

CHOOSE CHILDREN

Governance Framework

Goal: California's agencies and programs effectively provide needed early childhood resources and accountability in a timely manner.

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TIMELINE

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1 WHAT CALIFORNIA NEEDS

California's early childhood system spans multiple state departments and programs with differing responsibilities, authorities, requirements and funding streams. While individually they may address their individual department or program goals, there is limited coordination between agencies and programs.

Funding for young children and families flows through a patchwork of local, state, and federal programs, each with its own rules and requirements. As a result, families must navigate multiple entry points that often fail to connect them to the services and supports they need. Programs, in turn, ask families to repeat the same application and eligibility steps again and again just to get help.



2 KEY FACTS & FIGURES

A core early childhood governance challenge is the lack of empowered executive leadership and accountability, with sufficient authority to coordinate across the programs and agencies serving young children and families, resolve cross-agency barriers, and provide families, providers, and local partners a clear place to engage the state on issues spanning multiple systems.

- Improve governance, financing, and administrative structures to reduce fragmentation, clarify roles and accountability, and make programs easier for families and providers to navigate while building on effective state and local infrastructure already in place.
- Establish clear executive leadership, authority, accountability, and cross-agency mechanisms to identify and resolve barriers spanning departments, programs, funding streams, and levels of government.
- Align policies, requirements, data, and funding approaches where fragmentation creates unnecessary barriers for families, providers, or local implementation partners, including mechanisms for state-local feedback when implementation is not working as intended.

Potential Outcomes[1]:

- More children and families successfully accessing and connecting to needed services.
- Greater provider participation and local service capacity, with appropriate safeguards for quality, access, workforce stability, and public investment.
- Better alignment and utilization of state and federal resources, including reduced underspending and unnecessary funding silos.
- Clearer accountability and greater transparency regarding public investment and outcomes.
- More consistent access and quality across communities while allowing for locally responsive implementation.
- Better ability to identify needs and system gaps, coordinate resources, and assess whether investments are improving outcomes for children and families.

Experience in other states, including governance reforms documented by Vanderbilt University's PN3 Policy Impact Center, demonstrates the potential for improvements in these areas.

3 CALIFORNIA'S SOLUTIONS

- In his first 100 days, the new Governor should appoint a Cabinet-level Secretary for Early Childhood. The Secretary would provide the needed authority and oversight to set and drive cross-agency early childhood priorities, align programs and resources, resolve interagency barriers, and hold agencies accountable for shared outcomes.
- The Secretary should then establish and chair a California Children's Cabinet that coordinates policies, funding, and planning across state agencies serving children and families.[3] This Secretary and Cabinet would also serve as the administration's central point of engagement for families, providers, local partners, and other stakeholders on issues spanning multiple departments.[2]
- Launch a cross-sector task force to develop sustainable, long-term financing strategies for early childhood services, including opportunities to better align, leverage, and maximize existing state, federal, local, and private resources.
- Identify a lead agency for the Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS), with responsibility for convening an interagency early childhood data task force and ensuring data privacy protections across participating agencies.

Cost note: *Because these recommendations primarily involve governance and coordination, most can be advanced through executive action or budget trailer bill language without major new appropriations. Longer-term reforms, structure, staffing, and resource needs would be developed with the new Administration.*



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4 WHERE TO BEGIN

While the first 100 days will be critical, the work will not end there. To ensure continued results, California's new Governor should:

Formalize the authority, responsibilities, and accountability of the Secretary for Early Childhood and Children's Cabinet, including responsibility for cross-agency outcomes, implementation, financing alignment, data, any specific program oversight, and resolution of barriers that cannot be addressed by individual departments.

Establish shared outcomes, accountability, and referral pathways for coordinated whole child, whole family systems of care while allowing flexibility for local partnerships and infrastructure.

Work with the Legislature to establish an annual LAO cross-agency analysis of investments in young children and families, identifying funding trends, gaps, fragmentation, and opportunities for improved coordination, with findings publicly reported and considered by the Children's Cabinet, Administration, and Legislature.

Implement the recommendations of the financing task force.

Ensure sustained and intentional inclusion of local infrastructure partners, including First 5 Commissions in all 58 counties, Resource and Referral and Alternative Payment agencies, family resource centers, developmental services regional centers, local government, education and health systems, parents and caregivers, and community-based organizations, as part of California's state-to-local early childhood infrastructure.

5 BEYOND THOSE FIRST 100 DAYS

Establish and resource interagency governance for the Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECID), including clear purposes, participating agencies, data stewardship, privacy protections, interoperability with the Cradle-to-Career Data System and other relevant systems, and state-local feedback mechanisms.

Align and streamline state and local licensing, permitting, and administrative requirements to reduce administrative burdens while maintaining health, safety, accessibility, and quality protections.

Identify and reduce statutory, regulatory, and funding barriers that inhibit local leveraging, collaboration, and partnership while maintaining appropriate accountability for public resources and outcomes.



6 FINAL THOUGHT: LOOK TO PARTNERS

With intentional engagement of families and local partners including local government, First 5s, health and education systems, child care and early learning partners, and community-based organizations, these governance reforms will strengthen, rather than disrupt, the services that are already serving California families. These changes are put forward to eliminate duplicative structures, align responsibilities to the right authority and resources, and make the system easier for families to navigate.
Statewide expectations must account for the significant differences among California's counties and communities. For that reason, reform should begin with the experience of families and be built around the core functions the system needs to perform.

[1] These outcomes are extrapolated from other state experiences as described in case studies from Vanderbilt's PN3 Policy Impact Center. For example, the state of Virginia's journey in governance reform netted several outcomes in categories described above.
[2] California could build on existing governance structures in states such as Illinois, Minnesota, New Mexico, Colorado, Oregon, and Washington, which have elevated responsibility for young children and families under dedicated cabinet-level leadership. The new administration can adapt these models to the scale and infrastructure of California's needs.
[3] At least 27 states, including Minnesota and New Mexico, have established children's cabinets, typically bringing together the cabinet secretaries responsible for health, human services, education, and early learning under a coordinating mandate from the governor.

