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Building a Technology Infrastructure for State Level ECE Systems

By Sharon Easterling, June 2021

What if...

...Parents who need child care had a way to search online for programs that have openings for their child(ren), discover funding for which they may be eligible, access virtual/in-person site visits, and enroll their children electronically?

...ECE program leaders had the tools they need to efficiently, effectively manage their programs while simultaneously sharing data to meet myriad regulatory compliance and program standard reporting requirements?

...State administrators had reliable, comprehensive, secure real-time data from the Early Care and Education sector to make informed policy and funding decisions?

The Opportunity

The good news is that technology tools exist to create an early care and education (ECE) eco-system that delivers all of this and more to ECE stakeholders. However, no states have yet tapped into the extraordinary power of technology to deliver best-in-class results for the ECE sector.

The pandemic exposed the fragile nature of our nation's ECE system, putting on full display the need to re-invent the way we fund, oversee, and deliver early care and education services in the U.S. The public policy response has been an unprecedented federal investment in ECE—creating a once-in-a-generation opportunity to invest in the technology infrastructure that can transform the sector.

How should states approach the task of building the ECE technology infrastructure? What are the critical questions and information gathering tasks to drive planning and decision making? Where can state leaders tap expertise to understand and articulate system design, thoroughly vet prospective vendors and proposed solutions in order to create systems that deliver more fully on the promise of quality early care and education?

Proposed Framework
Change is possible and can start now. A graphic, depicting elements of a Secure ECE Ecosystem can be viewed **here**. While each state will have a unique set of issues and context to address, and therefore will need to develop a custom solution for stakeholders, the principles identified below apply to any setting and are key to effective system design.

A Comprehensive Approach
A well-designed ECE data system will build *interoperability* into the design—that is, critical data should move securely between system components. For example, vacancy data from providers should populate parent search engines, parent eligibility portals should include all available funding streams and connect parents to programs that offer these services, and provider child care management systems should have the capacity to transfer relevant information (such as attendance, child outcome information, PD Registry updates, etc.) to systems requiring that data.

A 360 Degree Perspective
Technology solutions that perpetuate our current system of siloed information will deliver less-than-optimal results. States undertaking this critical work need to build solutions that are intentionally designed to address the needs of multiple stakeholders—parents, providers, intermediaries who serve the field, policy makers, and more. Modern web-based solutions make it possible to reduce many burdensome, redundant reporting requirements while also strengthening data quality, accountability and confidentiality. Engaging providers, intermediaries and other stakeholders in system design, perhaps via an advisory group, can help identify key needs and challenges and build buy-in and effective engagement when the system is launched.

Independent Vetting and Review Process
Decision making is often driven by less-than-ideal conditions such as state bidding restrictions, a persuasive sales team or peer endorsement. However, states can craft a thoughtful and intentional decision-making process guided by a small team of independent consultants with deep experience in the sector and no financial stake in the final vendor selection decision. The consulting team can support the development of an "ideal design", including the technical specifications selected vendor(s) need to meet, with input from the stakeholder advisory group.
The process should include a "Request for Information" (RFI) that solicits proposals from any and all qualified vendors. The consulting team can craft and guide a rigorous review process to identify the capacity of applicants to deliver proposed services, make recommendations to decision makers, and assist with development of final design specifications. The project should include a process for "continuous accountability", so that the system functions well long after the initial launch, and is able to respond to landscape changes and ever evolving technology enhancements.

Summary

The need to undertake an ambitious technology build is urgent. The resources to do so have never been so accessible. The technology innovators have yet to be tapped to develop state-of-the-art solutions to serve the ECE mission.

The challenge for state leaders is to plan and implement a process that will lead to transformative results—results that will better serve children and families in programs now and well into the future.

Click Here to Download the ECE Ecosystem Graphic