start, and Educare demonstrate that it enables the hiring of credentialed and clinically trained staff and supports professional

## 6 ELEMENTS IN A COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM DESIGNED TO SUPPORT CHILD WELLBEING AND SCHOOL READINESS

To build a functional, responsive, effective system of comprehensive supports to promote child wellbeing and school readiness, significant input from the field, community- and program type-adaptations, and alignment within the state’s existing and emerging policies, structures, and technologies will be necessary. This brief outlines elements of a system, bringing to bear lessons learned from early education and K-12 evidence-based interventions, and the infrastructure necessary to bring them to scale. However, these insights will need to be thoughtfully and responsively adapted to each state’s unique early childhood context.

The next section synthesizes information under each of the following elements to serve as a starting point for the work ahead.

1. A personalized plan
2. Access to resource information
3. Capacity to develop and ensure delivery of the plan
4. Technology
5. Quality investments
6. Aligned systems

### 1. A personalized plan of supports and opportunities

A plan tailored to the strengths and needs of each child begins with a “whole child” review. Consistent with early childhood best practices, this review looks at each child’s progress in all developmental domains and at the context for child development and wellbeing. Because understanding the whole child is a core part of early childhood best practices, one or more tools already commonly in use may provide a strong starting point for a unified yet adaptable approach to understanding how best to support each child. For example, the [Ages and Stages Questionnaire®](#) or the [The Battelle® Developmental Inventory](#), plus key questions such as, “Do you have access to enough food for everyone in your house?” and “Do you have everything you need to help manage your family’s physical health? Mental health?” could become a statewide approach to whole child review. Room for adaptation to special populations or to specific programmatic requirements might also be considered.

This review of a child’s strengths and needs across all developmental domains informs the development of a personalized plan, in close consultation and partnership with the family. The plan may include in-classroom or in-program strategies to enhance learning opportunities or to address concerns about behavior or trauma. The plan may also include connections to community-based services, such as those provided by social services agencies, economic mobility programs, the local public school district, library, or health care organizations.

## 2. Access to resource information

In order to develop a customized plan for each child and family that leverages existing resources in the early childhood program and in the surrounding community, the person responsible for creating the plan must have ready access to accurate information about available services. This is a perennial challenge, but one which can be addressed.

First, certain information about available resources is best identified and organized at the state level, and certain information is best identified and organized at the local level. For example, in many jurisdictions the state divisions of early childhood, Health and Human Services, and Elementary and Secondary Education make available different services through different regional entities serving different geographic areas, and it can be almost impossible for someone in a local program to know which service providers are available to their families. The addition of different federal regions, such as those of multi-service CAP agencies, compound the challenge. The state, potentially in partnership with the United Way-developed 211 system, is uniquely situated to disentangle this information and make it accessible and actionable at the local level.

At the same time, local knowledge about available resources, programs, and whom to call, is invaluable, and any state-designed solution should allow for local knowledge to augment any centralized database, and/or to be interoperable with existing systems. Communities have developed a range of ways to collect and disseminate resource information, such as lists, Google docs, and databases. Some have been developed by local hospital systems like [Kaiser Permanente](#) and [Boston Children's Hospital](#). Others have been developed by municipalities like those in [Cambridge](#) and [Somerville](#), Massachusetts and [Multnomah County](#), Oregon. The San Francisco and Los Angeles areas have a resource search tool managed by [One Degree](#) and [Alluma](#). Some school districts use a more robust web-based [technology system](#) that allows for information to be updated and available across sites, minimizing duplication of effort and helping to ensure up-to-date information. Efforts to create more uniform technological solutions are being spearheaded by groups like [Open Referral](#) and the [Gravity Project](#). Any state-designed or supported solution should allow for integration or input of local resource information.

How resource information is organized can also contribute to helping those who know families and children to best facilitate connections to the right services at the right time. Developmental science and implementation experience shed light on how to conduct a local resource landscape analysis and organize information in a taxonomy conducive to creating high quality matches between child and family and available resources in the community. For more, see [Analyzing the Resource Landscape](#).

## 3. Capacity to develop and ensure delivery of the plan

In all settings committed to addressing the comprehensive needs of children and families, it is necessary to have personnel with capacity to review every child and to do the work of forging connections and navigating families through paperwork and other hurdles to ensure delivery of services. Though often described in mechanistic terms, this is relational work that helps to promote a network of supportive, caring, skilled adults around each child and their family.

Across the early childhood mixed delivery system, and in various communities, personnel qualifications, roles, and structures may vary. Drawing on experience in the early childhood and K-12 fields, the primary approaches to staffing systems of support are: (1) Programs are able to have one or more social workers or counselors on site, full time; (2) Programs are able to have social workers or counselors on site part time; (3) Programs engage support staff with strong local knowledge, but who may not be clinically trained or knowledgeable about handling confidential information; (4) Classroom educators review each student, create a plan, and an on- or off-site social worker assists with connections to services. Each of these approaches will require emphasis on different knowledge and competencies, and different structures for oversight and support. All approaches can be supported to implement core best practices.

## 4. Technology

Technology can play a valuable role in organizing and ensuring follow up on individual plans, facilitating identification of community-based resources for young children and families, and permitting data analysis and evaluation. The emerging marketplace of integrated support providers is demonstrating the core components of field-tested technology systems. These indicate the desirability of technology systems that:

- allow for access to relevant child-level data already collected, such as demographic information, attendance, and experience in early education and care settings;
- Provide a uniform comprehensive “whole child review” tool that can be adapted to special populations or program needs;
- provide a template for the creation of individualized plans;
- rapidly identify school-, community-, and web-based resources relevant to child and family needs across program sites within a community;
- track service availability and utilization;
- provide for ongoing review to ensure that services are delivered and that plans change in response to children’s needs over time;
- offer aggregate data to inform school-based, municipal-, and state-level decision-making; and
- allow for evaluation.

Advanced systems would articulate with existing program and state technology systems to track both process and outcome data. Process benchmarks are designed to assess the quality of implementation and allow for continuous progress and improvement. Examples of [process benchmarks](#) include:

- percentage of individual children reviewed
- percentage of children with a personalized plan
- number of services referred
- number of services provided or delivered
- number of agency partners
- number of agency partners delivering individualized services
- satisfaction surveys

## 5. Quality investments

As with so many early childhood interventions, the quality of implementation matters greatly to child outcomes. While there are many exemplary and promising approaches already in communities across the country, the sciences of child development and learning, emerging evidence in early childhood settings, and more robust evidence of positive child outcomes for school-aged students point us to best practices, including the value of a universal and systematic approach to supporting each and every child and family.

Many state agencies and divisions of early childhood are well positioned to create a responsive, adaptable system of supports that empowers the field to engage in best practices to promote child wellbeing and school readiness by leveraging program- and community-based resources, relationships, and opportunities. This may include:

- establishing a standard tool for “whole child review” that can be adapted for specific populations or program needs;
- developing a technology system that facilitates high quality implementation; and
- providing ongoing professional development and support for the use of tools and core competencies tied to best practices.

The benefits of having a standardized way to review each child include: (1) encoding of best practices; (2) opportunity to provide meaningful, complementary professional development and support for

implementation of best practices; (3) opportunity to provide the infrastructure systems needed to support plan development and execution; (4) opportunity to aggregate data in order to identify real-time trends in the changing needs of children and families, to quantify and act to fill gaps in resources in specific communities, and to more efficiently deploy resources aimed at child wellbeing.

Similarly, there are benefits to creating a statewide technology system that, in part, organizes resource information that can then be customized to each community and augmented by local knowledge. While such a system may or may not be a fit for local programs and existing technological commitments within a given community, a statewide system would allow for (1) greater statewide and local efficiencies on balance; (2) more uniform access to information about available resources at the federal and state levels, as well as “anywhere” resources increasingly migrating online; (3) opportunity to encode best practices and support consistent data entry, updating, and utilization; (4) opportunity to support the making of high quality matches between children and resources; and (5) capacity to aggregate and analyze data to inform more strategic decision making relative to resource allocation and investments.

## 6. Aligned systems

A strong system capable of driving the right set of resources, relationships, and opportunities to the right child and family at the right time must work within, and help to inform, both early childhood agencies and inter-agency systems. For example, “whole child review” could be an element of the Quality Rating and Improvement System, a practice supported by the educator professional development providers, reflected in user-friendly technology systems, and supported by stable funding streams to ensure capacity for follow up. The information generated by conducting “whole child reviews” and coordinating comprehensive services for young children and families may allow states to develop or expand bulk purchasing capabilities to help programs provide diapers, formula, or other necessities. This information may also highlight opportunities for improved inter-agency alignment and collaboration. For example, regulatory changes to smooth cliff effects, align early childhood- and Department of Children and Families-identified supports, or target Health and Human Services investments to improve the availability of health and mental health services to young children and families.

## CONCLUSION

The confluence of the recognized need to better address the complex needs of families; the rise in disruptions to healthy child development caused by the social, economic, and health effects of the pandemic; and new federal investments in early education and care make this a moment of unique promise to better promote child wellbeing and school readiness. States are positioned to leverage and adapt knowledge of best practices for integrating comprehensive services and practical tools to support implementation in order to create useful, responsive, effective systems to ensure that each child and family receives a tailored set of resources, relationships, and opportunities that capitalizes on their strengths and meets their needs. This would further the country’s commitments to promoting equity, healthy child development, school readiness, and opportunity for children and families across the United States.

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*The Center for Thriving Children advances science, implementation, and innovation to promote healthy child and youth development, learning, and thriving.*



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