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REPORT

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Effective State Offices of Early Learning: Structural Features, Enabling Conditions, and Key Functions in Four States

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Introduction

In the United States, state-level agencies manage a variety of early care and education (ECE) programs serving children birth through age 5,[i] including publicly funded preschool programs.[ii] These agencies administer almost $40 billion in federal funding and more than $8 billion in state funding, plus other state investments in early learning (e.g., literacy/reading proficiency), not including recent federal appropriations in the American Rescue Plan Act to child care providers and schools to respond to the pandemic. A state office of early learning (SOEL) often oversees and manages select early childhood programs. SOELs typically have a significant role in such tasks as setting policy to ensure the quality of programs, distributing funding to local programs, and collecting data for accountability and continuous improvement.

Although the role played by SOELs is similar, the management structure of specific ECE programs varies between states.[iii] SOELs can be located in a state education agency, human services agency, or a separate state early learning agency.[iv] For example, six states have created a lead agency for ECE with responsibility for multiple programs and functions, whereas 12 states plus the District of Columbia have consolidated multiple ECE agencies and functions into a single agency that also has broader responsibilities. The remaining 32 states coordinate ECE functions across two or more state agencies. In some states the SOEL consists of just one person or one person is assigned to early learning programs within another office in the agency.[v]

States can struggle with designing the best organizational structure for administering ECE programs. Recent examples of this challenge include the newly created cabinet level Department of Early Education and Care in New Mexico; the proposed consolidation of early childhood programs in two state agencies in Wyoming; and the unification of early childhood programs in Virginia. Additionally, there is a significant infusion of federal dollars to states for child care and schools to rebuild and reimagine the early childhood system following COVID-19. The federal Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B–5) grants to 29 states are intended to significantly strengthen and improve states' ECE systems.

Given this context, understanding the characteristics, organizational capacities, and functions of SOELs can facilitate equitable, effective, and efficient policies and program implementation. However, to date there is limited empirically based research on the key components and policy contexts that contribute to their effectiveness.

Road Map of the Report

In this report we share the results of case studies of four SOELs. To set the stage for the case studies, we highlight, in Section 1, the prior research that contributed to our conceptual framework. In Section 2 we describe our methodology. We then provide the individual case studies for each of the four SOELs in Sections 3, 4, 5, and 6. Each case study begins with an overview of the SOEL and its parent agency, including a brief history of early education in the state and the office of early learning, funding of the SOEL, and SOEL structure and staffing. This introductory text is followed by the findings for each of our three research questions. Finally, in Section 7, we provide a recap of the major findings in each of the four states, as well as a cross-state summary of what we learned.

For a selected list of acronyms and terms used in this report, refer to Appendix A.

I. Conceptual Framework

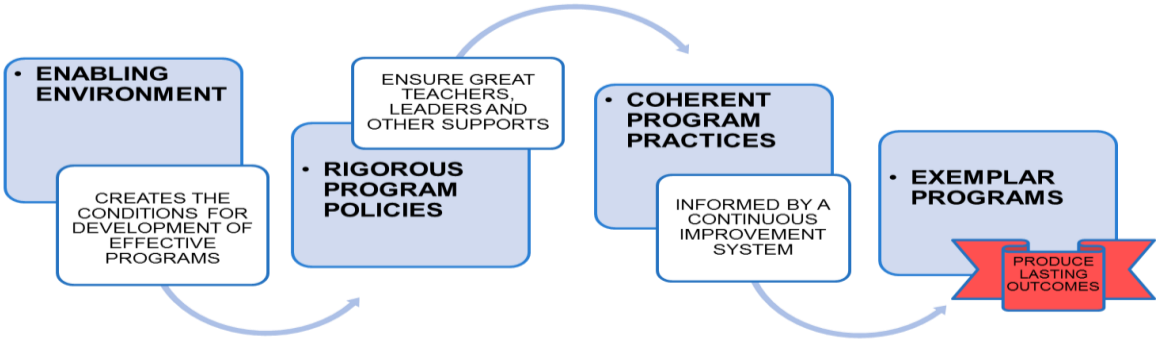
A recent report on early childhood governance by Elliot Regenstein noted that "good governance does not assure good outcomes, but a governance system that is well coordinated and highly functional provides the best opportunity to assure that good outcomes are being achieved for all children in the state."[vi] We know it takes strong leaders, highly capable staff, and effective and efficient functions within agencies to achieve enhanced early learning outcomes, but we do not yet have a deep understanding of how these factors play out in the context of a state system of early education.[vii] Put another way: like many things in life, there are great ideas that make a lot of intuitive sense, but putting them into practice can be a whole lot more challenging than you first realize, especially if you have no prior first-hand knowledge about what is involved.

The conceptual framework for our case studies grew out of two prior investigations of state early childhood administrators. In 2018, we published *Defining Highly Effective Offices of Early Learning in State Education Agencies and Early Learning Agencies,*[viii] which was based on a review of the literature on leadership and organizational effectiveness and interviews with early childhood state and national leaders. In that report, we proposed a set of hypotheses regarding the characteristics of high-performing SOELs across three dimensions: organizational capacity, organizational effectiveness and efficiency, and leadership and staff capabilities. Then, to further deepen our knowledge of how SOELs function, we conducted a nationally representative survey of state early childhood specialists in 2019. In *The Views of State Early Childhood Education Agency Staff on Their Work and Their Vision for Young Children: Informing a Legacy for Young Children by 2030*,[ix] we learned more about the characteristics and experiences of state early childhood specialists, the agency conditions that impact their effectiveness, and what priorities they see as important for enhancing early learning outcomes.

The current case study examines the factors and conditions that influence the structural components of effective SOELs and how they operate. We sought to fill a gap in the literature regarding leadership in SOELs, how teams implement policy, and how an enabling environment with a commitment to a shared vision can produce a coherent and aligned early Kaieducation system that leads to improved outcomes for participating children, especially those who are most vulnerable. We were particularly interested in understanding how to build a sustainable system of effective early education that adapts to changes in the political environment, while staying focused on goals for children and families.

To investigate these concepts, we first turned to prior research on the "essential elements" of state pre-K programs from Jim Minervino,[x] owing to the lack of a robust research base on the effectiveness of state organizational structures to oversee and implement early childhood programs. These elements highlight the importance of an enabling environment, rigorous program policies, and coherent program practices to link governance and outcome. The theory of change for building effective early learning systems via these contributors is displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Theory of Change for Building Effective Early Learning Systems[xi]



In this theory, an *enabling environment* is comprised of political support, public will, and strong leadership, and is necessary to ensure program quality and stability. It creates the conditions for the development of effective programs and supports the implementation of rigorous program policies. In comparison, *rigorous program policies* include qualified teachers, competent leaders, intense program duration, small class size, strong curriculum, and specialized supports for teaching children with disabilities and dual language learners. Finally, *coherent program practices* include systematically aligned learning outcomes, teaching practices, curriculum, assessment, and professional development that are improved through regular use of child-, classroom-, and program-level data. Taken together, these three components lead to *effective programs* that produce lasting benefits in education, health, and general well-being.[xii]

The literature on the governance of early childhood systems, systems reform in education, and early childhood systems is also informative for understanding the relevancy of this theory of change to the work of effective SOELs. For example, the recent report *Early Childhood Governance: Getting There from Here* provides a framework for making decisions about the governance of state early childhood systems.[xiii] Based on interviews with state leaders and national experts, the report identifies eight questions intended to guide decision makers as they determine the governance structure best suited to their state's goals. The questions address issues related to a system's priorities, the role of different state agencies, and the scope, personnel capacities, and functions of the proposed governance structure to achieve its goals. Also considered are important contexts and conditions that a state's unique governance structure should address. Similarly, another report on early childhood systems and governance in the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge states, which focused on different approaches to governance, found that "most importantly, state leaders believe that governance is a critical component of an effective early learning system and that state-level organization and administration are consequential in the effectiveness of governance to achieve results". [xiv]

In addition, our conceptual framework was informed by the literature on education system reform. For example, much of Michael Fullan's work[xv] posits that in order to achieve whole system reform and fundamentally improve the quality of teaching and learning, there are elements (i.e., "right and wrong drivers") of successful reform. Effective systems have a small number of ambitious goals, are led by a guiding coalition at the top, and are supported

by high standards and high expectations. Effectiveness is achieved by building collective capacity among all layers/sectors of the system, mobilizing data to improve performance, and being vigilant about staying on course and ignoring distractions. Other system theorists discuss the dynamic interplay between structural characteristics of the system and the enabling conditions of the environment, suggesting an effective system, "not only optimizes the relationship among the elements but also between the educational system and its environment."[xvi] Similarly, Hargreaves and colleagues discuss the characteristics of systems change in a complex adaptive system, such as ECE, that is nested within a broader system (e.g., of education, health, and care); that is dynamic and non-linear; and that functions independently but creates synergy to influence outcomes for children and families.[xvii]

Although this research base was informative, early childhood systems present unique and ever-changing complexities due to the historic and continued fragmentation of ECE sectors by auspice (e.g., child care versus pre-K). To help us identify critical functions of an SOEL, we also reviewed the available literature on early childhood systems.[xviii] As Gomez[xix] has noted, some common themes are the importance of leadership and governance; financing; quality program standards; a qualified and supported workforce; accountability; and data and systems that lead to continuous improvement.

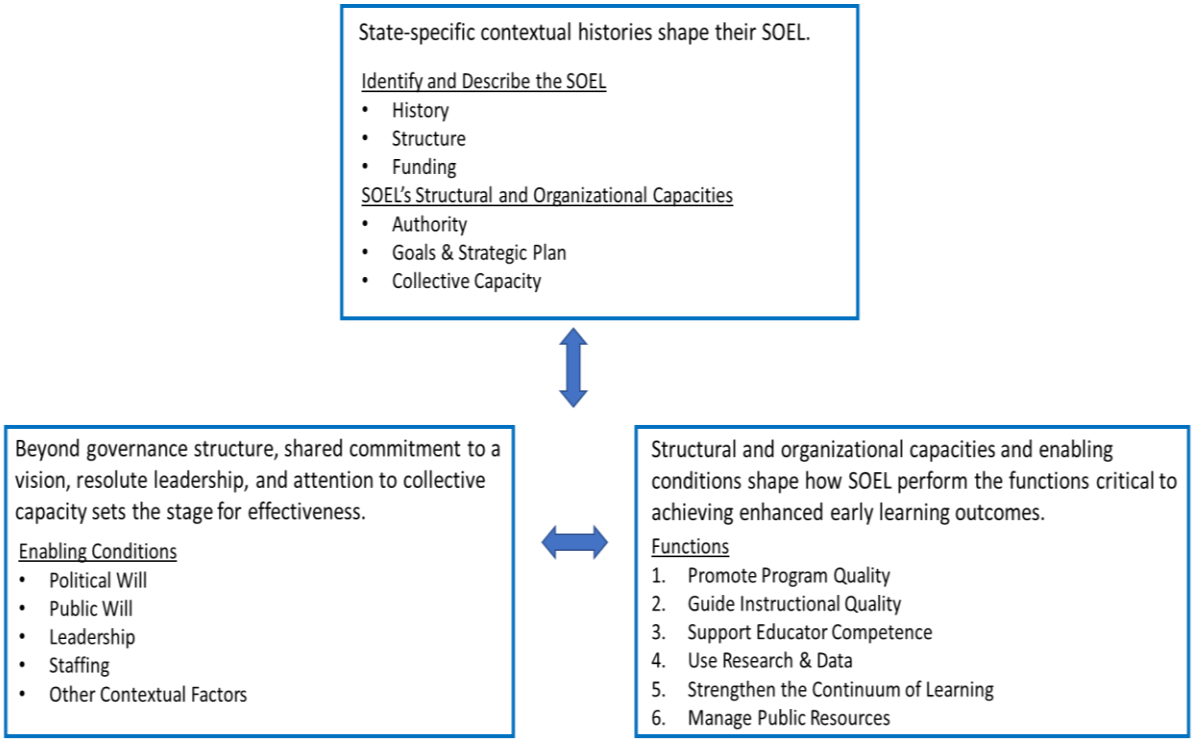
In summary, the literature framing our case studies suggests determining the factors that contribute to effective SOELs likely requires acknowledging the complexity of ECE systems, but also looking closely at the key, interrelated factors that contribute to how they operate. Therefore, we aimed to answer the question, *Regardless of governing body, what are the structural characteristics, organizational competencies, and programmatic functions of effective SOELs*?

II. Study Methodology

Study Design

Our previous research, which focused on state early childhood education administrators and existing literature on governance, education system reform, and early childhood systems, also informed our study's logic model (see Figure 2). For example, each SOEL's structure, funding, and purview reflects the state's history and provides important context for understanding how the SOEL functions.xx This history and context also informs an SOEL's goals and priorities and plans for achieving them. Additionally, SOELs are situated within multiple systems and, with strategic coordination and collaboration with other state agencies, regional and local education systems, child care programs, and partners, they can harness and use their collective capacity to function more efficiently and effectively.[xxi]

Figure 2. Logic Model for the Study of Effective SOELs



Drawing from this model, we posited that an enabling environment, including political and public will, leadership, staff capacity, and other contextual factors, would influence how well an SOEL could perform its functions and achieve its aims. The enabling environment shapes how structural and organizational capacities are activated and used to carry out the functions of the SOEL, which are critical to achieving enhanced early learning outcomes. The research questions that guided this project therefore were:

1. What are the structural and organizational capacities of effective SOELs?
2. What are the enabling conditions—leadership, staffing, other contextual factors—of effective SOELs?
3. What are the critical functions necessary for SOELs to effectively execute their authority to implement major programs, including but not limited to the public preschool program?

To answer these questions, we elected to use a comparative case study[xxii] approach, as, although each SOEL reflects an individual state's context and goals, SOELs can be compared because they share similar components.

Sample

Our case studies focused on the SOELs in the four states of Alabama (AL), Michigan (MI), New Jersey (NJ), and West Virginia (WV). These four states were chosen using our theory of change (see Figure 1) and available data, as we wanted to ensure that whichever states formed the basis for the cases already had rigorous policies and coherent program standards in place. To begin the selection process, we first identified the states that met eight or more

quality policy benchmarks in the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) 2018 *State of Preschool Yearbook*.[xxiii] Within this group of eight states, we then identified the states that met 11 or more of the 15 elements identified in *The Essential Elements of High Quality Pre-K: An Analysis of Exemplar Programs*.[xxiv]

Table 1: Selected Indicators of Quality of a State Preschool Program

State Preschool Program	NIEER Quality Standards Benchmarks	15 Essential Elements for High-Quality Pre-K[xxv]	Evidence of Effectiveness
Alabama's First Class Pre-K, voluntary prekindergarten program	Met 10 each year since the 2005–06 school year	Fully met 14 and partially met 1	A 2020 study found that those who participate in First Class Pre-K are more likely to be ready for kindergarten, proficient in math and reading, and less likely to be chronically absent or retained in a grade. A recent independent analysis found that these benefits persisted through elementary and middle school.
Michigan's Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP)	Met 8 or more each year since the 2013–14 school year; met 10 in 2018	Fully met 11 and partially met 3 (1 could not be determined)	GSRP has consistently shown positive impacts on children's development. According to a recent evaluation it has a significant impact on increasing at-risk preschooler's early literacy and math skills.
New Jersey's former Abbott Preschool Program	Met an average of at least 8 since the 2001–02 school year	Fully met 13 and partially met 2	Longitudinal studies show benefits into high school for children who attended Abbott Preschool Program.
West Virginia's Universal Pre-K	Met 9 or more each year since the 2013–14 school year	Fully met 11 and partially met 3 (1 could not be determined)	Results of a longitudinal study showed positive impacts of pre-K on children's learning at K entry. A 2020 report on fourth year findings indicate benefits of PreK participation converge in early elementary grades.[xxvi]

In addition, we identified the states that met both elements in the enabling environment component: (1) political will, including support from political leadership and, more rarely, judicial mandates, and (2) a compelling vision and strong leadership from early learning leaders.[xxvii] From this list of six states, we then reviewed research and program evaluation data on the effectiveness of the state funded pre-K program to determine if it had evidence of positive outcomes for children. Four states had sufficient evidence of PreK program effectiveness. Based on these criteria, we looked for variation in administrative structure and geographic diversity, leading us to select the states of AL, MI, NJ, and WV. Table 1 provides data on selected indicators of preschool program quality in the four case study states.[xxviii]

For the purposes of this study, the focal SOEL was identified within the state agency that oversees and implements the state funded pre-K program serving children ages three to kindergarten entry because we had standardized data on the quality of policies for the

preschool program. Table 2 provides a summary of the characteristics of the four states at the time of the study.

Table 2: Characteristics of the Four Study SOELs at the Time of the Study (2020)

AL	MI	NJ	WV
Department of Early Childhood Education (DECE)	Office of Great Start (OGS) in MI Department of Education (MDE)	Division of Early Childhood Education (DECE) in NJ Department of Education (NJDOE)	Office of Early and Elementary Learning Services (EELS) in WV Department of Education (WV DOE)
• Separate state agency	• Housed in Division of P–20 Systems and Transition Services, 1 of 3 MDE divisions	• 1 of 6 NJDOE divisions	• One of 5 WV DOE offices
• Led by secretary who reports to governor	• Led by asst supt who reports directly to supt	• Led by asst commissioner who reports directly to commissioner	• Led by executive director who reports to WV DOE asst supt
• Long-standing commitment of governor(s) to ECE	• Long-standing support for the Great Start School Readiness Program, operating for more than 30 years	• 1998 Abbott court case required high-quality preschool program funded by the state	• WV Universal PreK, established in 2002, was mandated to be universal by 2012; signature program of EELS
• Stable state funding, with steady expansion of state and federal funds	• In FY2012, governor moved child care subsidy and quality (but not licensing) and Head Start collaboration to OGS	• DECE established to oversee implementation of Abbot and other funding for preschool • Since 2018, Governor Murphy has increased funding to expand preschool	• EELS began as the Office of School Readiness and in 2012 was expanded to encompass pre-K–grade 5
• State Policy pay parity PreK program	• Local Decision pay parity, PreK program	• State Policy pay arity, PreK program	• Local Decision pay parity, PreK progran
• Staffing @100 FTE	• Staffing @66 FTE	• Staffing @14 FTE	• Staffing @6.5 FTE

Data Collection

To inform each case, we collected data on each state's SOEL structural features, enabling conditions, and key functions via semi-structured interviews with multiple stakeholders in each state. In each state, the research team identified a key informant of the SOEL who

assisted the research team in identifying other individuals who should be interviewed. Participants included the key informant, the senior leader(s) in the identified state agency (e.g., in a state education agency [SEA] the commissioner or the chief academic officer, or comparable position in the early learning agency [ELA]), and the state funded preschool program administrator, if different from the key informant. The research team also reviewed relevant documents, including any state, office, or agency strategic plans; organization charts and job descriptions; child and program data; and annual reports, as relevant.

Interviews were conducted on site in each state from November 2019–January 2020. The semi-structured interview protocol was based on a review of relevant literature and tailored to the role and responsibilities of each of the informants. The key informant in each state participated in two interviews with the research team, with the first interview conducted over the phone and the second on an in-person basis. The remaining 12–19 in-person interviews in each state were with staff within the agency and SOEL, other related state level leads (e.g., child care administrator, head start collaboration director), advocates, contractors, and other relevant stakeholders (e.g., chair or member of the state's early childhood cross-sector council or collaborative entity, lead for IDEA Part C). Each of these individuals was interviewed once. No matter what method was used, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

We analyzed all of our data via a qualitative coding process that involved weekly or biweekly meetings by all of the authors to discuss emerging themes and any inconsistencies in coding. We began the coding process by identifying preliminary findings from interviews conducted with participants who worked in the SOEL, and then turned to the data collected from participants with roles outside of the SOEL. To address research question 1, our preliminary codes were relevant to the structure, authority, and organization of the SOEL, including its goals and strategic plans, its relationships within the agency and the ECE system, and how it works with local entities. To address research question 2, our preliminary codes focused on the political context, public will and engagement of stakeholders, and the effectiveness of leadership and staff.

To address research question 3, we looked for data that illuminated the manner in which each SOEL conducts its work on a day-to-day basis. Derived from the literature on early childhood systems and governance, our six preliminary codes were:

- **Promote Program Quality**—developing and implementing policies which may include program standards, regulations, guidance, accountability systems (e.g., accreditation, quality rating and improvement system [QRIS]), and licensing.
- **Guide Instructional Quality**—building an integrated system of student learning standards, curriculum (e.g., approval or guidance on choosing and implementing curriculum), and aligned child assessment, including a kindergarten entry assessment (KEA), formative measure, and other assessments.
- **Support Educator Competence**—ensuring a qualified teaching and leadership workforce in a supportive environment (e.g., workforce standards, career pathways, core competencies, professional development resources, coaching models, training

registry, Teacher Education and Compensation Helps [T.E.A.C.H.] or other wage supplements, salary parity, and credentials).

- **Use Research and Data**—employing a robust continuous improvement system, including collecting data and facilitating self-assessment at the levels of child and family, classroom and teacher, administrator and program, and state; and contributing to an Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS) (e.g., producing reports and communicating with the public and key stakeholders, conducting or contracting for data analytics, program evaluations, or longitudinal studies).
- **Strengthen the Continuum of Learning**—fostering a coherent system of care across ages and settings, including robust family engagement policies, aligned birth to grade 3 policy and practice at the state and program level; and engaging stakeholders (cross-sector agencies, advocates, and organizations) in the transitions of children across the continuum of learning.
- **Efficiently Manage Public Resources**—effecting sound program and fiscal management of the SOEL, including finance and accounting for grants to districts and/or contracting with technical assistance providers and other intermediaries; internal human resources/professional development; performance management; internal and external communication; and outreach.

As part of this entire coding process, we used publicly available materials and data to validate participants' accounts. These data were helpful for resolving any instances of unclear or contradictory data. For each state, we identified the key themes that best addressed the research questions. Further detail on our team's approach to data analysis and the writing of this report can be found in Appendix B.

III. A Case Study of the Effectiveness of the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education

Lori Connors-Tadros, Tracy Jost, and Kaitlin Northey

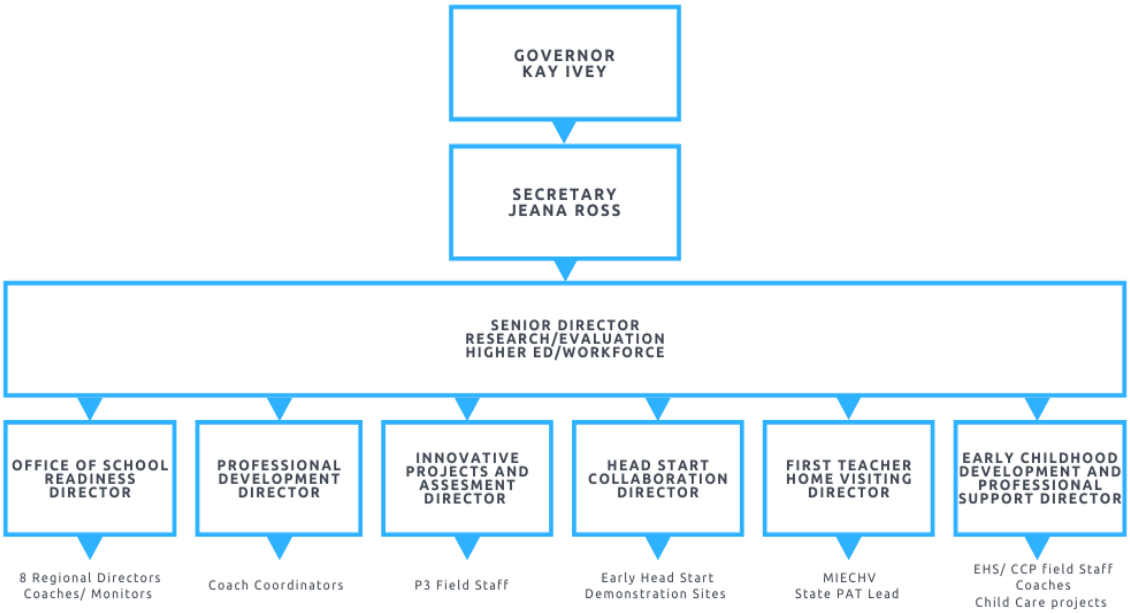
Overview of the AL Department of Early Childhood Education

The Department of Early Childhood Education (DECE) is the lead office for state-funded preschool in AL. One of seven state agencies in the state with some oversight for early childhood education programs, DECE was established to effectively coordinate efforts and programs to serve children throughout the state and is primarily focused on serving children birth through 5, with some exceptions. The largest and most significant DECE-operated program is First Class Pre-K. In addition, DECE is the state designee for the AL Children's Policy Council, home of the AL Head Start Collaboration Office, coordinator of AL's state and local Children's Policy Councils, administrator of the Children First Trust Fund, and lead agency for early learning and home visiting programs.xxix

DECE Staff and Organizational Structure

DECE is a stand-alone state agency, unlike the other states in the study, and part of the executive level of state government,xxx with the secretary of DECE reporting directly to the governor. At the time of our interviews, DECE had more than 100 staff, including a senior director, eight directors of major programs/offices, and accounting and data systems staff. Regional directors (RDs) led eight field-based teams that worked in districts, communities, and local agencies to implement the pre-K program and coordinate delivery of other relevant programs at the community level, including for the Departments of Education, Health, and Human Resources. In addition, DECE used some part time staff and contractors to manage the data and fiscal systems and had hired a Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B–5) program manager. Figure 3 displays the organization chart for DECE at the time of our study.

Figure 3. DECE Organizational Chart as of January 2020

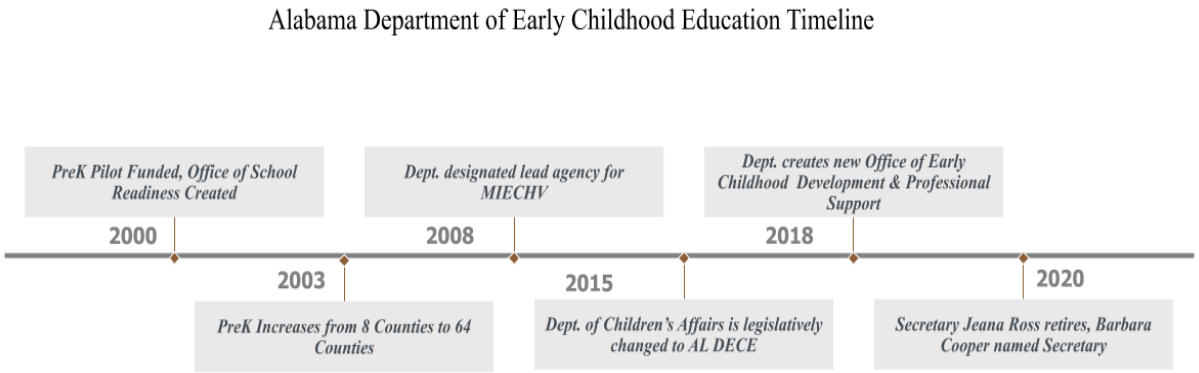


History of DECE

The Department of Children's Affairs was created in 2000 and oversaw the Children's First Trust Fund, Children's Policy Councils, and a few other smaller programs. In 2000 the Department of Children's Affairs took a more prominent role in implementing programs for young children in AL due to the funding of a pre-K pilot program and creation of the Office of School Readiness (OSR) within the department. The pre-K pilot program experienced steady growth and is currently known as First Class Pre-K. Owing, in part, to the success of its implementation, the department was designated as the state's lead agency for the federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program in 2008.

The Department of Children's Affairs experienced significant changes between 2015 and 2020 (see Figure 4). First, in 2015 legislators voted to change the name, to the AL Department of Early Childhood Education (DECE). Through very comprehensive legislation, DECE's authority was better recognized as focusing on a child's life from prenatal to 8 years. Then, in partnership with the AL Department of Mental Health, DECE expanded its scope once again, in 2017, to oversee First 5 Alabama, a program focused on infant-toddler mental health and aimed at addressing the need for system-wide change across the state. In addition, in 2018—and in partnership with the Department of Human Resources—the department created a new Office for Early Childhood Development and Professional Support to provide technical assistance to licensed child care programs, including family child care. Finally, Jeana Ross, who led much of the expansion of DECE from 2012 to 2020, retired, and Barbara Cooper, former director of the Office of School Readiness, was named secretary. The governor has established a transition committee, led by the Hunt Institute, to advise the new secretary.

Figure 4. AL Department of Early Childhood Education Timeline



Funding of DECE

The Department of Children's Affairs/DECE has received incremental increases in funding since 2000, but these increases have not been equally substantial. First Class Pre-K funding began at $2,350,000 in 2000. With steady increases during Governor Bentley's tenure (2011–2017), investments grew from $18.3 million to $63.5 million. Under Governor Ivey's leadership, the legislature approved an increase in the budget of $13 million for the expansion of the program in 2018 and included a total of $77.5 million for First Class Pre-

K. In 2019, allocation was $96 million and DECE also received funds to ensure pay parity for all First Class Pre-K teachers, with the same 2.5% cost of living raise as K–12 public school teachers. In addition,

- DECE was awarded a $70 million ($17.5 million per year for four years) federal preschool development grant in 2014 to expand access to quality First Class Pre-K and received funding from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation for the Pre-K–Grade 3 (P–3) initiative to expand to 75 programs.
- In 2017, DECE received an increase of $250,000 to expand the services of the home visiting program.
- In 2018, the governor appropriated $1 million for the State of Alabama Infant Mortality Reduction Plan.
- In 2019, AL also was awarded a $10.6 million federal PDG B–5 grant to further develop and implement a unified system. The governor also appropriated a $25 million increase in funding for First Class Pre-K and the inclusion of all pre-K teachers in the state's recommended teacher pay raise for all K–12 and community college teachers.
- Finally, in 2020, AL was awarded $33 million by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Department of Education for a renewal of its PDG B–5 initiative over the next three years. These funding increases have not only fueled the department's growth in terms of quantity of programs operated and related number of staff, but they also have contributed to its expanded stature both within the state and nationally.

State Child Demographics

Figure 5 provides basic demographic data on AL's young children. More than half of the children under age 5 are White, nearly a third are Black and 10% are Hispanic. Approximately 30% of children under age 5 live in poverty.[xxxi]

Figure 5. AL DEMOGRAPHIC DATA (2019)

- 293,554 children under 5
- Race breakdown
  - 63% White
  - 30% Black/African American
  - 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native
  - 2% Asian
  - 4% Two or more races
- Ethnicity breakdown
  - 9% Hispanic
  - 91% Non-Hispanic
- 30% of children under 5 live in poverty (<100% FPL)

Selected Indicators of First Class Pre-K Effectiveness

As noted in Figure 6, AL's First Class Pre-K met all 10 NIEER quality standard benchmarks for the 2018–19 school year and has met all 10 benchmarks since its inception. The program is funded by the Education Trust Fund, the federal PDG, and matching funds from grantees. Funds are distributed directly to the programs through a competitive grant application process. Research conducted in 2020 found that the impact of AL's First Class Pre-K on children's school success did not "fade out" in elementary school, and, in fact, persisted through seventh grade.[xxxii]

Figure 6. First Class Pre-K: AL's voluntary pre-kindergarten program

- Met 10 NIEER quality standards benchmarks each year since the 2005–06 school year
- State spending per child was ranked 21st in the nation, at $5,116
- 32% of 4-year-olds in the state attended First Class Pre-K (18,756)
- Met 14 and partially met 1 of the 15 Essential Elements for High-Quality Pre-K
- Those who participate in First Class Pre-K are more likely to be ready for kindergarten, proficient in math and reading, and less likely to be chronically absent or retained in grade. A recent independent analysis found that these benefits persisted through elementary and middle school.

FINDINGS

Research Question 1: What are the Structural and Organizational Capacities of DECE?

As part of the interviews conducted, we posed questions about DECE's structural and organizational capacities, which helped us learn how the SOEL defines its authority, develops its goals and strategic plans, and operates as part of the system. Our analysis of the data for this research question suggests that much of DECE's success is due to its structure as a separate state agency, in particular in the authority afforded to the secretary to directly operate programs and to advocate for funding with the governor and legislature.

Contributions of DECE's Authority and Scope

DECE was established to provide more prominence and support for implementation of First Class Pre-K. In fact, Jeana Ross, former DECE secretary, was given a specific charge by Governor Ivey: "I want the best pre-K program in the nation; that's your sole responsibility." As a result, Secretary Ross established a relentless focus on quality within the department. She said, "our main vision, and we all share it, whatever we do is highest quality. We have a standard of excellence that we will not compromise on." Staff in the governor's office noted that "the exciting thing is right now Alabama's the model for early childhood education."

This focus on quality was a common theme of our interviews with other staff, as well. As DECE became increasingly effective at implementing pre-K and had the data to prove the program's effectiveness, its funding increased each year, expanding its scope and influence in the state. In addition, the governor's and legislators' views regarding the successful implementation of First Class Pre-K had a spillover effect in terms of expanding the funding

for other programs run by DECE, specifically the home visiting program and the Alabama Pre-K–3rd Grade Integrated Approach to Early Learning initiative.

The clarity and comprehensive language in the 2015 legislation changing the name and scope of the agency from the Department of Children's Affairs to the Department of Early Childhood Education, was noted by informants as critical in giving the secretary and DECE expanded authority and a more refined description of the department's focus.[xxxiii] As Secretary Ross stated, "I don't answer to a board. I answer to the governor and to the parents." Governor Bentley felt a separate state agency focused on early childhood provided an opportunity to reduce institutional barriers among agencies and allowed the governor's office to nurture and support DECE's growth. An informant from the governor's office said:

> I think that most significantly is that this expansion and the Department of Early Childhood Education is within the governor's administration and it is not part of the state, the SEA. I think it's important because this is something that needed to be nurtured, almost like a Manhattan Project type effort, and not just one more initiative within a huge bureaucracy.

Secretary Ross also influenced the language of the legislation. She said:

> We also added a line in the responsibilities to define more specifically the importance of a continuum of high-quality services and coordination across agencies. I just thought that sounded like the right thing to do, and nobody questioned it.

Although the expansive scope of authority established in legislation played a critical role, DECE's small size when it operated as the original Department of Children's Affairs (beginning in 2005) and the creative approach to setting policy established by the secretary also helped to set the foundation for a culture of program implementation focused on the highest standards of quality. A DECE staff person said:

> We were fortunate in that we were small at the beginning and really just had a lot of creative minds that were able to know what was best for children and families, and just do it. And when we came across a barrier or some type of a challenge...we just had fun figuring out how to overcome it or to get around it. You have to be willing to take a risk. [The risks] didn't always pay off, but we've just learned to take those times that we weren't successful and learn from it.

Contributions of DECE's Organizational Structure

DECE utilizes a matrix organizational structure, meaning staff roles are defined both by the programs they oversee and also the functions of the agency, so everyone shares responsibility for DECE's goals. Informants describe the structure as "a web design" and the organizational chart as relatively "flat." This structure also appears to contribute to DECE's success. As Secretary Ross stated, "we try not to have a hierarchy of importance of a position…[although] they do have very specific responsibilities, roles, things that they have to ensure [are] happening." The matrix organizational structure appeared to facilitate and incentivize shared responsibility and collaboration among staff. A DECE staff person said, "once you've experienced [the matrix organizational structure], it's hard to go back."

Secretary Ross also stated she has a personal goal for FY 2021 "to continue expansion of pre-K until every child in the state that's on a waitlist has a high-quality early learning setting to attend." She also engaged staff members in multiple ways to develop the goals of

DECE. Staff uniformly report common goals for program implementation and high standards of quality. They also discussed a shared responsibility for DECE's programs and work. For example, although they may take the lead on a specific project, individuals also provide input on or indicate a joint ownership of other projects/programs.

Contributions of DECE's Goals and Strategic Plan

We also investigated the degree to which the goals and strategic plans of the SOEL contributed to its structural and organizational capacity. DECE's mission is to "inspire, support, and deliver cohesive, comprehensive systems of high-quality education and care so that all Alabama children thrive and learn." Within that mission, the department's top five priorities are:

1. Educating policymakers and families on the importance of early childhood education on a child's future academic success and lifetime well-being.
2. Providing more opportunities for children in poverty to gain access to high-quality early learning experiences before starting kindergarten.
3. Creating additional pathways to recruit, retain, and train qualified early learning professionals in classrooms and related early childhood settings.
4. Developing reporting systems to ensure accountability and the long-term success of early learning programs and most efficient utilization of resources to maximize services provided to children.
5. Working with families to improve the early development, learning, and health of their children by connecting them with health, education, and development resources.[xxxiv]

How DECE Operates as Part of the State Early Childhood System

While the primary scope of DECE's authority is children birth to 5 and supporting the transition to kindergarten, Governor Ivey has embraced a preschool to grade three vision of education continuity. In addition, in 2017 the governor announced her "Strong Start, Strong Finish" initiative as a means to improve student outcomes from pre-K to entering the workforce. As this initiative focuses on education, it has bolstered the role of DECE and necessitated a strong collaboration with the AL State Department of Education (ALSDE). A staff member from the governor's office said, "what is a big game changer in the state of Alabama [is] we have integrated early childhood for the state that connects the earliest years of life. Really, just as soon as a mother knows that she's expecting, all the way through the workforce."

ALSDE fully supports access to pre-K and recognizes its contributions to educational achievement and therefore reaching its own goals. This attitude manifests in the fact that the secretary and senior staff in DECE communicate frequently with senior staff in ALSDE. Superintendent Mackey stated:

> [ALSDE and DECE] can't survive in a silo and need to work together. [Ross] and I have a really strong relationship, we have the same goals, and we want all children to succeed, and to be ready for school and to choose their own pathway and career. The message I try to send to my staff is that we are working closely together; collaboration is very important.

> The ALSDE assistant superintendent of teaching and learning oversees the five major programs that intersect with pre-K: federal programs, special education, statewide reading initiative, math and science initiatives, and instructional services. To facilitate collaboration with DECE, she works to ensure her policy and staff align with DECE. In addition, through an interagency agreement, ALSDE embedded a staff person at DECE to support training on literacy initiatives related to the Alabama Reading Initiative. She noted, "when you do student learning it's every lane. All of the sections that I oversee dip into pre-K."

Many of those interviewed felt that DECE has been a critical driver in connecting state agencies around early childhood policy. A DECE staff person said:

> I think that [DECE] has been instrumental in helping different departments in the state come together toward a common goal. This department has helped to guide a coordinated effort of services, to bring diverse entities together—it allows faith-based entities to be a part of First Class Pre-K, it allows college universities, Head Start programs, private child care centers, and military bases. This department has been very instrumental in bringing people together to see how we are alike, how we're similar. It has helped us to understand the role of other programs and agencies. It has helped us to better see how we can streamline what we do or do a better job with what we do and how to utilize the resources that we have more efficiently, how we can strengthen what we.

Another significant contributor towards DECE's goal to develop a comprehensive and cohesive early care and education system was AL's receipt of a federal PDG B–5 grant, which included a requirement to develop a comprehensive strategic plan. AL already had the structure in place to assess needs locally, as it is the role of the local Children's Policy Councils to inform state policy. However, DECE led a cross-sector group to develop a new, more inclusive, and comprehensive plan. As Secretary Ross stated, "we've had two other strategic plans before this one, but I would say this one was done more comprehensively and more formally than anything we had done before." The plan also solidified DECE's focus on the birth through age 8 continuum and is setting up the structure, at least on paper, for a more robust statewide early childhood system. A staff person reflected on what she hoped they could achieve in five years:

> I hope to see that we have the birth to 8 collaboration set up with strong partners at the table, not that the Department of Early Childhood is [running] it; the Department of Early Childhood is coordinating it. And that [Department of Human Resources] feels welcome; Department of Ed feels welcome; Special Ed feels welcome; Department of Public Health; Department of Mental Health. We all sit down and it's—everyone feels welcome.

State-Local Infrastructure

AL has a long history of state and local partnerships around coordination of services. One example of these state and local links is the Children's Policy Council. In 1999, the Children's Policy Council was moved under the auspice of Department of Children's Affairs, and later DECE. County Children's Policy Councils review the needs of children in their counties and consider how local agencies and departments can work together more efficiently and effectively to serve the children in their area. The councils then report these

findings to the State Children's Policy Council, which uses this information to inform state leaders and develop a statewide resource guide. This structure formed the cornerstone of AL's successful application for federal PDG B–5 funds.

The Office of School Readiness in DECE employs regional directors (RDs) to serve as the critical link between the state and local pre-K programs, and one purpose of their role is to ensure consistent and bi-directional communication between DECE and local districts/communities. To accomplish this goal, RDs are required to come to Montgomery three times a week, and a senior staff person meets with them weekly and speaks frequently with the them by phone; RDs meet together, often with other staff in DECE, to share information and discuss policy alignment. RDs have director responsibilities and make final decisions about policy implementation or guidance to programs, with a lot of input from other RDs and program administrators. One RD said,

> I troubleshoot with [other RDs] almost on a daily basis. If I have an issue that I need a solution for, that I'm drawing a blank on, I call them, text them, email them. We have a very tight group, and we work well together.

The eight RDs oversee both monitors and coaches, two distinct roles that work directly with pre-K program administrators and district leaders. Monitors oversee the fiscal requirements and other aspects of grant compliance of First Class Pre-K, which are quite stringent. Coaches provide professional learning and support to teachers and administrators to meet the quality standards of the program. Many of the coaches are former pre-K teachers. As an informant explained,

> Most of my coaches have taught the entire time First Class Pre-K has been in the state of Alabama, so that's been a beautiful thing. But my job is to basically oversee them, from their timecards to their travel, all the way to their everyday life of helping them, going into classrooms with them. Obviously, I cannot do that every day, but I do make it a point to go at least two or three times a year with each of them, and I'm always facilitating through phone, through email, through text, helping them and encouraging them in any way I can.

RDs spend most of their time in the field, working with districts to build relationships with local program directors, and with principals to leverage capacity-building and resources for teachers. Their caseloads can be quite large. For example, one RD oversees 60 pre-K program directors, who in turn supervise pre-K classrooms.[xxxv] One RD stated:

> Knowing the district-level personnel is very important and having a relationship with them that you can call them and say, "Look, there's great things" or "there's an issue." And we're here to support [you]. What can we do to make a better tomorrow?

Based on our interviews, it was clear that RDs excel at working with both school and community based child care, including Head Start. They also are perceived as having an understanding of the nuances of both the child care and school-based sectors. RDs deploy their coaches strategically, drawing on the strengths of individuals to assist each other in addressing a need at the program level. An RD said:

> Our coaches have such a wealth of knowledge as far as the training that they get. They have a toolbox that is so big. When a problem arises, I always encourage my coaches to over-the-shoulder coach each other. And then we're going to pull in the

> troops; I would say, "okay, you need to go here with her, because this is what you have expertise in."

Research Question 2: What Conditions Enable DECE to be Effective?

Our second research question focused on the contextual conditions that constrained or enabled the effectiveness of the SOEL. These conditions may include political and public will, leadership and staffing, and other factors. The environment and context in AL over the last 20 years, with strong support for early childhood, has had a significant influence on DECE's effectiveness in implementing programs for young children.

Political and Public Will

One significant contributor to the effectiveness of AL's DECE is that the state's publicly funded pre-K program has been, and continues to be, a bipartisan issue, with significant support from many stakeholders. This "both sides of the aisle" acceptance may be due, in part, to how pre-K has been framed in Alabama. State leaders see pre-K as both an economic issue and a child's right to supports for healthy development. A staff member in the governor's office said:

> It's really an easy thing, in my opinion, to sell because Alabama doesn't have a huge budget compared to other states. But we've made it a priority and the public has bought into it and I think that's important. It's a bipartisan issue; it doesn't matter where you live in the state, everybody's for it. It's a message that we make sure we constantly preach and talk about the development of a child's brain and the most critical time is from 1 to 5 and why it's so important and how this is going to transform our state. This message is a winning message and it's a message I think that's going to continue to grow in the future because it's changing kids' lives and it's really important.

Indeed, other partners are committed to early childhood and see it is an economic and social strategy. Following a three-year (2003–2006) period of level funding for First Class Pre-K, the Alabama School Readiness Alliance was formed to bring together the voices of many advocates and business leaders to advocate for pre-K expansion. As a senior DECE leader explained,

> we kind of stand on their shoulders—a group of early childhood people came together and said ...all of these advocacy groups that aren't just particularly early childhood saw the importance of early learning and said we really need to pool our funding and form an advocacy group. And so [the alliance] is a group that strictly advocates and lobbies for pre-K.

The private funding has served to leverage and sustain the capacity of DECE to reach their goals. Advocates are proud of the results of their efforts, especially given that AL is a rural, Southern state. The director of the Alabama Partnership for Children said:

> I tout what we've done with state pre-K and what we did in 2018 with getting the first funding for early childhood mental health ever in our state house. So, it is unusual for some people to think that a one-party state that is a conservative, red state could do these things, but we started years ago, and we took great care not to have these investments be a partisan issue—strictly nonpartisan.

More recently, advocates are messaging access to pre-K as an economic issue: "we're wrapping all of our need to create new, better, high-quality early childhood slots to support the pre-K workforce."

Strong Relationships Built Over Many Years

Secretary Ross also cultivated relationships with legislators and used data strategically to show the effectiveness of high-quality pre-K. From the beginning she recognized the need to show facts (and data) to garner additional support and funding. "It happened the day the chief of staff looked at me and said, 'We are not asking for any money unless you can provide us data.' That's when it started," she explained. She takes the long view in advocating for increased funding because she understands the need to build capacity at the local level to maintain the state's high standards of quality. She told this story:

> A legislator saw me in Walmart, of all places, and he walked up and he said, "Jeana, I think it's time we fully fund pre-K." I said, "don't do it in one year." I said, "we do have a system built now that we absolutely can do it, but let's do 25 and 25 next year, and then the third year see where we are in meeting demand." But, in the meantime, I'm just not going to hit them [legislators] across the head with it. So—and then, I said, "let's just see where we are." So, that goal was 70 percent.

What is also remarkable is that the high-level political support for DECE has lasted so long, through both governor and legislative changes. Secretary Ross continued:

> We have such strong support in the state legislature and from governors. I had to work with the governors to provide brain research and the importance of early learning to the school and life success of each child. We tried to educate every governor. It takes a lot of visits. It takes getting advocates within their own groups.

Ross recognized the importance of taking sufficient time to build strong relationships with legislators and stakeholders as the department expanded. This helped to diffuse political battles over competing resources. A member of the governor's office noted,

> The secretary has done a good job of forming relationships with members of the legislature. It really comes down to the members actually understanding the value it has for their local communities, because all politics is local. And when they realize the impact it has and the community supports it. Every year there's a battle for dollars. But I think the governor fortunately has always been supportive of this initiative.

Accountability and Results

The governor's office values Secretary Ross's focus on accountability and results in the state's pre-K program. A staff member from the governors' office said:

> One thing that has certainly made this program successful is the level of accountability they put into each [contracted] pre-K [program] and how they monitor, make sure it holds them accountable of what they're doing. And if [the individual programs are] not doing what they're supposed to do, then they're not going to receive the funds to stay open. I think that's really important in government, that you have accountability. And I think that's one of the reasons Alabama's been so successful, too.

The governor's office takes the view that there is a need to expand access to pre-K commensurate with the capacity to meet quality standards, and this allows DECE to work on individual inputs (e.g., workforce) to keep to the high standards. The same member of the governors' office said:

> If you have the governor that wants to come in and all of a sudden say, "we're going to do 100 percent access," it's not going to be a First Class Pre-K. Maybe a pre-K of some kind, but it's not going to be the quality that we have here. I think also [we have] a commitment to ensuring that the gains that we're making in pre-K are continued on into elementary education.

DECE is focused on results and it is not afraid to change course. An informant outside of DECE noted:

> The other thing is [First Class Pre-K is] focused on results. And if something's not working or if some program is less than wonderful, they either get in there and fix it or they let it go. And that takes courage, because there's some constituencies built in there. But I think that's what makes it work. If they are unwilling to say, meet this standard or you aren't with us. There are lots of agencies that don't do that. They just sort of let people limp along and then that way it just erodes the excellence of all the other programs. So that is pervasive, in my experience with them.

Effectiveness of Leadership and Staff

Another contextual factor is the secretary herself. Secretary Ross was known as a "can-do" leader with an entrepreneurial approach that resulted in a mission-driven organization. Her focus on quality and accountability was evident in all of our interviews, as well. She also supports staff in developing their own innovative ideas. One informant said,

> When you go to her with an idea, you better be ready to start creating it. You better already kind of have a plan for what you're going to do with it and a second plan for when it grows bigger than you imagined, because she's going to find the funding.

The secretary's relentless focus on quality was coupled with deep respect for her staff and the effectiveness of her team. She told us,

> I think the most important thing is your team and to build leaders from the beginning. I always said, from that day I started, that one day I would—my goal was to pick up my purse, get on the elevator and leave, and nobody know I was gone.

DECE both "grows its own" and recruits bright early childhood leaders from across the state. Secretary Ross's leadership clearly inspired staff to be their best and to develop professionally. A DECE staff person said:

> I don't think we would be where we're at today had it not been for the secretary's vision and her leadership. I think it's all due to the leadership team that she has put together and the fact that she just says, "we don't work in silos here." And if anybody needs help—you [better] be willing to go over there and help do it. And people in this department do. I mean they really do. It's like a family.

All staff have deep expertise in early childhood education in various settings and roles. At the time of our study, the secretary herself had a long career implementing pre-K programs. The current secretary (appointed in summer 2020) was initially recruited to lead the Office

of School Readiness from her position as an assistant superintendent in an AL district that implemented the First Class Pre-K program. She said:

> I was nominated for Teacher of the Year for the state. And that probably changed my life forever because now you're at the table where you get to have discussions with other peers and people who get to make a little bit of a difference on a higher level.

The culture of DECE encourages team building to build the capacity of staff. This culture translates into a shared responsibility for decision making. A project director said, "while I'm the lead and I do make a lot of decisions, I do know every decision I make impacts everybody all the kids in the state." Professional learning of DECE staff is also supported. For example, the staff lead stated:

> We don't silo professional development into an area; [instead] we ensure that everyone has the level of support that's needed to make sure that professional development can happen.

Another staff person commented on the impact of this approach on her own personal growth, giving this example:

> Harvard came out with their Certificate in Early Education Leadership. And when I saw it advertised, [the secretary] encouraged me to do it. And that's been a game changer for me. The fact that they invested in that in me. I couldn't wait to come back to work and say, 'let me tell you what I just learned in this last module.'…It empowered me to think differently.

Staff members seem to take great satisfaction and pride in the work of DECE and the success they have achieved. One person said:

> I see the difference that it makes in children's lives. I saw the difference as a teacher. I see the difference as a person working with the state—going into classrooms and working with teachers now. I just think it makes the biggest difference in children's lives. And that little ripple is going to change the trajectory of our state in the future.

While they all work hard, those we interviewed do not seem overburdened with their roles. In other words, they appear to perceive that there are sufficient staff members to carry out responsibilities.

Research Question 3: How Does DECE Enact the Six Major Functions of an Effective SOEL?

Each SOEL carries out a set of functions on a daily basis to operationalize its authority (research question 1), that, together with the enabling conditions (research question 2), provides a road map for effective state SOELs. Our final research question therefore explored how senior leaders and staff carry out six major functions of a SOEL as discussed on page 9. As part of this question, we delved more deeply into learning about what staff do to implement programs and support quality, what they see as most important in terms of the functions of an office, and what they see as challenges in implementing policy.

Notably, DECE staff, and in many cases their partners in other agencies, conveyed an understanding of the interdependence of each of the six functions on the achievement of SOELs goals. A common thread among interviewees was that all staff see the "big picture" and interconnectedness among projects as a means for reaching their "North Star" or goals.

In addition, our analysis of data for this question suggests that DECE is driven by a strong focus on quality and accountability. This philosophy is clearly evident in what staff do and how they carry out their specific functions to implement policy throughout the agency. At the same time, while equity has emerged as a recent priority, it also represents a challenge to implementing quality programs and impacts the functions carried out by DECE as described below.

How DECE Promotes Program Quality

AL's First Class Pre-K program was designed around NIEER's ten *Preschool Yearbook* quality standards and has met these standards since 2008. To facilitate implementation of these standards, an advisory group established by legislation after the initial 2001 pilot developed the First Class Pre-K Program and Classroom Guidelines. The guidelines are reviewed each year for continuous improvement. They not only define quality and accountability (with a strong focus on fiscal accountability) for programs and funding, but they serve as the foundation of the grant application that local programs must use to become a contracted provider of First Class Pre-K. A staff person gave this example:

> When a new [First Class Pre-K] grant is awarded, part of that funding is $20,000 toward a classroom set up. It's the required components of a pre-K classroom and our coaches and monitors check on that every year. And to me, that has kept us developmentally appropriate because we require those learning components in the classroom.

The 2013 guidelines were revised in 2020-21 to address pay parity requirements and other issues to improve quality. The guidelines are actively used by RDs and coaches to identify areas of strength and weakness in implementation and to target support and technical assistance. An RD said:

> We're looking at our guidelines and we're looking at how we're in compliance with those guidelines. Or—and not just compliance, but really getting everyone to live and breathe it in a way that it doesn't feel like I'm checking off a box.

How DECE Guides Instructional Quality

AL has a robust, nationally recognized coaching model for First Class Pre-K teachers and administrators as a means of bolstering teachers' instructional quality.[xxxvi] A staff person said:

> I could take everything I've learned as a pre-K coach and now go back to the classroom [as] an even better version. Because what we do here to get a coach to the level of coaching is just phenomenal. I wish every teacher could go through this, because when I walked back into the classroom, I was a completely different teacher. I had gotten to the place of reflection.

The coaching model places a strong emphasis on collecting data to inform instruction. A staff person said:

> I think you can't do instructional quality without looking at the data to determine what that instructional quality looks like. And so constantly looking at the data that really looks different year to year and based on what you're looking at to determine what your instructional goals or what your instructional quality is.

In partnership with DECE, other state agencies are aligning efforts to improve instructional quality in the early years and early grades. For example, the Department of Human Resources (DHR) is funding DECE to provide coaching to the Early Head Start-child care partnership programs around behavioral issues, as they see this as impacting instructional quality in child care.[xxxvii] DECE staff also work closely with ALSDE on a number of projects related to instructional quality. The Alabama Reading Initiative is a signature project of the governor and is managed by ALSDE. DECE influenced the decision to use Teaching Strategies' GOLD assessment across pre-K and the early grades to support this initiative, and it provides grants to institutions of higher education to offer accreditation for trainers of trainers.[xxxviii] DECE's input also put a greater spotlight on professional development regarding the science of reading and evidence-based strategies to support children struggling with reading.[xxxix]

In addition, DECE and ALSDE recently collaborated to revise and align 0–5 and K–12 early learning standards. The two departments are aligning the two standards documents so that teachers can better understand the progression of learning in preschool and be equipped to support the transition to elementary school in a developmentally appropriate way. A respondent from ALSDE said,

> Our main focus is—could you consider teaching what you're currently doing with the current standards of your system, and think about them a little bit more developmentally appropriately? How can you do that? So that will be, hopefully, something we can do in our rollout of the standards is—educating everyone on how we could do this in a way that is developmentally appropriate.

Finally, in concert with the rollout of the aligned set of standards, DECE is working to align assessments across pre-K and the early elementary grades. One challenge has been a difference between the measure required in the pre-K program (i.e., Teaching Strategies' GOLD) and the reporting systems required of elementary schools. This means that pre-K programs in elementary schools may have two assessment systems.

DECE Support of Educator Competence

Every person interviewed for this study placed a strong emphasis on the role of teachers and practitioners in achieving their goals for quality and outcomes for children. The secretary said, "the most important thing we can do is support that teacher. Nothing else comes close." Similarly, DECE staff recognized that "teachers are the linchpin to quality," so much of DECE's effort is focused on educator competence. Continuing in this vein, she said, "educator competence, this is our biggest goal. If we don't build competence, then there's no sustainability in practice." Another DECE staff person indicated the challenge of supporting educators as adult learners: "the most challenging [function] is the adult learner…and ensuring that you have buy-in from the adult learner."

It was noteworthy that informants from other agencies interviewed (e.g., DHR and ALSDE) uniformly expressed shared goals around the competence of all teachers serving young children, beginning with infant-toddler teachers and through the early elementary grades. ALSDE sets standards for teacher certification and licensure and is revising standards to ensure teachers have sufficient experience in early childhood programs. One informant from ALSDE noted:

> One of the changes we've made in our standards for early childhood education and preparation is that they have to have experience with babies and toddlers. And that hadn't been in there before, so you could've done your field work and your experience internship, what we call student teaching, in early childhood education and not had any work with very small people. That…doesn't happen anymore.

At the same time, as DECE's scope of authority has grown and early childhood programs are expanding throughout the state, the need to ensure that more adults, (e.g., teachers, principals, home visitors) have the requisite knowledge, skills, and values to implement high-quality programs has become more challenging. Like many other states, AL is facing a teacher shortage, while also seeking to ensure that the workforce is diverse and represents the children and families in the state. A DECE staff person noted they are intentionally focusing on issues of equity and asking themselves the question "who's not at the table that you need to have at the table?" When the director of the Office of School Readiness asked each RD to identify an equity challenge, and an RD said, "definitely the shortage or teacher turnover."

ALSDE also recognizes the teacher shortage. A senior staff in ALSDE noted, "we've got systems that can't find teachers and, for the first time in years, can't find elementary teachers." AL is similar to most states in addressing the dilemma of recruiting individuals with the motivation to teach young children that represent the ethnic diversity of the children they serve.

DECE has elected to address these early childhood workforce challenges in several key ways. First, the department is ensuring that principals and leaders are well grounded in early childhood development.[xl] As part of this effort—and in partnership with the Department of Education—DECE is building the capacity of principals and administrators to lead preschool through grade three efforts via the National Association of Elementary School Principal's Pre-K- 3 Leadership Academy. An informant said, "supporting educator competence [is most rewarding] because we have so many people in leadership roles that don't have any kind of background in early childhood."

Secondly, DECE and DHR are collaborating to support the competence of educators in all settings serving young children. A DECE staff person noted:

> We've got some [child care center] demonstration sites [that] we've chosen [to support] serving children birth to kindergarten. They have to have a First Class Pre-K, which is at the highest level of [the state's quality rating & improvement system], providing support to that program to move up those [QRIS] stars up to the fifth level. That includes a tremendous amount of collaboration with DHR, but they're helping us here. So we're providing funding for that teacher to go back to school, we're providing a classroom setup, we're providing a coach and a monitor.

As noted earlier, in 2018 DECE created a new Office for Early Childhood Development and Professional Support to provide technical assistance to licensed child care programs including family child care. DECE and DHR have a number of reciprocal projects to increase qualifications and pay parity in child care and to recruit more people to see child care as a career. DHR also contracts with DECE to provide a high-quality infant-toddler track as part of the annual Alabama Early Childhood Education Conference to help support infant-toddler practitioners in the state. As a staff person from DHR said:

> We know that child care and workforce own this assignment together. We've had various meetings with the new Office of Apprenticeship, so that we can look at establishing child care apprenticeship programs—engaging children in the high school level community, college, and things of that nature—so that we can help build that interest, first of all, to sell child care as a profession and not as a babysitting service. So we're working very intensely with the workforce side—because we can't do one without the other.

Finally, to ensure there are a sufficient quantity of well-qualified and -compensated practitioners that represent the racial background of the children they serve, DECE has focused on pre-K teachers' compensation. First Class Pre-K standards have always required that a teacher's starting salary was in line with kindergarten teacher salaries. However, DECE adopted a new salary schedule in 2015 that required commensurate raises for pre-K teachers over a 10-year period.[xli]

How DECE Uses Research and Data

Our interviews explored how DECE staff used data to report to those outside the agency or in partnership with other agencies. In AL, using data is part of DECE's culture of decision-making. One informant said:

> I love to look at [the] county, where when I started, we had one classroom and just through sharing the data and the evidence, now every little town in [the] county has a pre-K classroom with their school.

Staff have established a culture of using data to understand issues and drive decisions. Using data helps staff be more strategic in planning ahead, and it also grounds decisions in real-time data and information. A staff person pointed out the following,

> Until we shed the light on it and started actually pulling data, you think you have this widespread issue that really is not there. And that's really what I'm trying to help them to understand. Otherwise, we just feel reactive all of the time. And we're not always reacting to the right thing.

The use of research and data to influence policy was also mentioned by numerous informants. Another staff person said:

> We try to use data to influence on a policy level as well as where we can influence here within the department. It started with our [Teaching Strategies] GOLD [assessment] data and what we had available, but just going deeper into our ECE [early childhood education] data and other things that [the] coaches are seeing. Some of it is qualitative, to really try to get to the root causes for those issues.

DECE also partners with researchers to explore issues that are impacting outcomes for children. An informant noted, "everything we do is partnered with an outside research project. So, even the things I'm doing with higher ed has a component of an outside research group following that." DECE partnered with Auburn University at Montgomery to observe children's physical development because it started getting a lot of early intervention referrals based on physical development. Given the research connecting physical and cognitive development, DECE felt this was an area important to study. It also frequently pilots new initiatives, collects data, then refines and scales up the project.

Given the strong focus on research and use of data, DECE has been working for many years to develop a robust and functional data warehouse. After a failed attempt to hire outside consultants to manage these data, it has recently hired a senior leader and support staff to manage the data systems and ensure information is collected and used meaningfully. DECE staff also have worked on improving the system and are currently expanding the system to include a robust reporting function.

DECE uses data to influence and justify policy decisions, as well as to advocate for funding. For example, senior DECE leaders use data to help local superintendents understand the cost savings of the pre-K program. As an informant noted,

> When [we] go around and do the presentation, one of our data slides says that those who attend First Class Pre-K are less likely to be chronically absent, and we have savings based on that. And so that always gets the superintendents or principals [to see why] we need pre-K because it's closing the gap and they're less likely to be chronically absent.

DECE also is considered quite savvy at using data to justify requests for funding to the legislature as well. An informant said that,

> At budget hearings where Secretary Ross did her presentation, and there's, like, a round of applause because it's all data, all outcomes, child-level outcomes. The last time we walked away and the superintendent looked at [Secretary Ross] and goes, "Can you save some money for us?"

How DECE Strengthens the Continuum of Learning

Given the mission and goals of DECE, as well as the number of state-level departments that manage early childhood-relevant programs in the state, we sought information regarding the ways in which the department contributes to a continuum of learning, from birth to age 5, and kindergarten through early elementary school. Our analysis of interview data related to this focus suggests that DECE seeks every opportunity to align the prenatal to grade three system. DECE also plays a major role in strengthening the statewide system of early care and education across agencies.

***Aligning Prenatal to Grade Three Initiatives*.** DECE has authority over a variety of programs for children prenatal to age 3, including home visiting and infant-mental health consultants. The department has a strong focus on implementing programs to engage families, including Help Me Grow, in partnership with the Alabama Partnership for Children. The program is a resource for families of children, from infants through age 8, to help them access health and developmental resources. The most significant of these programs is First Teacher, AL's home visiting program. As the director of the Alabama Partnership for Children said,

> When the [federal] Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting grant came through, our agency sat back for three weeks because we didn't know to what agency it was going to be directed. That was the governor's choice. In most states it went to the departments of public health. In our state, there were multiple options: Public Health, Child Abuse Prevention, and then there's the newly designated Department of Early Childhood Education. We didn't care who got it for our state, honestly. We

> knew it would be administered well here, and we knew that we could have input into how it was developed; we knew there would be a state leadership team.

The home visiting program leverages federal and state funds across different agencies and is truly a collaborative model. An informant told us:

> It is hard to tell who manages it because it is strictly collaborative with our Department of Public Health. We also have a huge collaboration with Medicaid, so we've been able to use our data. They're going to have Nurse-Family Partnership in every county of those that qualify for Medicaid, and then we will pick up those that don't qualify with Parents as Teachers.

Governor Ivey launched the "Strong Start, Strong Finish" education initiative in 2017 to support a comprehensive approach to improve education from pre-K to the workforce. The governor has dedicated funding for this initiative annually since 2017 to support cross-agency efforts on P–3 efforts. In response, DECE and ALSDE are working collaboratively to develop a pre-K–3rd early learning collaborative.[xlii] DECE manages competitive grants to schools to implement the Pre-K–3rd Grade Integrated Approach to Early Learning. An informant from ALSDE noted:

> We're looking at assessments, instruction, and leadership and making sure that this is not just a black box, that we've got a really good thing happening on the front end. And then, all of a sudden, that just peters out after everybody gets into elementary school. So, working with principals [we are] building up the cohort across the state that is integrating the approach that works so well for early learners into the first eight years of life. We're looking at the first eight years of life as a sacred time there and recognizing that, and how much the brain is developing at this rate.

DECE and ALSDE also developed a P–3 Framework to support pre-k to grade three efforts. It focuses on leadership, assessment, and instruction within these grades. Their work to align these key pedagogical inputs in the state has evolved, first with a focus on principal leadership, and more recently efforts to ensure teacher practice from pre-K to grade three is aligned. A DECE staff person said,

> The vision of the P–3 project is so different now than when it started. It started with the Kellogg Grant [to pilot] a [kindergarten entry assessment]. The intent was to get in there and just create a better environment to where this transition from that First-Class Pre-K [into early elementary], those children walk into a—just a better flow. Academically more in line with the assessment. Now it has evolved to, how can we just help teachers with their practice? Because what we're finding now is that if you really don't help a teacher with their pedagogy, all the other things really won't matter. Whether they use the GOLD assessment tool or not. Whether they have a principal that even went to the leadership academy.

Indeed, DECE is both the coordinating hub and often-identified leader in efforts to align P–3 efforts across AL. In fact, the first duty named in the legislation creating DECE was "to advise the Governor and the Legislature in matters relating to the coordination of services for children under the age of 19."[xliii] Furthermore, many believe that efforts to align the system are the key to AL's success. An informant from the governor's office told us that "taking people out of silos, especially inter-agency, has been an integral part to our success

as a state." It was also evident in conversations with those outside DECE, including informants at ALSDE, DHR, and one of the advocacy organizations interviewed for this study, that there is a shared commitment to supporting children across ages and services. An ALSDE informant summed up this attitude by saying, "we have measurable outcomes that we want to improve. We don't care who does it. We don't care how they do it—if it's legal, if it's moral, whatever, just get it done."

Strengthening the State's Early Care and Education System. AL has formal structures within the government, like the Children's Policy Councils at the state and local level, to provide a common vision and infrastructure for collaboration and alignment around goals for young children. Strong advocacy agencies such as the Alabama Partnership for Children and the Alabama School Readiness Alliance were established to support cross agency/stakeholder (e.g., business) collaboration and a focus on systems building.

The PDG B–5 grant accelerated this work and added more resources and structure to the state's efforts. AL completed a strategic plan in late 2019 that included a mission "to inspire, support, and deliver a cohesive, comprehensive, mixed delivery system of high-quality education and care so that all Alabama children thrive and learn."[xliv] This plan has formalized the process and expectations around collaboration. A member of the PDG B–5 leadership team said:

> Collaboration meetings have been very helpful. There's little nuances you just don't know if you don't come to the table enough—you don't want to duplicate services. You don't want anybody to get territorial. You want to all look at this together and say, the ultimate goal is the betterment for children, and how can we all come together and do that well? And you really have to talk together a lot and you really have to say, how can we partner and do better?

DECE's leadership of the PDG B–5 grant has also elevated the role of DECE's work in the prenatal to third grade space. A staff person said, the grant "really broadened our footprint in the state because we've always been home visiting, and we've always been pre-K, but now we're in the 0-to-3 world."

How DECE Efficiently Manages Public Resources

DECE leadership has a strong belief in and focus on accountability that stems from an understanding of the degree to which legislators and the governor place a priority on the efficient management of public funds. DECE has robust internal and external systems of managing resources, with sufficient fiscal staff and comprehensive data and grants management systems to help track program funding awards, monitor expenses, and track expenditures. A key function of the data system contractor, who is an independent consultant but works closely with DECE staff, is ensuring and improving the systems to manage resources. She said,

> The thing was to maintain quality and deliver services and expand capacity without just adding bureaucracy. The financial management software and processes were quite inadequate for what they were about to deal with. So that's where we began to automate things, like submitting applications and transcripts, and we automated registration for the state; that was quite a hurdle.

As their scope and funding grow, senior leaders are trying to ensure that their fiscal systems, internal capacity, and business practices support the quality of publicly funded services. A senior leader described the balance between accountability systems and building relationships with people that is fundamental to a well-run system:

> The most challenging and the most important, I think, is building that accountability system. But [we also] want to always emphasize that the system that we're creating is not running us, we're running it, and we know to be able to step beyond what we've put in place when it's necessary. The most challenging is always those partnerships. Because you don't have total authority over everything that happens to a child. You've got to build trust, you've got to build relationships, and you have to continually communicate.

Each program director manages his or her own program budget, and staff meet frequently to review and negotiate budgets. A program director said:

> We have monthly budget meetings, and so everyone's highly involved in the budgeting part. Everyone knows—their budget is flexible, but they know what their budget constraints are and what their budget is, and you can even see negotiating, like, is it worth $20,000, because I'll share that if you share this.

Each program has specific rules based on the funding stream. For the First Class Pre-K program, funding is allocated in the governor's budget each year, and though DECE staff feel the funding is secure, the need to wait for the final state budget each year puts some constraints on funding awards. An informant noted:

> Our state funding that we receive [for pre-K] this moment is as secure as K–12. So, we always know we have this much. So, because of that, we just operate within our budget. And see, we will not give out the new classroom grants until they vote on the budget. So, we're kind of holding them [legislators] responsible.

Staff pride themselves on keeping administrative costs low so more funds can go to children and programs. In fact, one informant noted that "our pre-K budget [allocates] less than two percent [to] state level admin and 86% go[es] to programs, [with additional resources for professional learning and other supports]." The pre-K program monitors work directly with programs to manage their pre-K grant expenditures. Senior leaders also work with programs to help them manage funds and will adjust fiscal policies to better meet the needs of programs and families in a diverse delivery system. The secretary noted that because child care providers indicated that they were having a hard time waiting until midyear for reimbursement checks for expenditures related to the pre-K program, she was able to get funds to child care programs earlier in the year. She described the following,

> We started to do first checks to child care, get it out the door to child care. Well, the next year, guess what? That little bit turned into $2 million. And the next year it turned into—we paid forward a little bit at a time to where we can pay one-third of all of our classrooms in August [so programs have funds at the start of the year rather than wait to be reimbursed]. Now, it took us seven years to get there.

DECE First Class Pre-K RDs provide technical assistance to program administrators to "blend and braid" funds at the local level. ALSDE staff also help districts to leverage and combine various federal resources, which in turn, supports more stable, sufficient funding

for pre-K programs at the local level when combined with DECE's First Class Pre-K grant. The secretary also said,

> I have experience as a director of federal programs and we help the [districts] understand how they can braid their money. Because, as more and more get them [pre-K programs], they're trying to understand how to supplement them with federal funds. We created a flyer with some of the federal laws and the examples.

DECE has a number of collaborative funding arrangements with other programs or agencies to increase staff capacity. As mentioned earlier, ALSDE places a staff person at DECE to help to manage the Alabama Reading Initiative. DECE has also leveraged Head Start funding to provide additional early childhood mental health capacity across the state. An informant explained:

> Head Start was requiring early childhood mental health, and there was one person in our state that was certified. And so we were getting reports that because [districts needed more resources to support children's mental health needs]. And so several agencies came together and pooled our funding, and now currently, after five years, we have some consultants out in the field.

Conclusion

AL's DECE has been effective at operationalizing its scope and authority, mastering the art of relationships, and slowly growing high-quality programs and services for young children in AL. DECE is highly valued in AL and nationally. When asked to describe an effective OEL, a respondent from the governor's office said:

> It's definitely an energized, passionate, and effervescent kind of group of individuals who care a lot about children but are willing to go the extra mile to see it through. So, that's what I've definitely seen here and I hope it continues.

DECE benefits from having a direct line of authority to the governor's office and strong political and fiscal support for early care and education and to expand First Class Pre-K and other programs for young children and families. Under strong leadership and with expert staff, DECE has executed its authority efficiently and with an eye toward accountability and results. DECE has built relationships, both inside government, with other state agencies and legislators, and outside, with local district leaders, over time. In addition, DECE has effectively maximized the support of key advocacy partners, which have helped to fuel the growth of programs for families and elevated the agency on a national level. As a result, DECE is poised for continued growth as an agency and as a leader of the state's early learning system.

IV. A Case Study of the Effectiveness of the Michigan Department of Education's Office of Great Start

Lori Connors-Tadros, Katherine Hodges, and Kaitlin Northey

Overview of MI's Office of Great Start

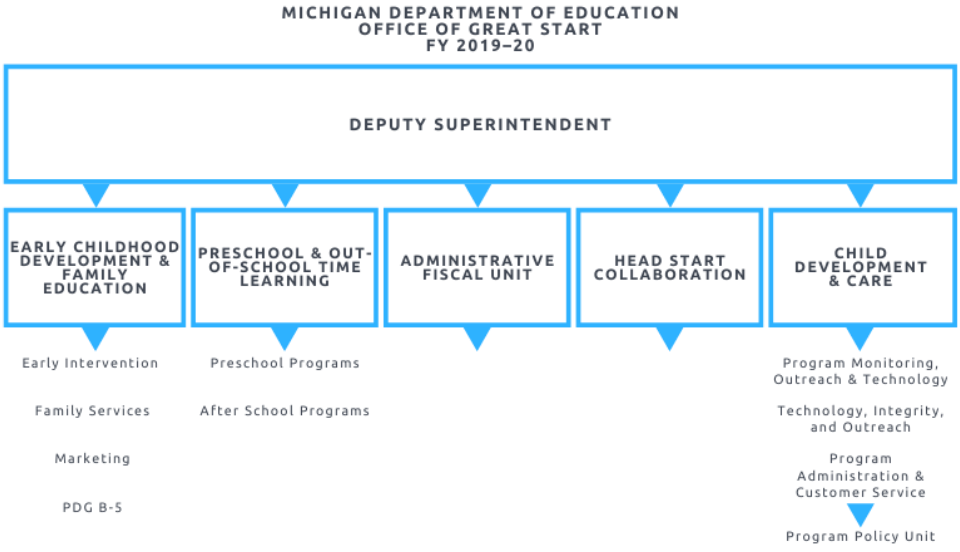
The Office of Great Start (OGS) is part of the P–20 System and Student Transitions Division in the Michigan Department of Education (MDE). There are four offices within OGS that all report to the deputy superintendent of the division. As of January 2020, OGS itself had four offices: Early Childhood Development and Family Education; Preschool and Out-of-School Time Learning; Child Development and Care; and Head Start Collaboration. For the purposes of this study, we focused on these four OGS offices as the collective SOEL. These offices house all comprehensive programs for children from birth through third grade.

In addition to these four offices, the division includes the Office of Special Education, since a birth mandate state serves children with identified special needs from birth until age 26; and the Office of Career and Technical Education. The two additional MDE divisions are Finance and Operations and Educator, Student, and School Supports. The divisions are led by deputy superintendents, who report to the chief deputy superintendent and the state superintendent.[xlv]

OGS Staff and Organizational Structure

OGS has about 66 staff (see Figure 7) and is led by P–20 System and Student Transitions Deputy Superintendent Scott Koenigsknecht. Each of the four OGS Offices has a director and each office employs a number of educational consultants who work primarily with intermediate school districts (ISDs) to implement their respective programs. In addition, the Office of Child Development and Care employs a variety of staff members, including those in customer service, technology, administration, and data analysis.[xlvi]

Figure 7: OGS Organizational Chart



History of OGS

There has been long-standing support in the state for early childhood programs in part owing to the fact that the HighScope Educational Research Foundation is located in Michigan. A signature program of OGS is the Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP). Operating since October 1, 1985, GSRP is MI's state-funded preschool program for 4-year-old children who have factors which may place them at risk for low educational attainment.

An office or unit of early childhood education, albeit under different names and within the department of education, has existed for 30 plus years. In 2011–12, Governor Rick Snyder issued an executive order to begin consolidation of a couple of early childhood offices across state departments of education and health and human services into one office, named it OGS, and made the decision to house it at the MDE.

The move was precipitated by both the research identifying the importance of early learning on brain development and the advocacy of the state superintendent at that time. This individual believed that not only were the overall goals of OGS more aligned with the goals/mission of MDE, but MDE had greater staff capacity to implement the OGS concept.[xlvii] Establishing OGS within the MDE also gave more prominence and stature to early childhood education, including the role child care could play in the mixed delivery approach to MI's preschool program. As the director of the Child Development and Care office at OGS stated:

> At [the] Department of Health and Human Services, child care was not a priority. So we were always the first on the cut or reduction list. Being able to come to an office that was only going to be focused on early childhood—I was excited about that.

Another reorganization of OGS occurred in 2017 under State Superintendent Brian Whiston. Whiston was implementing a department-wide reorganization and created MDE's Division of P–20 System and Student Transitions. During that process, OGS was placed in this new division precisely because it "was established to align high-quality early childhood to post-secondary attainment activities within the department."[xlviii] OGS went through additional leadership changes in 2018 and 2019, with the appointments of Deputy Superintendent Koenigsknecht and State Superintendent Michael Rice.

Office of Great Start Funding

OGS's total budget is $603 million, derived from two state budgets appropriated through the MI legislature's House and Senate Appropriations and Sub-Appropriations Committees annual budget process. The MI State School Aid and MDE annual budgets provide for all major MDE offices. Approximately $279 million is included in the MDE budget for administrative costs and some programs (see note below). OGS receives $324 million, allocated through State School Aid Act; however, none of the funding within MI State School Aid Budget can be kept by the MDE for administrative costs. All the funding within that budget must flow through the department to school districts. Furthermore, non-district entities, like CBOs and private child care partners for state pre-K, must be subcontractors of school districts or ISDs. The CBOs/non-districts cannot get funding directly through the State School Aid Act, unless the funding source is state general fund dollars allocated through the Act. OGS receives funding from several key state and federal sources, including state funding for implementation of specific programs and initiatives and state matching

funds for federal dollars, federal flow-through funding for Child Care and Development Fund and IDEA Part B and Part C, and Head Start Collaboration.

The GSRP is a categorical funding item included in the State School Aid budget, which totaled $249.95 million in FY 2020.[xlix] GSRP funds children on a per child basis within the categorical line item outside of the K–12 student per-pupil formula. ISDs receive financial support directly from OGS, but may distribute funds to local school districts, public school academies, and community-based child care providers to offer GSRP. The MI legislature and governor's administration determines the total appropriation for GSRP. Once that is done, ISD funding is determined primarily by level of poverty through a funding formula. The state funding has set-asides for transportation, recruiting families, and increasing public awareness of GSRP, as well as $300,000 annually for ongoing statewide evaluation activities. Although an updated funding formula was used in 2017–18 to allocate GSRP funding, the GSRP budget has remained flat since 2015–16.

Federal Funds

OGS has been successful in receiving competitive federal funds aligned to its agenda. For example, in 2018 MI received the federal Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five initial planning grant of $5,058,813,[l] and in 2019 it was awarded the PDG B–5 renewal grant for $13,413,552 annually for three years. The grant is managed by OGS Office of Early Childhood Development and Family Education, in partnership with other state agencies. The federal funding through 2022 is intended to strengthen the statewide infrastructure and programming needed to facilitate healthy early childhood development from birth through age five via a mixed delivery system that works for MI's children and their families.

In 2020, the MDE literacy team applied for and was awarded the U.S. Department of Education Comprehensive Literacy State Development grant. This award provides $16 million over the next five years to advance literacy skills—including pre-literacy skills, reading, and writing—for children from birth through grade 12, including limited English proficient students and students with disabilities. The funds will be awarded to local school districts and other eligible entities through a competitive process.[li]

Demographics of MI Children

Figure 8 provides basic demographic data on MI's young children. About 72% of the children under age 5 in MI are White and 18% are Black; more than 90% are non-Hispanic. About 25% of children under age 5 live in poverty.[lii]

Figure 8. MI DEMOGRAPHIC DATA (2019)

- 573,282 children under 5
- Race breakdown
  - 72% White
  - 18% Black/African American
  - 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native
  - 3% Asian
  - 6% Two or more races
- Ethnicity breakdown
  - 8% Hispanic
  - 92% Non-Hispanic
- 25% of children under 5 live in poverty (<100% FPL)

Selected Indicators of GSRP Effectiveness

Figure 9 notes that MI met 10 NIEER quality standard benchmarks in the 2018–19 school year and serves approximately 32% of total 4-year-olds. MI has conducted research on the GSRP program since 1995. A longitudinal study of children participating from 1995–2011, conducted by the HighScope found significant impacts on children's proficiency in reading and math and found that they were less likely to be retained and more likely to graduate on time.[liii]

Figure 9. MI Great Start School Readiness Program

- Met 8 or more NIEER quality standards benchmarks each year since the 2013–14 school year; met 10 benchmarks in 2018
- State spending per child 14th in the nation, at $6,586
- 32% of 4-year-olds in the state attended GSRP (37,140)
- Fully met 11 and partially met 3 (1 could not be determined) of the 15 Essential Elements for high quality pre-K
- GSRP has consistently shown positive impacts on children's development; according to a recent evaluation, it has a significant impact on increasing at-risk preschoolers' early literacy and math skills

FINDINGS

Research Question 1: What are the Structural and Organizational Capacities of OGS?

As part of the interviews conducted, we posed questions about the structural and organizational capacities of the OEL. Questions helped us learn how the OEL defines its authority, develops its goals and strategic plans, and operates as part of the system. Our analysis of the data for this question suggests that, reflecting the larger division in which it is housed, OGS embraces a P–20 vision to align early care and education from birth through college and career. In addition, OGS goals established by the originating executive order by Governor Snyder have withstood an administration change and MDE leadership transitions and continue to drive the work of OGS around the healthy development of young children. Furthermore, because OGS oversees many programs and plays a significant coordinating role for early childhood programs with other initiatives at MDE, the organizational and staffing structure seeks to distribute leadership across OGS.

Authority and Scope of the Office of Great Start

The four offices that were the primary focus of the study were: The Office of Preschool and Out-of-School Time Learning, which oversees the state pre-K program, after-school programs, and Part B, Section 619 program for preschoolers; the Head Start Collaborative Office; and the Office of Child Development and Care (CDC). The CDC office oversees the child care subsidy program, child care reimbursements, and the quality rating and improvement system. The Office of Early Childhood Development and Family Education oversees Part C of IDEA, PDG B–5, Great Start Collaboratives and Parent Coalitions, home visiting, early literacy, and family engagement.

The scope and breadth of the programs administered by OGS is expansive and connects the health and well-being of children and families and is intended to unify early education and early childhood systems. It also creates greater coherence among programs across the educational continuum. Services for children with special needs cut across two MDE offices within the Division of P–20 systems, with early intervention and early childhood special education for children birth to age 5 housed in OGS and services for children birth to age 26 administered out of the Office of Special Education.

OGS has a "flat" organizational structure. Each office has a director who reports to the MDE deputy superintendent, whereas each of the directors have program managers that oversee day-to-day operations and work with the ISDs, local school districts, public school academies, community-based organizations, and other OGS grantees. According to staff, this organizational structure has been effective for consolidating early learning programs within MDE and elevating and aligning early learning priorities. One staff member said,

> It is effective, in that, the bringing together of what had already been in place in the Department [of Education] and bringing in CCDF and [the] Head Start Collaboration directors allowed the leadership in the Office of Great Start to be aware of the kinds of priorities that each of our statute[s] or regulation[s] is pushing us toward and to have easy access to each other to make decisions.

This structure also provides directors more opportunity to work on cross-division initiatives. The four OGS office directors share responsibilities so that each individual does not have to participate in all committees, which frees their time for strategic planning. Operationally, each program has its own standards, implementation guidance, and budget. As noted by an informant, "the implementation manual is pretty much the bible of GSRP. It outlines every single parameter of implementing GSRP from start to finish."

Alignment of OGS and MDE Goals

OGS is charged with ensuring that all children birth to age 8, especially those in highest need, have access to high-quality early learning and development programs and enter kindergarten prepared for success. For example, in 2013, OGS engaged stakeholders across the state in the development of *Great Start, Great Investment, Great Future: The Plan for Early Learning and Development in Michigan*. This comprehensive plan contained six recommendations and numerous priority action items for advancing early learning and development. As part of that process, and repeated in 2015, OGS conducted an early childhood program inventory.[liv] In 2015–16, OGS commissioned a study of child care to identify recommendations for increasing access to quality care.[lv] And again in 2020, as a

requirement of the PDG B-5 grant, OGS led the development of a cross-sector strategic plan for children birth through 5, informed by a needs assessment of stakeholders. MI's *Birth through Five Strategic Plan* identifies goals related to early learning, alignment and transitions, and systems coordination across the agencies and sectors in the early care and education system.[lvi]

OGS's mission and core set of goals as set in in its originating executive order are aligned with several different MDE goals. First, in 2011, Governor Snyder outlined a set of four early childhood outcomes against which all public investments would be assessed. They were:

1. Children born healthy;
2. Children healthy, thriving, and developmentally on track from birth to third grade;
3. Children developmentally ready to succeed in school at the time of school entry; and
4. Children prepared to succeed in fourth grade and beyond by reading proficiently by the end of third grade.[lvii]

These four goals became the "North Star" for OGS and were subsequently embedded in MDE's 2016 "Top 10 in 10 Strategic Education Plan." An informant noted, "our focus on system building and our system supports across agencies maps really closely with the four [2011] outcomes that we were gifted [by Governor Snyder] when we were formed and have been our anchor point." Most importantly, there not only has been a sustained focus on these four goals through numerous leadership transitions, both at the department and in the governor's office, but as another responded predicted:

> [Those outcomes] will remain with the Office of Great Start through our existence. They've never been changed, altered, and we believe they're enduring. We're on our fourth state superintendent. Despite that, all of them, [including our current state superintendent] have maintained support and vision [on these goals].

The second set of goals emanated from MI's 2016 "Top 10 in 10" Strategic Education Plan and a subsequent 2020 update. Of the eight goals identified for MDE, two were specific to early childhood education.[lviii] These goals were:

> (1) Expand Early Childhood Learning Opportunities. Tracking the following metrics:
>
> - Number and percent of children served in Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP)*
> - Number of children eligible for GSRP
> - NIEER annual yearbook rating for state-funded Pre-K programs; and
>
> (2) Improve Early Literacy Achievement. Tracking the following metrics:
>
> - Percent proficient: M-STEP—third grade ELA
> - NAEP—fourth grade reading
> - Benchmarks—third grade ELA

When the original 2016 Top 10 in 10 Strategic Education Plan was released, it became a game changer for early childhood, as it elevated the importance of high-quality early learning and related goals for young children and families. As an informant said,

> When Superintendent Whiston embarked on this MI Top 10 in 10 strategic planning process for the department, we came up with seven goals [and] 44 strategies, informed by tens of thousands of pieces of data and input. Ultimately, it definitely changed the conversation around education and understanding P–20, linking early childhood to K–12, promoting alignment, and promoting value in a foundation of the early years to build upon.

However, this elevation was not left purely to chance. Instead, OGS staff were involved in developing the MI's Top 10 in 10 Strategic Education Plan through engagement of experts in the field. An informant recalled:

> For the Top 10 in 10, I would say that in leadership roles we make contributions, but it was lifted out of the state superintendent's office. At that time, the state superintendent's cabinet was kind of directing the contractors, who were assisting with that. And our goal was to make sure that our field was engaged in voicing what was important.

Similarly, OGS staff were involved in the most recent update to the MI Top 10 Strategic Education Plan and identifying specific metrics associated with outcomes to track.[lix] An informant described this addition:

> Our current state superintendent believes that like any good strategic plan, [it] needs to be looked at every few years, [and] we're almost four to five years into this. A pulse needs to be taken on it and any refinements need to happen. Our current state superintendent, Dr. Michael Rice, with our process now is very intentional. We have five more years. What can we accomplish in five years? So, what he hopes to take to the board this year, is a revised Top 10 in 10 plan that has fewer goals, that has very specific metrics associated with them, that continue to emphasize the department's priorities of equity, whole child education, and importance of prenatal through age 8 foundations, and literacy. And then allowing for us to establish the strategies that become our implementation plans of the Department [of Education], but then publish that so that the field, whether you're a community-based organization, a nonprofit, a statewide advocacy organization, a school district, [or] whatever entity, you can come up with your own strategies for how you connect to that goal. So you can feel a part of helping the state achieve it. That's what Dr. Rice is trying to achieve.

Staff report a focus on how the goals of OGS align with and support MDE goals. An informant said,

> Let's say I wanted to propose something to go to the State Board of Education for a presentation. We have to be able to say how it's connected to one of the Top 10 in 10 goals. So the first one is all about access to high-quality early learning opportunities. There is also one about families. And then, there's one about access for low-income families. So we're generally connecting our [OGS goals] to one of those three.

OGS offices also coordinate and align their goals across other offices within MDE and with other stakeholders in the state's early childhood sphere. An informant noted:

> Our focus is on system building. And our system supports across agencies maps really closely with the four [2011] outcomes that we were gifted when we were formed. So, for the Office [of Early Childhood Development and Family Education] I would say that the predominant goals are to not operate in silos and make sure that the staff, and all of the ways in which we are funded, are taken into consideration in the cross-system work. That is our responsibility. And so, with that comes the responsibility to play nice in the sandbox with our other agencies and with the other offices of Great Start, and [to] make contributions from our knowledge base to not just birth to 3 or birth to age 8, but [from] birth. And now we have leadership for the P–20 family engagement work that we've been doing.

Directors of OGS offices spoke about both formal and informal methods to determine policy priorities and plan for strategic initiatives for their offices. One director described the approach to identifying the priorities for his office. He said:

> I ask [my staff's] perspective, get some feedback, and I hone in on the policy change priorities, a list of three to five, for the next year to two years. From that point, I take into consideration, what are the state superintendent's priorities, or what are the department's priorities going on? I then also take into consideration, what are the overall administration's [governor's] priorities? Now, we [the department] function semi-autonomously from the administration [of the state] under the Michigan constitution. So, that is a third or fourth lens. And I'm lucky, right now, that the last two state superintendents, in particular, and the current State Superintendent Michael Rice is absolutely supportive of the programs in my office—his top five priorities align perfectly to support most whatever agenda I want to come out of my office. So, I can come up with my top five: expanded funding, equity of funding, GSRP preschool expansion, social-emotional learning, workforce, and then career tech ed options. I then take those to my deputy. And, [in speaking] with him, I [discuss] the pros and cons [and determine] the top three I would like to move forward at least one for every area of my office. And then, from there, we move it to the P–20 division leadership to expand it to special education and career and technical education to get other perspectives; thus, widening the expertise. And we go through a kind of a pro and con perspective process, just to help refine our policy agenda, not to change it. So, I still have authority to guide it. From there, I just refine it and set it, and it's informed. Then [the deputy superintendent] adopts it and takes it to his leadership—to the chief deputy, to showcase it and get a final blessing on it. And, from that point, that's our policy for the next year.

How staff members work together toward agency goals has changed over time in two important ways. First, the P–20 systems approach is becoming much more a part of the way OGS staff work within MDE. As an informant described:

> There are many things across the department that we will do, making sure we have early childhood people working with the K–12 people now, which just didn't happen in the beginning. More and more we try to look at the P–20 continuum, particularly since officially our last governor named us [as part of the] P–20 [education] continuum. It really helped other people start paying attention to the early childhood people that were right here with them.

Secondly, staff now have greater input into MDE and OGS goals and this translates into a more coordinated approach across offices within MDE. An informant said,

> I think we all have influence. We all have lots of conversations together, but I think the idea of the consultants among the programs doing the work they came here to do in a specific program now goes a lot beyond that. They really are, whether it's working together in a work group that's furthering part of the Top 10 in 10 work or the things, right, in early childhood. We tend to work a lot together and I think listen to a lot broader voices now than we did when I first arrived here.

Collaboration is Highly Valued

OGS is located on the same floor as the MDE state superintendent and deputy superintendent. This visibility is perceived as a reminder of the importance of early learning. An informant noted,

> Having that physical reminder presence, backed up by the research, backed up by the investment, the outcomes, et cetera, reinforces the importance of early childhood all the way down to prenatally.

In addition, there are formal processes to support collaboration among office directors and other senior staff, each division's deputy superintendent, and the state superintendent. A senior leader noted:

> We see each other every day, but from a systems point of view, we meet with our chief deputy superintendent—we just had a meeting this morning. It's the chief deputy superintendent and the three of us [deputy superintendents], and it's kind of a round-robin agenda. So, opportunity to discuss, deliberate, debate there. We also have the opportunity to meet with [State Superintendent] Rice in a very similar setting, just the deputy superintendent, chief deputy superintendent, and him, and I think that's every other week. And then we also have a senior leadership meeting every Monday for four hours. There are a lot of opportunities for us to communicate, work together, dialogue in terms of breaking down silos. And we just had that conversation today and, again, I'm new. [An MDE staff person] has been here 10 years. She just made the comment today, she feels that we've come a long way in breaking down those silos and doing more work across the departments.

Directors of the four OGS offices collaborate frequently to ensure that their respective staff members are cognizant of cross-cutting priorities and issues. An informant noted that there are frequent opportunities to collaborate on the P–20 continuum across these offices and within MDE more broadly:

> We bring issues that might be what I would call cross-cutting. For example—Great Start to Quality falls under my office. So as we were putting together an advisory structure to think about making changes [to it], we talked—the directors—and all came together for a planning session with BUILD. We kind of agreed on the priorities. I've checked in with them about membership, about who should be interviewed, the focus group locations—so kind of making sure that what I'm moving forward was still aligned.

There also is a strong sense of "getting the work done" to meet the needs of children and families. A senior leader said:

> One of the things I feel very strongly about for the Office of Great Start is 95% of us are there for kids and families first and work really, really, really hard every day for kids and families. And I don't think that's true [generally] for state government workers. There's a high, high level of commitment across the Office of Great Start. People will put in the extra time and effort for their jobs. And I think that it helps make us effective, in a very informative, passionate way. If something needs to be done, it will get done. I can't imagine myself working with another group of people, just because the mission is there for all of us to do what's best for kids and families in Michigan. I think that helps make us effective. The collaborative nature of our work is there; the spirit is there.

There is one final area of collaboration. Although most early childhood programs are housed within OGS, teaching certifications and professional learning for 0–5 educators are housed in the Office of Educator Excellence at the MDE. Therefore, this office handles questions from the field about certification and teacher evaluation, but its staff collaborates with OGS staff as needed.

State-Local Systems and Capacity Building

MI is a local control state and OGS works directly with the 56 ISDs primarily, as much of the early childhood care and education system has been centralized at this system level.[lx] In turn, these ISDs—which sometimes are referred to as regional educational service agencies (RESA) or educational service agencies (ESA) or regional education service districts (RESD)—work with both local school districts, community partners including child care, Head Start and community-based providers and families to implement the program and leverage resources. The ISDs were created by the legislature and are both the main driver of educational policy implementation and a convener of education stakeholders.

For many OGS programs and initiatives, funding flows directly from MDE to ISDs. For example, early Intervention services are operated through the ISDs. ISDs also are the fiscal agent for the GSRP, although they can (and do) contract with many local school districts, public school academies, and community-based organizations to operate the state preschool program. ISDs must employ a GSRP administrator to oversee the program, and in some cases, when the ISD is also the federal Head Start grantee, the ISD GSRP administrator may also play dual roles as the Head Start administrator, which allows for braiding funding and maximizing local funding sources. This, too, happens more often at the GSRP sub-recipient level of program providers where the ISD has contracted with a community-based organization (e.g., a CAP agency) and that organization is also a Head Start grantee or delegate.

OGS has worked to set up structures and practices that build local capacity to ensure a coherent and aligned early care and education system. An informant noted:

> I feel like those big infrastructure pieces are in place. It's just a matter of coordinating them better at the state and local level as well as broadening who's at the table around systems work. And that's a tricky balance in terms of having to still hold your daily responsibilities to the state and being grounded in education while also recognizing that in order to meet those [OGS] four priorities around kids are born healthy—kids are developmentally on track—but that is not an education-only goal. And so, when you do that, you automatically have to open up [to include other

> voices]; otherwise there's no way you're ever going to meet those expectations. I am very hopeful that we are on the right track.

Another example of state-local capacity building is OGS GSRP education consultants, who are assigned to approximately 17 to 18 ISDs. These consultants are tasked with meeting with ISD staff monthly or periodically to address any GSRP program implementation issues, ensure data reporting is accurate, support teachers and the GSRP early childhood specialist coaching system, oversee funding and contracts, and ensure program quality is maintained. A major focus of OGS education consultants is technical assistance to the field. Early On (a program for infants and toddlers with development delays or are at risk for delays) consultants are housed within Office of Early Childhood Development and Family Education in an Early Intervention unit and GSRP consultants are housed within Office of Preschool and Out-of-School Time Learning within a GSRP unit.

OGS education consultants also sit on cross-division committees within the department, such as the Way of Work Committee, looking at professional learning across the department. Certain programs within offices in OGS also contract with other entities to provide technical assistance to ISDs. For example, for Part C programs, staff in the Early Intervention noted,

> With our team here at the department for our 56 service areas, we have a contracted organization [Early On Training and Technical Assistance] that does the training and technical assistance so we don't do TA here, for the most part. We do case consultation every month with [the contractor], where we talk about "here's an ISD who's having a concern around this particular topic." And we'll brainstorm about issues, concerns, questions that they might be having. We sit at a table much like this and we just hash everything out. And then we do more leadership-type meetings. We meet a minimum of twice a month around training and TA topics and then they're the ones doing the work. They're the ones in the field around the training and technical assistance issues, whereas we're providing the guidance around funding, compliance, monitoring, and things like that.

Finally, in 2005, Governor Granholm created the Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC) as a public-private entity to work with local communities to implement the Great Start system, including the state's quality rating and improvement system, Great Start to Quality (GSQ). ECIC is overseen by an executive committee appointed by the governor and a corporate board, whose members are elected by the ISDs.[lxi]

Research Question 2: What Conditions Enable OGS to be Effective?

This research question focuses on the enabling conditions that impact the effectiveness of the OEL, in addition to the organizational structure and authority of the office. Conditions may include political and public will, leadership and staffing, and other contextual factors of effective state offices of early learning. Our analysis of the data for this research question suggests that although the legislature in MI plays a very strong role in driving policy, highly capable leadership and staff in OGS provides policy leadership and support to local leaders in implementing high-quality programs. Given the manner in which OGS is funded, the combination of strong legislative support and experienced leaders likely plays a critical role in OGS's effectiveness.

Relationship with State Legislature to Support OGS Policy and Funding

In MI, early learning programs, and most notably the GSRP, have enjoyed bipartisan and long-standing support. This support has been maintained through political changes. An informant noted:

> You know where in other states a changed party might weaken MDE and weaken the early childhood programs? Ours did not. Ours strengthened it. We have been very fortunate for the knowledge of our superintendents and [that] their value on early childhood has grown.

The legislature plays a significant role in the development and expansion of OGS and early childhood programming in the state—in essence, the legislature makes decisions and OGS implements them. The deputy superintendent is savvy in understanding his role in building relationships and educating legislators on the role of OGS. For example, early in his tenure he led the division in the development of a P–20 Division Education Policy Guide, intended to communicate the priorities of OGS to external stakeholders, including legislators and others. He said,

> When I came in, we developed this document, which is our guide. And so again, I oversee special education, Great Start, and [Career and Technical Education]. What we did is we spent some time as a division asking, what are our priority areas? And then we developed our belief statement. We have history and context. We have data. We have the story. We have the need and then we have the resources available with a contact at the bottom. If I'm a legislator and I've got a question and I'm on the floor [of the House or Senate] and I pull the guide out, it's right there. As opposed to having to send staff to go back, to send staff to find this person, or that person.

The deputy superintendent and other OGS directors not only are very responsive to any questions a legislator raises but they have a robust, collaborative, working relationship with individual legislators, staff from the State Budget Office, staff from the House and Senate Fiscal Agencies, and the MDE's legislative liaison. They also proactively educate legislators on proposals they would like to see addressed. A senior leader said:

> One thing I've learned about MDE, that [when] you're very responsive, the legislature is very involved. This is the proactive way. Saying, here's where we would like to see either additional programming, a new program, whatever you want to call that. The reactionary way is [just] to be available. I mean it all comes down to relationships, it really does. Just since my short time here, [senior staff in OGS] have filled a number of requests in a very positive way from legislators, the governor's office, and the State Budget Office. Being responsive and reacting to their requests in a timely manner with very accurate and factual information has helped.

Senior leaders in OGS were also cognizant of the need to cultivate relationships with legislators and the public. The director of the Office of Preschool and Out-of-School Time Learning identified an understanding of the political process as important to the success and effectiveness of OGS:

> In MI, in particular, where we have legislative term limits and turnover, you have to be able to be adaptable to change rather rapidly. So, you have to stay on top of context on a regular basis and be thinking ahead for how you want to drive your

> goals under plan A and plan B, with a contingency for plan C. And that is something that you have to take on all the time and be prepared for. This is necessary to be effective and be able to be extremely responsive within a political environment that we live in because that's ultimately what government is. In MI, where our Department of Education, our Office of Great Start, is semi-autonomous per our state constitution, but the legislature and the governor they hold our purse strings, so we must keep that in mind even though we can make policy and we can guide the education of our young children.

The Deputy Superintendent Overseeing OGS is a Strong Supporter of Early Childhood

The deputy superintendent of the Division of P–20 System and Student Transitions—and therefore the senior leader of OGS, Koenigsknecht had been in his position at MDE for just 18 months, recruited by State Superintendent Whiston. He said:

> Prior to my arrival here I was an [ISD] school superintendent. In MI, at [this] level, we do really three things similar, and that is early childhood, special education, and career and technical education. The division that I oversee incorporates all of these. All are passion areas of mine.

Having spent many years in schools in MI, and with his own experience of raising his children, the deputy superintendent is a strong proponent of early learning and the GSRP. He said,

> The Great Start Readiness Program, from my perspective, really can be considered what I would call the great equalizer for a lot of our kids. And I mean that in a very positive way. It gives some of our kids who otherwise might not have an opportunity to really have a rich preschool experience focused on the whole child, and really get them ready to go and get them prepared to enter kindergarten. And so it's a program I've always supported. It's been fun to see the growth of that, as you know. Fortunately, we have a governor, or had a governor, who believed in it as well and invested significant dollars in that. And our hope is that this governor, and as we know she's passionate about early childhood as well, we can continue to see that growth.

OGS Office Directors Are Seasoned Early Childhood Administrators

The directors of the four early childhood offices within OGS meet weekly to ensure their respective programs are aligned and coherent and also to determine how best to integrate early childhood expertise into other initiatives or programs in MDE. According to an informant, at "The Office of Great Start, we have weekly leadership meetings to discuss cross OGS [topics]. That, I think, contributes to [its] effectiveness."

All of these directors are experienced administrators and came from work in communities or other state agencies with relevant missions and goals to the work they are doing in OGS, as well. For example, the director of the Office of Preschool and Out-of-School Time Learning—often viewed as the "voice" or leader of the directors—had a long history at MDE, beginning in 2008, and experience serving as a program manager. He was mentored by the former director of the Office of Early Childhood Education and Family Services (a previous iteration of an office within OGS), who retired with over 20 years of service, and

he was elevated to his position in 2014. He comes from a child development and family-centered, social work background, and has some lobbying experience. He noted:

> I am a non-traditionalist within an education department because I don't have a teaching certificate. But I have policy, I have budget, I have child development and family education content, and I have lifespan development content. I utilize all of that based on a foundation of having experts under me. It works well because they guide me, and I'm only as effective as my team under me.

This director also is a savvy leader, and this serves OGS well in terms of ensuring the prominence and success of early learning programs. He also said,

> You need to understand the full extent of the laws, rules, policies, administrative rules, and the context in which your purpose lives within the state agency and within the broader state government. And who you are connected with within your department and within your cross-agency work. And you have to understand the context and whether or not it's pertinent to what you're doing that day, that month, that year. You still have to take time up front to understand the complexity and the wholeness of [all] that.

In turn, OGS directors are highly valued by the deputy superintendent. When he first came to the division, he had to address a challenge with one of the other offices, so he said to OGS:

> You guys have a reputation of high quality, [so] I'm going to rely on you to keep going while I focus here and fix what I need to fix, and I'll be back." For me, it was doubling down on having staff own the programs even more. And have them come up with what's the next evolution of the program and having them come up with the ideas. It could've very easily been a new leader, whether it be deputy, whether it be state superintendent, come in and say, "this is what I want out of it and these are the parameters and so forth." But neither of those things were [what happened].

OGS Office Directors Cultivate Staff Capacity

A "cultivation of staff capacity" approach is a strategic hallmark of OGS. At the time of our study, two of the four OGS office directors were leaving, after having been in OGS for many years. However, other staff within the offices seemed poised to take on new responsibilities and were serving in acting positions. Directors of OGS offices reported similar approaches to leading and managing their staff that respected staff members' expertise and insights and engaged them in policy decisions. An example that illustrates this approach is from the director of Office of Preschool and Out-of-Time:

> It all starts with my staff. That is the level at which I function in terms of—my staff, my teams. They are the ones that are in touch with the field. They are the ones who understand on a day-to-day basis what is going well and what is not going well with the current law, the current policy, the regulations, the rules we have in our implementation manuals, for whatever program we're implementing. And so, from my point of view, I need to hear from them first.

He also seeks to develop the program managers in his office, with many staff members promoted to positions of increasing responsibility. He said:

> It’s about empowering staff to self-reflect on the work they do, take leadership, seek out new opportunities to utilize their experience, their education, their passions. At the same time, it also made it difficult to deny the importance of the program. And, in some ways, no matter who came in, it’s harder to dismantle that when your footprint is so much broader and wider [across the department]. And knowing that these staff would establish real solid, robust relationships and do it in a quality manner that others would have a tough time to save face if you were to say, “oh, we’re going to cancel all that [early childhood priorities].” People would be asking why. So, there’s some strategy to that, too.

In part, staff commitment to their work is facilitated by the leadership approach of the directors, each of whom work hard to engage staff in setting priorities both within OGS and across MDE. Directors work with their teams to determine priorities, as one informant noted:

> We sit down as a team and we decide, what are the possible alternatives? From that brainstorming session then, I actually incorporate management across programs for a diverse perspective.

Engagement of Stakeholders

The deputy superintendent overseeing OGS sees his job as bringing non-traditional partners together to create a strong early childhood education system within the state. He said:

> [It’s important] to really getting ownership from people from the field, whether that's right down to the parents, local school districts, ISDs, and so on and so forth. I'm the type of person that can certainly make a decision when I need to, I don't have any problem with that, but, I like to bring folks together. I like to hear those perspectives and build the system. And so, having that collaborative approach of involving others who have a sense of ownership in the issue, and sometimes that's out of the box. I'm very comfortable with the business community. I mean, there's so many aspects of early childhood that are really workforce development issues. And we're having those conversations. If you have an employee that can't find child care, guess what? I'm very comfortable involving what some people may consider non-traditional partners, but I think those voices are important. I would say that bringing together a collective group of folks from a variety of backgrounds who have ownership in the issue is the leadership piece, and making sure that there's somebody there who has a systems point of view with systems experience.

External stakeholders also report that OGS is good at taking suggestions from other state and local partners to engage key stakeholders in their decision-making process. An informant noted:

> I think the willingness to engage external partners and not just make decisions in a vacuum, I think that’s definitely a strength. And to want to get different perspectives and voices at the tables. I think that they’re open to hearing from the field—not just in a stakeholder manner—but if someone raises something, it seems like they’re open to hearing that and then thinking about and/or addressing why something can’t be a certain way. Greatest strengths: I think they do well with the resources they have.

Significantly, the federal PDG B–5 grant awarded to MDE is putting new resources into stakeholder engagement and building on extensive stakeholder engagement and listening sessions conducted during the related 2018 needs assessment. OGS staff are engaged in a "re-think" of GSQ, MI's quality rating and improvement system. They have invited applicants from across stakeholder groups to sit on a GSQ advisory group and they plan to conduct additional focus groups and surveys of providers and users of GSQ to inform their efforts.

The strong working relationships with external stakeholders and advocates have also resulted in an increased understanding of the impact of GSRP, and thus on the funding for the program. An informant noted:

> Having this [OGS] office has changed some of the dynamics that we have with our outside partners or the advocates in terms of being able to try and get people on the same agenda. I think it's opened up some opportunities for funding increases—whether it's been with GSRP, the Early On increases that happened, or the child care increases that have happened. We were a state that was returning [child care] money to the federal government because our appropriations were not being fully made by the state. Since the [OGS] office was formed we have had increases in funding.

OGS Staffing

Staffing is a critical contributor to OGS's effectiveness. Each of the major programs within the four OGS offices have a manager to oversee day-to-day program implementation. Managers also lead the policy development for the program, with input from staff and directors. Directors of each office meet frequently with program managers, both formally and informally. Directors noted that having staff members focus on day-to-day operations and program management allows directors the time to do some strategic planning for their office and to engage in initiatives within MDE and external stakeholders. One of the four said:

> That frees me up as a director to do a whole variety of other stuff that I could not do before. Form partnerships across the divisions, across the offices. [For example], it has allowed me to take [on] the kindergarten entry assessment work that was not functioning well [and] take it under my wing, to rethink how the department supports the field in implementation because it's been moved under my office, where staff understand the field and the tool better.

In addition, OGS staff members have a breadth of experience in early childhood and in the field. Most of these individuals have worked at the local school district or ISD level as teachers and/or administrators. Several have worked in community-based organizations. Staff members also are very committed to their work and seem to like working at OGS. At the same time, informants noted a lack of expertise in bilingual education. However, they have just joined WIDA Early Years, using funds from the PDG B–5 grant award. One director felt with more staff in OGS they could play a great role in supporting ISDs in effective program implementation. He said:

> In terms of thinking about the size and scope and the importance of the programs—of early childhood programs—we are just under-resourced in terms of bodies for the education consultants [positions]. I think that we could spend more time in

> consultation, more time in creating professional learning communities, and some of those things that, you know, really could kind of take off and feed itself in many ways if we could get to that point [with more resources]. And [we could] still work on data and policy and things that are beyond GSRP or beyond the Office of Great Start, being in support of the Top 10 in 10 [Strategic Education Plan].

At the same time, OGS staff members believe their office could be even more effective if they could bring on additional staff. An informant noted:

> I think what would help us become more effective would be more help. I've worked with two other offices; I know how lean we are. We're under-resourced in so many ways. I'm not even talking about people resourced, I'm talking about stuff resourced. I'm talking about resources; I'm talking about professional learning. We don't get any of that. And I would like to find ways to help support my team better in all [of] that. I mean, when I think about all of the things that we're up against and how many projects and priorities that we're trying to organize with the number of people we have, it's impossible.

OGS staffing levels are a consequence of the state budget process that affects OGS and MDE more broadly. Administrative funding for offices like OGS is separate from funding allocated for programs and initiatives delivered in schools and communities (e.g., GSRP), which is instead part of State School Aid Act that flows funding to schools via the department. OGS administrative funding is allocated within the MDE budget and provides for both an certain number of positions (FTEs) to each office and a total funding amount for those positions. As a result, advocating for funding both internally and externally is a significant part of the job of OGS senior leaders. As the deputy superintendent noted, he must use data and results to justify his budget requests:

> When I came here and what I learned is that last year, my first year, we get a limited number of budget asks from the State Budget Office, and we got three. So I have to take all of this [P–20 budget priorities], put it next to my colleague's budget asks here, and my other colleague's budget asks [here], and come up with three. That's not a lot. Fortunately, last year, two of the three were early childhood. We asked for additional GSRP dollars. So fast forward to this year, a new governor in a new setting, and we got one budget ask. And so, in having those conversations with my colleagues and at the leadership level, I was able to share information, provide data, and the fact that our one budget ask is around GSRP [is fantastic]. Serving more kids, so it's an increase in slots.

Similarly, the office directors must be strategic in their funding requests for new staff, because FTEs are included in the state budget as part of the annual appropriations process. An informant noted:

> Unfortunately, money [to fund positions] and FTE are both independent. All of our administrative structure is funded through a department of ed budget. If we want new positions, we have to ask the state budget office and the governor not only for money [for the positions], but we have to ask for authority for FTEs. We have to ask for new positions to be allocated to the department out of the total positions of the state pool. They do cap FTE positions. If we want [a new position], that means that some other department may not get positions.

The need to advocate for additional funding is felt at the local level by ISDs implementing the GSRP, as well. An ISD administrator said:

> My biggest issue is the funding piece. It's that we really do have a lack of funding for early childhood. It's at the legislative level, just continuing to advocate for additional funding. I'm sure you've heard it; but for GSRP, we have not had a funding increase in seven years, so we're operating on the same dollar amount per child that we operated on seven years ago. And so how do you really increase your staff quality and require certain standards for staff when you can't give them—really—give them an increase?

Research Question 3: How Does OGS Enact the Six Major Functions of an Effective SOEL?

Each SOEL carries out a set of functions on a daily basis to operationalize its authority (research question 1), that together with the enabling conditions (research question 2) provides a road map for effective state SOELs. Our final research question therefore explored how senior leaders and staff in the OEL carry out six major functions of a state office of early childhood as discussed on page 9. As part of this question, we learned more about what staff members do to implement programs and support quality, what they see as most important in terms of functions of an office, and what the challenges are in implementing policy.

The functions performed in OGS are driven by the agency's goals and can be traced back to the "Top 10 in 10" Strategic Education Plan. Priorities are determined by an iterative process within OGS of seeking feedback from staff, considering agency and state superintendent goals, and then bringing the priorities to division leadership for final consideration. In line with the structure of the office, OGS is focused on the system from prenatal to 20. An informant noted:

> I think that strengthening the continuum of learning is always on our radar. We do have good relationships with the public-school systems in our county, but I think the transition piece can definitely be strengthened. I think that's where we sometimes see it lacking…between early childhood and when they go into kindergarten.

Promoting Policies that Undergird Program Quality

Each program not only has an implementation manual that is the "backbone" of program quality expectations, but these manuals are aligned to the program's standards and updated annually. In addition, each of the major programs delivering services to children and families (e.g., GSRP, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Early On, child care, Great Start Collaboratives/Parent Coalitions, and early childhood special education) has a monitoring system. These systems vary based on program requirements and/or funding, but their common monitoring goal is to drive quality improvement.

OGS staff, especially education consultants, work with the field (ISDs, LEAs, CBOs) to ensure the program standards are used and met. An informant noted:

> [I spend a lot of my time] just answering the questions from the field, helping them to make good decisions about balancing the requirements and their funding, and what's good for kids and families. We really want to look at how the monitoring

> system can work towards improving the quality across the board. It's a big—is a big push for us."

For some programs, where regulations are targeted to local school districts or ISDs (e.g., early childhood special education, Early On), the OGS staff role is to engage stakeholders in developing guidance around best practice. An informant said,

> we're working on the inclusion policy statement now. We do more recommended and best practices. Given that Michigan's local control, we'll even had [this] during the inclusion stakeholder group. We had individual ISDs or LEA people coming in and talking about what they were doing well for inclusion and what some of [the] trials and tribulations [were] that others could maybe learn from. We kind of do our guidance as a show and tell of what's happening around the state.

The ISD informant also noted that the resources and supports for program standards that OGS provides help them maintain a focus on quality:

> We're looking at our standards. If we have questions, we will go to the implementation manual for GSRP or we'll go to the Head Start program performance standards. I mean, it is—it's just part of the work that we're doing—and there are times when people become complacent and forget about something that they know that they're supposed to be doing. One example is active supervision at our centers. We really had to increase our active supervision policies and procedures and our systems, and we constantly will focus on those and retrain on those at center meetings and with staff so that they understand that—the reasons why we're putting things into place. And it's for the health and safety of our children and to make sure that we're providing those quality pieces for our families.

However, some OGS efforts to promote quality are stymied due to a lack of control over all of the key programmatic inputs. For example, MDE contracts with the Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC) to oversee the state's QRIS initiative, Great Start to Quality (GSQ), that is made up of five categories of program quality indicators aligned with MI's *Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Infant and Toddler Programs*, *Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Prekindergarten*, and *Out-of-School Time Standards of Quality.* These program quality indicators are used to rate child care, preschool programs, and out of school time programs to ensure MI's youngest children have high-quality early learning experiences. Informants generally feel the QRIS is effective in raising awareness around standards of program quality. Yet, one challenge with the GSQ system is that programs in lower-income areas have trouble scoring higher because they have limited financial resources. An informant shared:

> One of the challenges we do hear from a lot of the programs in lower-income areas especially, or who have the majority or all children receiving [a Child Care and Development Fund] subsidy, is that attainment of the higher ratings is challenging for them for a number of reasons. Either they don't have access to financial resources to purchase curriculum, or the main one, by and large the biggest, is staffing. That has been the biggest challenge. If they're reliant on subsidies, they cannot afford degreed-level teachers, or they turn over frequently.

A specific structural issue for the Office of Child Development and Care is that eligibility for the Child Care and Development Fund subsidy payments is under the authority of another state agency, the MI Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). As an informant stated:

> I think the challenge [is that] the eligibility system lives at DHHS. So being able to get changes that we need in that system—whether it's [subsidy] rate increases or policy changes, is a challenge. So I think that's our biggest challenge at this point.

Building an Integrated System to Guide Instructional Quality

Guidance and resources to guide instructional quality are the foundation of the GSRP program, as well as Great Start to Quality, including the implementation requirements for curriculum approval, use of standards, and assessment. As one informant discussed, OGS provides funds through the ECIC for purchasing approved curricula:

> We were able to purchase each [GSQ] Resource Center a set of all of the state-approved curricula so that they could use that to help [all child care] providers understand what curricula is, help them choose an appropriate one based on their program philosophy, the children they had in care. And we know that has been a huge help for programs, to just get their hands on it and look to see. Because, otherwise, it's so conceptual and abstract that it's been a challenge for some folks. So, I know that's been a big benefit. And, of course, that funding came from the Office of Great Start.

OGS supports the Office of Educational Supports (OES) in the administration of state early literacy funds, as designated in MI's Read by Grade Three Law. Effective literacy practices for pre-K to grade three, including an early literacy grant program, are supported with these funds from the state and a federal grant going to ISDs for coaching and additional instructional time and other professional development to increase instructional quality to support teachers in effective literacy instruction.

In addition, OGS aligns requirements for standards, curriculum, and assessment across the major programs serving children in MI, including early childhood special education, with expectations for kindergarten. An informant noted:

> We promote in high-quality pre-K, and I would say the same for kindergarten, the comprehensive package of evidence-based and research-driven screeners, evaluation—or more comprehensively screeners, diagnostics, evaluation, formative ongoing assessment, curricula, as a package.

Supporting Educator Competence

OGS funds a number of initiatives aimed at enhancing the capacity of teachers and administrators to support young children's learning and development. For example, in 2014 OGS developed core knowledge and core competencies for the early care and education workforce. The office also aligned early childhood educator preparations standards with the core competencies. Based on the evidence base on the impact of coaching, an important decision the GSRP staff of OGS made was to redirect resources from annual conferences for teachers to individualized coaching. As an informant described:

> We have found ways to [coach teachers] in such a way to maximize the amount of time on a daily basis to promote program quality through consulting via email, phone, and development of professional learning opportunities, webinar, and in face, and through kind of communities of practice. We gave up on annual conferences. Because we felt that that is the least effective manner in which we're going to have a true change in instructional quality in the classroom. Our focus has become on working with and increasing the professional development of the coaches, aka GSRP early childhood specialists. So, from a department, our focus is on the coaches and the early childhood administrators, but for different reasons. The instructional quality aspect is on the coaches. The early childhood administrators, they get some of that for continuity and support of their ECSs, but they also get a lot of the policy regulation alignment pieces between early childhood and K–12.

OGS staff both directly deliver and contract with other organizations to provide training for teachers and administrators. For example, one Office of Child Development and Care investment in educator competence that benefits all educators is the MI T.E.A.C.H. program. In addition, the 10 GSQ Resource Centers are a regional infrastructure system to support early care and education educator competence. These Resource Centers are funded with federal CCDF quality set-aside dollars and provide training to providers of child care and after-school programs, which may include GSRP and Head Start as well. ECE educators in GSRP classrooms have access to 250 coaches (early childhood specialists) throughout the state to support their work, as well. The Office of Child Development and Care is also working with a foundation to pilot an early care and education wage supplement.

OGS leverages other funds to ensure that MDE's early literacy coaching model is relevant for pre-K–3 teachers. An informant noted:

> We do have coaching funded through the legislature for K–3. They always forget early childhood. But we actually have been using Race to the Top [Early Learning Challenge], and now PDG-B–5 funds, to make up the difference around the literacy essentials. So, we're actually creating a community of practice for literacy—they're called early literacy coaching networks, both at the K–3 and early childhood levels. And we're trying to join them together, [which] is the ultimate goal, around literacy instruction. And we do have a coaching model that was developed that's uniform across the department for that. So, that's exciting work that's been going on around educator competence. Probably the most work that's happened in a long time.

OGS staff are working to strengthen policies to support the workforce and address the need to ensure a pipeline of high quality early care and education staff. In 2016, OGS participated in a project with national organizations to develop a comprehensive early care and education workforce framework in 2016. In 2018, OGS commissioned a study of the workforce to learn more about the opportunities and constraints facing the early educators. The report made a number of recommendations, including recruiting cultural diverse early educators, improving working conditions and salary parity in all settings, and increasing access to professional development.[lxii] As an informant stated, they "started with the early childhood workforce capacity building grants. And so, those really helped in terms of catalyzing for the department a focus on early childhood education educator workforce issues." This framework effort had a significant spillover impact in terms of rethinking and revamping teacher certification from birth through high school. However, to address this issue, they

needed to work with the Office of Educator Excellence in the Division of Educator, Student, and School Supports. OGS staff, in partnership with other colleagues, were successful in developing age-appropriate certification bands. An informant recalled:

> Because of the complex ecosystem, we were saying our K–8 elementary certificate was a fallacy. So, it was rebirthed, thankfully, to concentrate our bands from what used to be pre-K–12 into concentrated bands, restructured. We accomplished great things with emphasizing early childhood content into the pre-K–3 band. It influenced appropriate practices up through the 3–6 band and 5–9 band, thankfully. We just got, last week, our birth–K band approved by the [state] board. So, we have a brand-new certification [band]. And so, exciting times—now we're in the implementation phase.

More recently, staff from OGS Office of Preschool and Out-of-School Time Learning and the Office of Educator Excellence are working to ensure administrator credentials have sufficient early childhood content in their coursework and experience in all settings for their field work. An informant described this effort:

> We have a group right now working on administrator standards. That stakeholder group is made up of a selection of varying roles. We have some early childhood representation along with the secondary recommendations, so it's quite the range of people from the administrator programs at the college. And [we're] trying to balance all of their voices, knowing that there's also a national set of standards out there that is newer than Michigan's current set of standards. So they are currently looking through that national set of standards and thinking about the things that teachers need to know. And one of the things that has come up is the need for administrators to better understand the whole child in early childhood, better understand developmentally appropriate instruction, and also to better understand special education in the general education context. And one of the things that I do know will happen is the development of some stronger requirements around field placements for administrators. So really making sure that, because the administrator can be placed in any school setting—whether it's elementary or middle, or could be in high school—making sure that they have field experiences across that continuum before they graduate with their administrator certificate [is key], which is a shift from just the one internship experience that's generally current practice.

Using and Managing Research and Data to Improve Policy and Practice

OGS commissions a significant amount of research, particularly on the effects of the GSRP program. This is part of the culture of the program, and due in part to the prominence of the HighScope Educational Research Foundation in the state and the successful use of research on the Perry Preschool Project to justify investments in early care and education. One legacy of this culture is that OGS directors place a priority on research that emanates from research-policy partnerships. Owing to its philosophy of using "research and data for results, for program improvement," the office structures its contracts with researchers in a way that they can both influence and be informed by the research. This is a different approach from most other offices in MDE, which primarily work in partnership with a separate center for student-level data and report data but do not engage in research. The center, called the Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI), is funded by the

legislature/administration through the Department of Management and Budget annual budget. As an informant told us,

> It exists under [the] Department of Management and Budget. They house all the education data in MI. We partner with them. We don't own our own data; that's where all the student data is housed in the state. And we have a partnership with them to access all that stuff. But we have our own research agenda. Office of Great Start tends to be the office that funds research contracts for our programs. No other office does that. Everyone else just relies on CEPI to produce population-level data based on standardized tests, and they don't actually evaluate the programs because they're K–12.

Data to Inform Decisions at the State and Local Level

OGS, and specifically the GSRP, has a strong focus on using data to inform decision-making. The office therefore collects and uses data to monitor programs and track trends and make funding/allocation decisions. An informant said,

> We have the MI Student Data System that GSRP has to input all of our students into. And the end product is that that's how they [the ISDs] get their funding, for slots filled during a time period. But we are using that [MSDS] more with the new upcoming monitoring system, looking at the demographics. Not just ethnicity but where they fall in the poverty rankings, so that we can kind of start to piece out, do we think that they're really getting to the neediest kids?

GSRP programs also are required to use a program/classroom evaluation instrument and OGS staff use these data to monitor classroom quality and inform the goals of GSRP coaches. More recently GSRP has used consumer surveys to gather additional data on the qualitative aspect of program quality and parents' experiences in the program, and these data is used both at the state level and by ISD staff. An informant said,

> Now they [ISDs] are really much more centered on program quality because of our relationship and being supported. [Originally] we kind of said, "we hope you'll have the administrative stuff you have to have and we'll check periodically." But now we want to make sure this is about all of us working together on quality pieces and developing quality programs. And so this fall they did the first self-assessment survey and it was about recruitment and enrollment. Kind of what's happening out there. Not only the technical parts that we have to make sure that people get right, but how is that experience for parents? How is that a supportive experience for families? And how can it be made better? So it helps lead all of the ISDs through that examination themselves and then gives us a way to report on what is going well with that."

Challenges in the Timely Use of Data. Despite a long history and strong focus on the collection of data, OGS does experience some challenges in the timely use of data. An example was access to information from the state's kindergarten readiness assessment, which aims to provide information about what students know and can do as a means of informing short-term instructional decisions. However, providing timely access to these data required OGS to make a change in statute to ensure that state and local administrators could access it, as an informant said:

> What we have learned over the last year that has been frustrating, in Michigan, is that we have data galore, but we don't always have access to some data. So, in terms of across the continuum of early childhood…we now have a kindergarten readiness assessment, a system that's going statewide in the fall of 2020. And now we have access to that data and we're going to be able to utilize it, link it, within the GSRP. So, again, putting it Kindergarten Readiness Assessment [KRA] in my office and having it linked with GSRP, I have an ability to influence things in statute to make it [access to data] happen.

Another challenge is access to the type of data and research that influences legislators, and in turn, funding for OGS programs. Compared to education insiders, some non-education stakeholders may understand and have a preference for simple standardized test score data, as methodologically rigorous research can sometimes be perceived as "taking too long" and/or may not provide a clear answer or direction for legislators. One informant shared how he has learned to balance his approach to research and data in order to be more successful in providing legislators with the data they prefer:

> One [topic] that's been challenging for me, and frustrating at the same time, is this issue of research versus standardized population data reporting. The lay public are used to NAEP scores, are used to what we call M-STEP, which is our third grade, eighth grade reading and math standardized assessments. They're population-based, census-level data, easy to understand. You get your number, you get your percentage, and so forth. And so, although we've had success utilizing the research that's been funded since '95 on GSRP for expansion of GSRP—we've had success with the research we've used to promote summer learning loss impact and 21st Century Community Learning Centers, and so forth—it doesn't hold the weight in Michigan with our policymakers in our administration. And so, I've had to come to a different strategy on data. I had to figure out how to adapt and say, "you know what, we're going to keep going on research because that is valid, it is reliable, it is useful." But I had to find another way to utilize population census-level standardized data. And I had to figure out how to do it for GSRP and early childhood data. So, I figured out how to connect GSRP with third grade M-STEP reading assessment. I figured out how to do it, how to report on it, how to access it with our data warehouse, and that has solved many problems.

Although OGS places a priority on research, due to the constitutional Headlee Amendment that prohibits MI from requiring districts to report data unless the state funds the effort, it also needs to be deliberate in selecting the data to be collected. OGS typically builds any critical data requirements into GSRP program standards. Districts collect data on children in early elementary grades, as well. Yet, because districts are not required to report these data to the state, OGS is missing information on how children are doing once they leave the preschool program. As this informant shared:

> Districts already are required to do K–2 benchmark assessments in math and ELA in fall and spring for their own purposes of growth monitoring. But, because of the law, they're not required to report it [to the state]. So, we could have a much more robust data profile on children that also could help in Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS) from pre-K all the way to third grade.

Collaborating to Strengthen the Continuum of Learning

Driven by MI's Strategic Education Plan, OGS is focused on alignment within the continuum of learning. The office's expertise related to this topic is viewed as an asset. An informant noted:

> I think here in this department, what our priorities are seem to get set by what we call the corner—which is the sup[erintendent]'s office up here on the fourth floor. So, by having the three priorities—we have the P–8 priority, the Whole Child, and then the Early Literacy—I think that has really helped. Because it's often people from the Office of Great Start who can step forward and give examples of how our work is connected or supports, whereas other offices seem to struggle with, "how are we connected to P–8?" or "how are we connected to the Whole Child?"

Given the scope and structure of OGS and the division within which it is housed, directors are attuned to identifying areas of alignment and coherence across policies and programs birth through age 8 and beyond. An informant reflected that

> when you're talking the mixed delivery system, it's much broader than just simply education; [it's] in terms of mental health and child welfare and housing and transportation. My goal is that if you want a coordinated system, you need all of those services that families who have young children touch in order to really realize the goal of the whole child and the whole family.

As a result, depending on the initiative or program, OGS office directors and their staff work with other agencies. For example, the Office of Child Development and Care works closely with many divisions within the MI Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), and staff from that agency often sit on OGS advisory or other teams. Similarly, the director of the Office of Early Childhood Development and Family Education works with staff in other agencies, including the DHHS Bureau of Maternal and Child Health around home visiting and children's mental health services and the Children's Trust Fund on social-emotional learning. An informant noted that although one of their goals was for children to be born healthy, they do not have direct control over all the factors impacting this metric. As a result, such collaboration is essential:

Born healthy, there's so much more dealt with over in Human Services, in other parts of government that have more impact. We can have some impact because we have to think holistically. We do have teen mothers. We do have teen fathers. We do have to think about born healthy from a holistic point of view. But, at the same time, we are not the primary influencer on that. However, we can be a partner too. We are a key partner in the Michigan Maternal Infant Health Equity Plan through 2023. DHHS is the lead partner. But our director of the Office of Health and Nutrition Services is our department's key point person to the DHHS for it. She interfaces with me, as I'm the lead for the prenatal through age 8 priority. She is the whole child priority lead for the department. And so, there's integration there and as a department we understand, although we're not lead on that, we have a vested interest in that because they are our future children in the education system.

OGS structure and scope also undergirds and drives work on the broader early care and education system. Internally, the Great Start Operations Team represents OGS directors and other staff working to implement state policy at the local level, and to support coherent

policy implementation across OGS offices, state departments, and in the field. An informant said,

> To be able to have that infrastructure in place and have that leadership in place absolutely is amazing with the GSOT—the Great Start Operations Team—to help model a more cohesive system starting at the top. We pride ourselves that we have connected with some unusual partners around substance abuse and really encourage that the table broadens as well, inclusive of looking at different funding sources and how things are supported.

More recently, due to the federal PDG B–5 grant, OGS is working to strengthen the continuum of learning for children from birth to age 3. An informant noted,

> I have been an advocate for the last two years to start a greater investment in prenatal through age 3. And so, I stand side by side with my CDC director, with ECE&FE director, to say, "we need greater investment in putting as much structure in place and systems resources in place that we've put in pre-K on the P–3 mixed delivery system. That continuity of care piece is terrible. And it's not helpful for the family or for the children." So, that is one of the biggest challenges when we want to promote a B–5 mixed delivery system to meet the needs of families related to their children's development. And we're not able to do that currently.

This lack of sufficient investment impacts services for young children with special needs. For example, differences in eligibility requirements for children with special needs transitioning from IDEA Part C for infants-toddlers to IDEA Part B/619 for preschool children impact whether children are served in natural environments, especially given the lack of high-quality programs for 3-year-olds. An informant noted,

> We know there is a massive hole between infant-toddler programming and pre-K. That year of 3-year-olds that children are 3, whether it be Early On when they age out, and then they age out at 3 but they can't start the program until 4. Or they're 3-years-9-months. That nine-month hole gap, that's a huge problem. The stop in delivery of services.

The Office of Early Childhood Development and Family Education is charged with developing supports for families, including parent leadership, in partnership with other offices in MDE and state agencies. The Family Engagement Framework effort is a cross-divisional effort across the MDE to develop and roll out a P–20 framework for supporting educators and providers in promoting families as partners in their child's education. The Parent Leadership in State Government is a specific effort through Early On and home visiting to support and empower parents in early childhood programs. An informant described this effort:

> We have a Parent Leadership in State Government effort that we make financial contributions toward, so that there's a specific curriculum that's available to have parents at the table. We maintained that throughout our model of Race to the Top [Early Learning Challenge] and into our [Great Start] Collaboratives. And now, with PDG B–5 we are doing some more work in that area. We will be evaluating and creating a curriculum about not just Parent Leadership in State Government, but how could that curriculum also be more useful at the local level.

At the local ISD level, our informant noted areas of weakness and areas of strength in aligning the systems of early care and education. She indicated there is more work to be done to ensure alignment across the preschool into kindergarten years, particularly in building bridges between the community-based preschool programs and schools. There were strong efforts to connect early learning with resources for families and the community. An informant noted:

> Through the Trusted Advisor's grant that we received, we've been doing a lot of work with the Arabic population in our county [with] Reach Out and Read. Doing more by trying to reach those hard-to-reach families with literacy materials and looking at some different cultural awareness pieces. We have [also] been working with the county DHHS and the superintendent and law enforcement with the Handle with Care initiative that is happening in MI. That's where, if law enforcement is involved with a family outside of school hours, that they are letting school districts know. They send a Handle with Care notice, and it's just giving them [the schools] the child's name and that the school should handle that child with care the next day. So it's kind of taking those different pieces that wouldn't fall under only early education, but other pieces within the community, and putting those systems together.

Efficiently Managing Public Resources

OGS monitors funds for all major programs serving children and families, including the state funded GSRP and federal funds for 21st Century Community Learning Centers out-of-school time learning, child care quality, home visiting, and early intervention and early childhood special education. OGS has an Administrative and Fiscal Unit, with dedicated auditors and analysts who are responsible for allocations of funds to ISDs and other grantees, as well as fiscal grant monitoring. However, OGS leaders are still working to ensure efficient processes to manage the myriad of federal, state, and private funds. An informant recalled that,

> We constructed this idea, years ago, that a centralized fiscal unit would help to make efficiencies across all of OGS and the entity would report directly to the [OGS] deputy [superintendent], but would have indirect [access] to all the directors and support our staff. In theory, that was logical. But it does require greater interaction, and that is not efficient. So, this is an area that we struggle with organizationally—it's a challenge and it's one that we work through.

Depending on how the money flows to local districts and program requirements, oversight varies. ISDs must adhere to the program requirements for financial monitoring, and OGS staff believe it is very effective. An informant noted,

> In terms of ensuring not only are budgets approved, [education consultants] ensure are they submitted on time, do they reconcile to approvable things…and then, ultimately at the end of the year, the final expenditure reports are submitted and are approved. And then [they] turn it over to our auditing staff that we have. They do audits. Do corrective action plans. We have a whole system. I've had this in place for quite a while. I put it in place when I became a manager, but it's in place for 21st Century and GSRP.

The GSRP program requires ISDs to blend and braid federal Head Start dollars that flow through to their districts or the community agencies they subcontract with for preschool programs. OGS has developed resources and guidance for ISDs on blending and braiding and also on sharing administrative structures in order to reduce costs and increase efficiency. The local ISDs bear much of the administrative burden of blending funds, and depending on their size and structure, this could take a lot of their time. An informant said,

> Because of the size of our ISD, I do the budgeting for Head Start and GSRP. I do spend a lot of time on resources and budgeting and fiscal. But there are times when I feel like I spend a lot of time in that area where I could be doing other things, maybe more outreach in the community, looking—working with other programs in the community. So it's something on the radar to look at and to try to see if we can't work on that a little bit.

The Office of Child Development and Care manages the federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) block grant that is split across the two agencies because DHHS is responsible for eligibility and licensing. This requires the director of that office to have sufficient staff to monitor the federal funds and to ensure coordination with DHHS. However, OGS is not responsible for fiscal monitoring of CCDF funds at the local level. The director of the Office of Child Development and Care noted she spent a lot of her time managing federal funds, responding to legislative questions about the funds, and determining policy with DHHS on using the funds. Her office also manages the blending of Head Start and Child Care Development Funds for the Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership grants, working with local grantees. The director worked with the Head Start Association to respond to the needs of grantees to provide more flexibility to ensure the funds were efficiently administered. She said that,

> The place where we've actually found success was the Early Head Start Child Care Partnerships. We have seven grantees here in Michigan with a pretty significant amount of funding. That was really rocky at first. There could have been a lot of things that were improved when those grant applications went out. The Head Start Association had some conversations with the regional office and decided we would enter into partnerships with those grantees that allowed them to utilize CCDF funding differently for the partnerships. And we've been on a much better path since that's happening and programs are really figuring out how we can make that work.

Conclusion

OGS, while evolving over time in scope, authority, and auspice, is best known for implementing the high-quality GRSP. Driven by the foresight of former Governor Snyder, OGS has had a consistent focus on the whole child, and how education, care, and health impact a child's success in school. This has allowed OGS to focus both on the alignment of programs and services within MDE, from prenatal to college and career, and to play a key role across agencies in building an early care and education system. The ongoing focus on early learning in MDE's Top 10 in 10 Strategic Education Plan and priorities, and the opportunity given to OGS staff to influence these goals, has helped to solidify early childhood education as a core education function in MDE. The more recent placement of OGS in the Division of P–20 System and Student Transitions affords OGS a core role in the

organizational structure of MDE, that also allows the office to connect and strengthen coherence across MDE's programs and initiatives.

OGS has benefitted from strong leaders and highly capable staff members, who are highly valued by senior leaders and called on nationally to share their experiences and insights. The deputy superintendent recognized the types of skills needed to lead programs in OGS, stating, "I would recommend a strong leader with a systems view and a systems lens and systems experience." This belief serves almost as a motto for how staff work together to collaborate on initiatives and with other partners externally to drive systems change.

Though many factors play a role in OGS's success, a critical contributor is its long-standing focus on using research and data to drive policy, inform practice, and advocate for funding. OGS has invested in research to provide data on the current strengths and weaknesses of the system and to engage stakeholders in identifying priorities and recommendations to guide its work. OGS staff members, across offices, are focused on guiding program quality for each of the programs they oversee, and in turn, shaping instructional quality. OGS staff members, in partnership with other offices in MDE and across agencies, know that teacher and administrator competence is perhaps one of the most important factors driving students' experiences. And as members of a public agency managing significant federal, state, and private resources, OGS staff have set up fiscal policies and practices to ensure accountability and efficiency in the flow of funds to local programs.

V. A Case Study of the Effectiveness of the New Jersey Department of Education, Division of Early Childhood Education

Katherine Hodges, Tracy Jost, and Kaitlin Northey

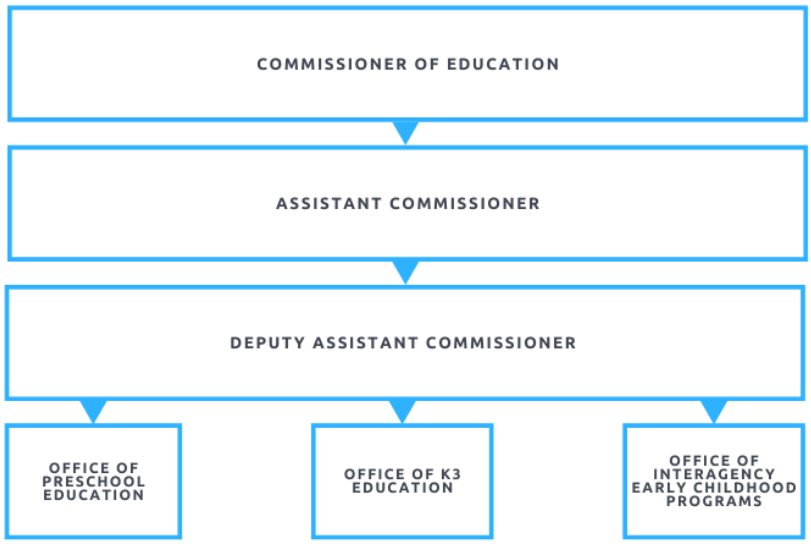
Overview of the Division of Early Childhood Education

The Division of Early Childhood Education and Family Engagement (DECE) is the lead office for state-funded preschool in NJ. It also oversees educational programming in kindergarten through third grade. DECE is one of six main divisions within the Department of Education (DOE), along with Executive Services, Finance, Academics and Performance, Student Services, and Field Services.[lxiii]

Staff and Organizational Structure

DECE is headed by an assistant commissioner who reports directly to the commissioner of education. the assistant commissioner leads the three program offices in the division: The Office of Preschool Education, the Office of K–3 Education, and the Office of Interagency Early Childhood Programs (see Figure 10). The Office of Preschool Education oversees the state's three preschool funding streams: the former Abbott Preschool Program, Non-Abbott Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA), and the Early Launch to Learning Initiative (ELLI). It is responsible for pre-K expansion in the state. The Office of K–3 Education oversees kindergarten entry assessments and standards, kindergarten through grade three implementation guidelines, and other supports and trainings for districts. The Office of Interagency Early Childhood Programs was not staffed at the time of our study. In addition to the program offices, DECE houses the Office of Head Start Collaboration and the NJ Council for Young Children.

Figure 10. Division of Early Childhood Education in NJ (2020)



History of the DECE

Preschool[lxiv] in NJ began in 1988 with Prekindergarten for Urban Children (later named Good Starts or GoodStarts), a small pilot program that served 2,300 low-income 3- and 4-

year-olds annually until it was defunded around 1998.[lxv] In 1996, the Comprehensive Education Improvement and Financing Act of 1996 (CEIFA) included funding for Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA), which funded early childhood programming (full-day kindergarten and half-day preschool) in districts with high concentrations (over 20%) of children eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch (FRPL).[lxvi] In 2002, 101 ECPA districts funded preschool programs. The state mandated half-day programs, but some districts elected to use local funds to extend the program to a full day.

In the 1998 *Abbott v. Burke* ruling, the NJ Supreme Court mandated access to preschool programs for all 3- and 4-year-old children residing within the state's poorest school districts.[lxvii] In addition to requiring access, the court case mandated high-quality elements of the program, including a maximum class size of 15 students with two teachers (a highly trained lead teacher with a bachelor's and certification and an assistant teacher), a research-based comprehensive curriculum, the use of a continuous quality improvement system, and support services for children and families. The ruling also stated that school districts could contract with existing early childhood programs in the community, including Head Start and private providers, which opened the door for the mixed delivery system and coordination with the Department of Human Services used in NJ today. This ruling was critical in solidifying preschool as a permanent fixture in the state.

Shortly after the *Abbott v. Burke* ruling, the NJ DOE formed a Division of Early Childhood Education under the direction of an assistant commissioner for early childhood education to oversee the implementation of the Abbott Preschool Program and to provide guidance for districts implementing the ECPA program. In 2002, the division was renamed the Office of Early Childhood Education (OECE) and administratively placed within the Division of Assessment. The OECE was led by an assistant to the commissioner who was a member of the senior staff. In the early 2000s, at its peak, staffing consisted of three managers, 20 education program specialists, and three support staff.

In 2008, DECE was reinstated as a stand-alone division within the department, with an assistant commissioner who oversaw both DECE and the Division of Assessment. At this time, the office was expanded to include K–3, creating two distinct offices within the division: The Office of Preschool Education and the Office of Kindergarten to Third Grade Education. The intent was to extend the quality of early childhood education in the state beyond preschool, into the early elementary years, but the effort was inhibited by a lack of staffing and expertise. In 2011, under new leadership, DECE was reorganized again and became a part of the Division of Teaching and Learning. At that time, the head of DECE was no longer an assistant commissioner or part of senior staff.

In early 2018, Governor Phil Murphy took office and preschool expansion was one of his priorities. In 2019, DECE was administratively placed within the Division of Teaching and Learning to become a stand-alone division, with an assistant commissioner and deputy assistant commissioner (see Figure 10). This shift was widely advocated for during the Chris Christie administration (2010–2018) but did not receive traction until Governor Murphy took office. The commissioner of education appointed the senior policy advisor for Governor Murphy as the assistant commissioner to oversee DECE. The combination of elevating DECE to a stand-alone division in conjunction with bringing in an assistant commissioner with close ties to the governor's office elevated the visibility of the division.

DECE Funding

Like other divisions within the department, DECE does not have a dedicated funding stream or an annual operating budget. To receive funding for new positions, promotions, or to fill vacant positions, the assistant commissioner of DECE must send requests to the chief of staff (COS) and chief financial officer (CFO) of the department. The DOE makes recommendations on behalf of all divisions within the department and sends them to the office of the governor for review and approval. Similarly, other requests, such as money for attending conferences, office supplies, or technology, must also be run through the COS and CFO. There is currently nothing in code or statute that addresses preschool staffing at the department level. There is no requirement for additional staff as the program continues to expand.

During the early 2000s, funding for DECE came out of a two percent allocation from the full Abbott PK–12th grade budget. With these funds, the head of DECE, with approval of the assistant commissioner and the commissioner, could hire staff and was able to provide professional development, not only for district personnel, but for the three managers and 20 education program development specialists. In 2004, NJ introduced a third preschool funding stream, the Early Launch to Learning Initiative (ELLI), intended to increase access for 4-year-olds residing outside of the Abbott districts. ELLI was developed with the goal of enrolling children from diverse backgrounds within the same district. ELLI funds creatively used different funding streams to support the program and the children it served: children from low-income families were funded with state dollars, middle- and/or high-income children were funded by parent tuition or local dollars, and special education children were funded with IDEA, Part B dollars. The maximum class size was capped at 20 students, with two teachers. ELLI is the smallest of NJ's programs, enrolling fewer than 1,000 students each year since its creation. The program was developed with the intention of expansion, but those plans were derailed.

In 2008, the court approved the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA), which overhauled how school funds were distributed, maintaining the former Abbott districts special status. The focus of SFRA was on matching state funding to individual student need as well as to the local tax base. This targeted funding included expansion of preschool at the quality standards set by the Abbot program to districts at the next tier of high concentrations of low-income children. The Great Recession and the election of a governor who was not as invested in pre-K resulted in the pre-K funding not being appropriated until 2017.

Annually since then, NJ has expanded pre-K in accordance with the high-quality Abbott Preschool Program requirements. Existing ECPA and ELLI districts were eligible for this funding for serving more children and for meeting the more rigorous standards, in addition to new districts with a high concentration (20% or more) of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. During the 2018–19 school year, 52,553 students were enrolled in state-funded preschool, of which 88% were in either the (former) Abbott Preschool Program or in expansion classrooms, 11% in ECPA classrooms, and one percent in ELLI classrooms.

Federal Grants

NJ has received all major early childhood federal funding awards in the last decade. In December 2013, it was one of six states to receive Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) funding during the third and final round.[lxviii] The state was awarded $44.3 million to be used between 2014–2017. The NJ Department of Education was the lead agency on this grant but

included three other state agencies as partners: the Department of Human Services (DHS), the Department of Children and Families (DCF), and the Department of Health (DOH).[lxix]

In December 2014, shortly after receiving RTT-ELC funding, NJ was one of 13 states that was awarded a Preschool Development Grant–Expansion, commonly referred to as a Preschool Expansion Grant (PEG).[lxx] This award totaled approximately $17.5 million annually for the following four years to serve 4-year-olds. Sixteen[lxxi] school districts received these federal funds to expand high-quality pre-K programs or start new programs.

In addition, in 2018 NJ received the one-year Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B–5) initial grant award for $10.6 million. This grant was intended to "fund states to conduct a comprehensive statewide birth through five needs assessment followed by in-depth strategic planning, while enhancing parent choice and expanding the current mixed delivery system consisting of a wide range of provider types and settings, including child care centers and home-based child care providers, Head Start and Early Head Start, state pre-kindergarten, and home visiting service providers across the public, private, and faith-based sectors."[lxxii] The following year, NJ applied for and received the PDG B–5 renewal grant to implement the strategic plans developed during the one-year planning grant period. NJ was awarded almost $11.2 million annually for the next four years.[lxxiii] The NJ Department of Children and Families (DCF) took the lead on both of these grants but worked in close partnership with DOE, DHS, and the NJ Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DOL).

State Child Demographics

Figure 11 provides basic demographic data on NJ's young children. Less than 20 percent of children under age 5 are Black and 67 percent of children are White. About 70 percent of children under age 5 are non-Hispanic, and approximately 17 percent of children are living in poverty.

Figure 11. NJ DEMOGRAPHIC DATA (2019)

- 521,718 children under 5
- Race breakdown
  - 67% White
  - 17% Black/African American
  - 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native
  - 10% Asian
  - 5% Two or more races
- Ethnicity breakdown
  - 30% Hispanic
  - 70% Non-Hispanic
- 17% of children under 5 live in poverty (<100% FPL)

Indicators of NJ Preschool's Effectiveness

Figure 12 notes that NJ met an average of eight NIEER quality standard benchmarks during the 2018–19 school year.[lxxiv] However, the preschool program standards in NJ exceed these benchmarks in specific policies by requiring P–3 teacher certification in all settings with pay parity, providing a full six-hour school day for two years of preschool and setting a

maximum class size of 15. These additional standards are reflected in NJ fully meeting 13 and partially meeting two of the Essential Elements of High-Quality Preschool. As preschool in NJ expands, districts are required to follow these same high-quality standards. Additionally, a longitudinal study of the former Abbott Preschool Program has shown consistent positive outcomes for children who attended the program compared with those who did not attend and those attending for two years as compared to one year generally gaining twice as much.[lxxv] The most recent analyses show benefits in all subjects assessed through 11th grade with consistent reductions in grade repetition and special education placement.[lxxvi]

Figure 12. NJ state-funded preschool programs

- Three preschool funding streams:
  - Abbott Preschool Program
  - Non-Abbott Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA)
  - Early Launch to Learning Initiative (ELLI)
- Met an average of at least 8 NIEER quality standards benchmarks since the 2001–02 school year
- State spending per child ranked 2nd in the nation, at $13,172
- 20% of 3-year-olds and 30% of 4-year-olds (52,553 children) attended
- Abbott Preschool Program fully met 13 and partially met 2 of the 15 Essential Elements for High-Quality Pre-K
- Longitudinal studies shows benefits into high school for children who attended Abbott Preschool Program

FINDINGS

Research Question 1: What are the Structural and Organizational Capacities of DECE?

As part of the interviews we conducted, we asked about the structural and organizational capacities of DECE. Questions helped us learn how the SOEL defines its authority, develops its goals and strategic plans, and operates as part of the system. DECE oversees educational programming for children from preschool through third grade. Our analysis of the data suggests that the division places a high premium on inter-agency collaboration and, despite limited staffing, prioritizes direct interactions with districts to ensure quality programming. While the division spans preschool through third grade, the majority of staff members oversee the state's expanding pre-K program.

Authority and Current Staffing Levels

When this study was conducted in the fall of 2019, DECE was led by an assistant commissioner who reported directly to the commissioner of education and was staffed by an additional 13 individuals, including a deputy assistant commissioner. The deputy assistant commissioner is responsible for overseeing the Office of Preschool Education, the Office of K–3 Education, and the Office of Interagency Early Childhood Programs.

There are six staff members in the Office of Preschool Education. As noted above, this office oversees the state's three preschool funding streams: the former Abbott Preschool Program, ECPA, and ELLI. It is also responsible for pre-K expansion in the state. The office is headed by a director who supervises five education program development specialists, each of whom works directly with the districts in implementing the program. At the time of our study, there were four education program development specialists employed by the DOE and a fifth who was on loan from a school district. At its peak in the early 2000s, the office overseeing preschool education had 26 staff members to facilitate the required rapid expansion of the preschool program from 1999 to 2005. In later sections of this report, DECE staff discuss the challenges of having only six individuals overseeing programming for over 50,000 children, particularly as the preschool education programs continue to expand throughout the state. This reduction in staff is consistent with reductions across all NJ state agencies during this time frame.

There are four staff members in the Office of K–3 Education, which has been consistent since its creation in 2008. The director position was vacant at the time of our study, but one member of the team served as the acting manager at the time of the study (currently he is the manager). An additional two education program development specialists served as content-matter experts in literacy within the office, while a third specialist was the parent and family engagement coordinator. While K–12 standards are overseen by the Division of Academics & Performance, DECE staff were instrumental in the development of the early grades standards. They also developed the *New Jersey Kindergarten Implementation Guidelines* in 2011 and the *First through Third Grade Implementation Guidelines* in 2015. The office provides technical assistance on the guidelines to districts across the state. It also works to strengthen transitions between kindergarten through third grade, improve the district self-assessment process, and, in conjunction with other divisions within the department, to strengthen alignment of K–3 assessments.

There was to be an additional individual who worked in the Office of Interagency Early Childhood Programs, but that position was vacant. The Head Start Collaboration coordinator reports directly to the deputy assistant commissioner and is funded with federal funds. Because NJ uses a mixed delivery system, the position sits within DECE and oversees any district that contracts with a Head Start agency. In addition to overseeing these collaborations, the coordinator is involved in all aspects of Head Start and Early Head Start within the state.

Goals and Strategic Planning

The goals of DECE are developed by division leadership, shared with staff for feedback, and are aligned with the governor's priorities. The DECE website lists six goals for preschool through third grade:

1. Develop and align program standards, teaching, learning, and resources anchored to best practice and current research on early childhood development and learning.
2. Develop guidance, modules, and other materials designed to facilitate the implementation of each component of high-quality development and learning programs for children from birth through third grade.
3. Track, reflect, and adjust implementation procedures to improve outcomes.
4. Build capacity to maximize the relationship with families to promote development and learning in all areas.

5. Enrich services by expanding and including the voices of diverse stakeholders.
6. Provide regional and on-site support to strategic staff who facilitate relevant information to local educators.[lxxvii]

A fundamental part of the culture and history of DECE is direct work with districts to support effective implementation, particularly for the preschool program. In recent years, limited staff capacity has meant less frequent visits to districts and less of the type of meaningful relationship staff members would like to have in support quality improvement. One respondent said,

> One of the goals [our staff has] is how to make meaningful connections with the [now] 205 districts providing preschool, with a limited staff. What are the most effective and meaningful ways to do that, so that we can provide guidance to them, they can ask questions, we can give that support, so that we can ensure that it is a quality program? We need to look at how to provide those supports and to build the relationships.

One major goal set forth by Governor Murphy's administration is the expansion of high-quality pre-K education to all children in the state. This goal is mirrored in Commissioner of Education Lamont Repollet's NJDOE 2.0 initiative, which implements the governor's education priorities, including to "'expand access to pre-K for everyone.'"[lxxviii] Once funding is included in the state budget for the next fiscal year, DECE is tasked with getting the funds to school districts and ensuring that they implement their programs in accordance with the required standards and guidance. Many of our respondents echoed that expanding pre-K in the state was one of the key goals of the office.

Since taking office in 2018, Governor Murphy and his administration have included $80 million in expansion funding that was adopted by the legislature. The commissioner of education and the staff of DECE determine the process for distributing funds, with approval and oversight from the governor's office. The competitive application process is open to districts with high concentrations (over 20%) of students that are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Districts apply for funding and are encouraged to serve all students in their district. Despite ensuring that districts who receive funding have a high concentration of students from low-income households, it is up to the individual districts to target low-income students when they fill programs. One of DECE's outstanding goals is to collect local data on which children are being served to ensure equitable access to the program. One respondent said:

> We choose the communities who are eligible to apply based on their free and reduced lunch [rates] because we [want to] target the kids that are most at need. We are working with Head Start because we know they are serving our neediest families and children. [The commissioner] wanted us to really, to start looking at our work through the equity lens to ensure we are meeting the needs of all students in these communities.

How DECE Operates as Part of the System

Interagency Collaboration. Preschool through third grade education is housed within DECE, but many other aspects of early childhood education are housed outside of the DOE in the Department of Human Services (DHS) or in the Department of Children and Families (DCF).

DHS oversees Grow NJ Kids, the state's quality rating and improvement system (QRIS), child care subsidies, Child Care Development Fund/Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (CCDF/TANF), and wraparound care, among other aspects of care, whereas DCF oversees child care licensing, home visiting, child welfare, and foster care, among other things. Because these agencies oversee crucial aspects of the early childhood system, inter-agency collaboration is critical.

In 2011, NJ applied for the first round of federal Race to the Top (RTT) funding but did not receive the award. Losing this award highlighted the lack of collaboration between agencies that oversaw early childhood programming. One respondent described it as a wake-up call that highlighted the need to develop formal structures for collaboration:

> In the first round for a Race to the Top grant—we didn't win. And I think we should not have—because we weren't ready. When the second-round opportunity came, I called [my counterpart in the other agency] and I said, "We don't even know what each other does. So, that's why we didn't get that grant. And I think that was a blessing in disguise because we just would have failed. It would not have been a good opportunity. Why don't we pull everybody together, start meeting on a regular basis, and then start talking about what our plans would be?"

As a result, the agencies created the Interdepartmental Planning Group (commonly referred to as the "IPG"). The IPG consists of directors, assistant commissioners, and deputy assistant commissioners from the DCF, DHS, DOH, and DOL. The group meets monthly to discuss policies and programs impacting children ages birth to age 5 in the state. Additionally, they work together to share resources. When the opportunity arose in 2013 to apply for a second round of Race to the Top funding, the IPG was ready. With the DOE as the lead agency, the agencies put together a comprehensive application that detailed their formal collaboration and were awarded $44.3 million in federal grant funds to improve the quality of programs for children from birth to age 8.

Five years later, when the Administration for Children and Families announced another competitive federal grant, the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B–5), IPG was once again ready to apply. At the time of the announcement, the state's DCF had the staffing to handle the award, so DCF became the lead agency, with strong support from DECE, and the larger DOE, as well as DHS and DOL.

Collaboration with Districts. DECE staff in the Office of Preschool Education are seen as partners with the districts, coaching to improve program quality and providing opportunities for technical assistance. They place a premium on building strong relationships with districts. Though their limited staffing inhibits proactive visits to districts, they still try to build strong relationships with district personnel to support quality improvement. As an informant noted:

> The visits are all a part of relationship building. And I think it makes it easier when you're trying to make recommendations and strategies, when you're trying to find supports for districts and help them network, helping them to understand that quality takes time, it takes a team effort, getting the leadership, classroom teachers, [coaches], all of these comprehensive pieces and components of our state-funded program on board, the site visit helps.

In addition to providing technical assistance and professional development, Education Program Development specialists oversee the continuous quality improvement system, which includes monitoring districts' annual planning documents and self-assessments (Self-Assessment Validation System, or SAVS). Each year, districts must submit a program plan and budget for the upcoming school year that details the financial aspects of the preschool program as well as the programmatic aspects such as plans for professional development, inclusion, curriculum and assessment, parent engagement, support for English language learners, and community and family engagement. The specialists review these documents to ensure that each district is meeting the program requirements. Each former Abbott Preschool Program and programs in charter schools must use the SAVS to evaluate the quality of its program, though preschool programs supported with other funds are not required to do so. Specialists review these documents and work individually with district personnel to target areas in need of improvement.

The Office of K–3 Education also works closely with district personnel, providing technical assistance on the kindergarten and first through third grade implementation guidelines. At the time of our study, the office was also working to develop a K–3 SAVS to align with the required Pre-K SAVS. One respondent explained the process of developing the K-SAVs and the role of the office:

> The structure we're going to have is critical friends' networks, where the participating districts will be able to talk with each other. We see our role as being like a guide to help them to move forward—once they take that document, the K to 3 SAVS, and really analyze it and have those in-depth discussions at the district, then we could ask them to have those critical friends' networks, but also involve us in the process.

Research Question 2: What Conditions Enable NJ DECE to Be Effective?

This research question focused on the contextual conditions that impact the effectiveness of the SOEL. Conditions may include political and public will, leadership and staffing, and other contextual factors of effective state offices of early learning. NJ has a history of strong political and public support for early childhood education.

Political Will

In the years since the 1998 *Abbott v. Burke* ruling, gubernatorial support for expanding pre-K has waxed and waned. Legislative support for preschool was strong during the first 10 years after the ruling,[lxxix] but dipped following the Great Recession during the Christie administration (2010–2018). Preschool funding remained stable possibly because the Court order required it. Despite a lack of gubernatorial support, during Governor Christie's last year in office the state legislature added a $25 million-line item for Preschool Education Expansion Aid (PEEA) to the FY 2018 budget, which started Preschool Expansion in the state.

Support and funding for preschool has grown since Governor Murphy was elected. Over the last three years, the governor and legislature have included $80 million in expansion funding for districts that were previously partially funded using ECPA and ELLI funding or districts who previously did not receive any state funding for preschool. Additionally, in 2019, the DOE determined that PEEA would no longer be a one-year grant, but rather, once a district

received Preschool Education Aid (PEA) funding, it would be rolled into the state funding formula. This shift meant that the state would fund these districts to expand annually until they serve at least 90% of their universe[lxxx] of 3- and 4-year-olds.

In his February 2020 fiscal year budget address (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic), Governor Murphy announced $83 million for preschool expansion, including $25 million that would be available for new districts to implement the program. Despite across-the-board cuts and a state budget crisis, Governor Murphy kept $10 million in the state budget for preschool expansion to new districts, which was passed by the legislature. In December 2020, 10 new districts received funding for their pre-K programs.

Public Will

In NJ, advocacy groups like The Advocates for Children of NJ (ACNJ), Pre-K Our Way, and others play a role in expanding access to and improving the quality of state-funded preschool. ACNJ works in conjunction with DECE, and as ACJN staff said they "support the work of the division and as critical partners in talking about issues to improve their functioning [and to] play a connecting role to the community who are actually implementing [the preschool program]." ACNJ described this relationship as "mutually supportive," "collegial," and a strong partnership:

> [We] have been working with the division for more than 20 years; there are times that we are on different sides or we may disagree, but both sides want the same thing. And it may look different, how we think we should get there, but…we work together. So there's a level of trust.

Rather than focus on occasional differences of approach, ACNJ and DECE work collaboratively to expand high-quality early childhood education.

In collaboration with NIEER, ACNJ also plays a pivotal role in supporting pre-K expansion across the state by providing technical assistance for new districts as they apply for funding to implement the program. As an ACNJ informant said,

> I do think it helps—it's not only just the capacity, although I think we are filling a role, along with NIEER, to kind of strengthen the capacity that the division doesn't have, but I also think it's a nice partnership because we bring a different perspective. NIEER brings a lot of skill in terms of working with districts around doing their proposals, doing their budgets, and I think we bring an advocacy perspective that helps districts focus on kids and also stresses the importance of the relationships to make this happen. So I think we've strengthened the capacity, but we also add a piece that is a little different. I think it's been a great partnership.

While DECE oversees the competitive application process, ACNJ and NIEER work with individual districts that are applying, in conjunction with the DOE, to ensure that they understand and are prepared to meet the requirements for the preschool program. This relationship and collaboration are also valued by senior leadership within the DOE, according to one informant:

> One of the things that I think we've gotten very good at, that we'll have to continue to get better at, is being supportive of and working very closely with our partners out in the world. So, NIEER, ACNJ are the two that come to mind immediately, who've been phenomenal partners in terms of really working and really—I almost feel like I

> meet with them sometimes more than I've had staff meetings. But, I mean, the conversations have been extremely productive. We need our partners to be strong. And we need to be as strong and robust as we can. I think among all of us, we can construct a way to really be great at this.

In addition to working directly with the districts, ACNJ also advocates for more funding for the DOE to oversee the expanding preschool programs. Neither code nor statute provide guidance for preschool staffing in the department. As a staff person noted,

> We've advocated for funding for expansion, but we have also advocated for funding to cover the administrative costs of the division because that's an essential part of implementation, and I think in the expansion monies, that has not happened. And I think that puts the Department [of Education] and the division at a disadvantage.

ACNJ takes a partnership role with the DOE, working alongside DECE to accomplish their goals of expanding the preschool program.

Another organization that is key to the expansion of preschool programs in NJ is Pre-K Our Way. Pre-K Our Way is a single issue, privately funded group whose sole goal is to advocate for expanding access to high-quality, state-funded preschool in districts serving low-income populations. The campaign was established in 2015 by a NJ businessman who was motivated by research on the effectiveness of the former Abbott Preschool Program. He hired two lobbyists to advocate for full implementation and funding of preschool expansion as legislated in the School Funding Reform Act of 2008 (SFRA), which would expand access to pre-K for 3- and 4-year-olds in school districts with over 20% free and reduced-price lunch eligible students. The approach has been to build both public and political will through the use of billboards, advertisements, videos, and other media-centered approaches and by targeting multiple levels of influence, from grassroots campaigns in individual cities and towns to lobbying activities at the legislative and gubernatorial level.

Leadership and Staffing in DECE

Leadership in DECE is a combination of new leaders and leaders with longevity within the division. The assistant commissioner joined the DOE in 2019 after working as a senior policy advisor in the governor's office, where he advised Governor Murphy on policies related to education and workforce development. He was brought into the department to oversee the governor's birth–third grade priorities, including the expansion of high-quality preschool. Prior to working in the governor's office, this individual worked in higher education and in charter schools (K–12). His experience gives him the capacity to understand the full educational trajectory for students and aligns well with Governor Murphy's vision for a strong continuum of learning from birth to secondary education. As he noted:

> [The governor] has outlined a vision that spans pre-K expansion [to] free community college. We're talking about an education system that is going to need to graduate 100% of its kids from high school ready for some other additional formal education. What does that system look like? Well, that system needs a structure for early childhood. When you think of where the brain science is and what that means for how we are going to get kids to this end goal of, well, 100% prepared.

While the assistant commissioner is new to DECE, the deputy assistant commissioner has spent over 22 years at the DOE, 19 of which have been in DECE. This institutional knowledge and deep experience is crucial for success, as described by a senior leader:

> [The deputy assistant commissioner] knows this environment far better than maybe anybody I've met to date. She understands the department and she understands this area of education very, very well, in the technical details of it. She knows the trees and the forest and can help make sure that we stay grounded in the work that we're doing while we're trying to drive toward this big idea. So, I think we are a good balance of sort of mindsets. She also knows the people well. She knows the people in this department. She knows the people in our sister agencies. She knows the people…in our ecosystem and has worked with them for years. And that is an advantage.

Because of the deputy assistant commissioner's long tenure in the DOE, she has invaluable institutional knowledge about how the department and pre-K programs have evolved over the years.

The director of the Office of Preschool Education recently returned to DECE after 18 years in the field. She started at the DOE in 1998 and left in 2001 as the manager of the Division of Early Childhood Education. The director of Preschool Education fills in the practical, hands-on experience for DECE leadership team. Additional staff experience in DECE comes from a mix of subject-matter experts and former educators, and many have extended tenure within DECE. One education program development specialist in the Office of Preschool Education has been with the DOE for 19 years; another has been at the department for over 14 years, in two stints. The Head Start office coordinator has served in that position for over 14 years. The manager of the Office of K–3 Education was in the K–12 Office of STEM before shifting to the Office of K–3 Education, which provided perspective from other offices within the department.

To address staffing shortages, DECE frequently "borrows" a school district administrator or coach, who will join DECE staff on detail for a set amount of time. The school district continues to pay the individual's salary, but he or she works full time at the DOE as one of the education program development specialists. This reciprocal relationship allows the department to benefit from an administrator or master teacher's experience, while the individual gains greater knowledge and context of DECE and the state's policies to bring back to their district at the end of their detail. At the time of this study, DECE had one employee on detail from a school district.

Research Question 3: How Does NJ DECE Enact the Six Major Functions of an Effective SOEL?

Each SOEL carries out a set of functions on a daily basis to operationalize its authority (research question 1), that, together with the enabling conditions (research question 2) provides a road map for effective SOELs. Our final research question therefore explored how senior leaders and staff in the SOEL carry out six major functions of a state office of early childhood as discussed on page 9. As part of this question, we learned more about what staff do to implement programs and support quality, what they see as most important in terms of functions of an office, and what they see as the challenges in implementing policy.

Staff within DECE emphasize the importance of promoting program quality and managing public resources, two functions that directly support the high-quality requirements for the preschool program in code and guidance. Additionally, they emphasize the importance of strengthening the continuum of learning both vertically, to maintain a strong P–3 continuum, and horizontally, by coordinating and collaborating with outside agencies that also serve young children and their families.

Promote Program Quality

One of DECE's top priorities as reported by respondents is promoting program quality. Many of the preschool program standards and requirements are mandated by law and written into administrative code, including maximum class size, student-to-teacher ratios, and teacher and assistant teacher qualifications. As preschool has expanded in the state (i.e., PEA expansion), new districts are required to adhere to these requirements. Code (N.J.A.C. 6A:13A, Elements of High Quality Preschool Programs) is revised approximately every five to seven years, or whenever the former code sunsets, though major changes dictated by the 1998 Abbott v Burke court case (i.e., changing maximum class size, ratios, or teacher qualifications) must remain the same. When code is reopened, DECE engages an array of stakeholders for input and comment including district personnel (e.g., supervisors, classroom coaches), key legislators, other divisions with the DOE (i.e., Academics and Performance, Field Services), the NJ Board of Education, and the commissioner and chief of staff. To be updated, the code needs to be approved by the commissioner of education. Once new code has been approved, the education program development specialists in DECE work with districts to implement any updates.

In addition to code, NJ has two sets of guidelines that outline *how* to implement the high-quality preschool program (*Preschool Program Teaching Guidelines* and *Preschool Classroom Teaching Guidelines*). Like code, all state-funded programs must adhere to these guidelines. These guidelines are updated and cleaned up every few years by individuals within DECE. The education program development specialists then work with the districts to implement these guidelines, answering any questions that the districts may have.

Because preschool was initially implemented outside of the K–12 system, DECE also works to ensure alignment between the preschool code and the K–12 code, *New Jersey Kindergarten Implementation Guidelines*, and *First through Third Grade Implementation Guidelines*. One respondent described trying to fold two sets of expectations together:

> As we tried to clean up administrative code, we tried to make sure that things that affect kindergarten, affect preschool [too]. Or things we don't believe should affect preschool, shouldn't affect kindergarten [either]. Because, just because you magically turn 5, doesn't mean all of a sudden you should be affected by this. So, a lot of our policies we've tried to put in to affect pre-K to 5, or pre-K to 2. We really tried to keep that as one alignment.

Because much of the code is handled in other divisions within the department, this is an important, ongoing collaboration.

Guide Instructional Quality

DECE works hard to ensure high-quality instruction in the state-funded preschool programs. The foundation for this quality is the NJ *Preschool Teaching and Learning Standards*,

which outline what preschool children should be learning. The standards, developed in 2014, are currently being revised. As one informant noted:

> The standards are always the base of it. And then, one of the things we've been trying to do is look at the support districts need and [see] what's missing. One of the things we've been looking at is curriculum and we're getting ready for a curriculum review—adding new curricular opportunities into state-funded preschool.

At the time of the study, NJ had four approved curriculum models: Creative Curriculum, Tools of the Mind, HighScope, and Curiosity Corner. After conducting a review of current and potential models, DECE recently decided to phase out Curiosity Corner and approve a new curriculum, Connect4Learning.

While DECE does not provide hands-on curriculum training, all preschool teachers and assistant teachers are required to complete 100 clock hours of professional development every five years, which includes training in the district's selected curriculum model. The districts who participate in GROW NJ Kids (the state's QRIS initiative) receive free professional development. Each year districts are required to submit a program plan to the DOE that outlines the professional development opportunities that teaching staff and all individuals that interact with preschoolers (for example, nurses, family service staff, etc.) will receive in the coming year. The education program development specialists review these plans and work with the district to ensure that all staff that interact with preschoolers are trained in their selected comprehensive curriculum. DECE encourages training directly from the curriculum developer. Although the division initially provided additional funding for training, it continues to allow districts to use state funding to support these activities.

The Office of K–3 Education is also focused on promoting smooth transitions between pre-K, kindergarten, and first through third grade. Currently, the state has three sets of implementation guidelines: preschool, kindergarten, and first through third grade, which can cause inconsistencies across grade levels. To address that issue, DECE is in the process of updating the kindergarten guidelines. The Office of K–3 Education is currently focusing on strengthening the transitions between pre-K and kindergarten and kindergarten and first grade to provide a seamless educational experience for students. One way they are working to strengthen these transitions is to use an adapted version of the Preschool Self-Assessment Validation System (SAVS) in kindergarten through third grade.

Support Educator Competence

In NJ, publicly funded preschool lead teachers are required to have a minimum of a bachelor's degree and Preschool–Third Grade (P–3) teaching certification. To support these educators, the state mandates a strong coaching model that includes master teachers and preschool intervention and referral teams (PIRT). The master teacher is a classroom coach who is licensed with at least three to five years of preschool teaching experience. That person's role is to provide feedback to classroom teachers on their use of curriculum and adherence to the *Preschool Standards* through formal and informal observation, modeling, and coaching.[lxxxi] Similarly, the PIRT member coaches teachers in how to address challenging behaviors and to "deliver preschool age-appropriate services designed to decrease referrals to special education and to maximize general education classroom teachers' ability to support all students."[lxxxii] The state requires one master teacher for every 20 preschool classrooms and one PIRT member at a similar ratio (this ratio is currently

being rewritten in code). DECE strives to support educator competence by providing seminars and trainings for master teachers, PIRT members, and preschool program administrators.

To leverage and extend the divisions' staff capacity, DECE works in collaboration with other stakeholders in the state to offer these trainings. While a member of DECE is always present at the master teacher seminar, they call on experienced master teachers from local school districts to run the sessions, as explained by a DECE staff member:

> We have some districts who do things exceptionally well and we will bring them in to do the training. We will also assign a DECE staff person to be there as a support and to serve as a point person from the state. We know that districts respond better to their colleagues.

This seminar consists of nine sessions in which new master teachers are trained on coaching techniques, including using structured program evaluation instruments (e.g., ECERS-3). To preserve the coaching relationship, master teachers do not have any classroom responsibilities nor are they in supervisory roles.

DECE works in conjunction with Montclair University to provide training for PIRT members. Recently, these trainings have been provided through an online platform to make them more accessible to district personnel. Like the master teacher seminars, a member of DECE is available at each session to answer any policy-related questions that may arise.

Use of Research and Data

DECE places a high premium on using research and data to inform best practice for the pre-K programs. The division therefore collects data from the districts through their annual program plans, budget workbooks, and, in some districts, the Self-Assessment Validation System (SAVS).[lxxxiii] Additionally, DECE frequently contracts with the NIEER for classroom observation and child assessment data. Because of budgetary restraints, those data are not collected each year for every school district, so the data are used for a statewide analysis rather than district by district analysis. Districts are required to collect classroom quality data in each classroom annually to inform their own improvement plans.

The continuous quality improvement system is deeply ingrained in code and guidance for NJ's pre-K programs. Districts are required to submit budget workbooks and program plans each fall, and a portion of districts are required to submit self-assessments every spring. DECE education program development specialists carefully review each district's program plan to ensure that districts are meeting all requirements of NJ's high-quality preschool program. The plans are also used to oversee key programmatic components, including ensuring that district staff are receiving targeted professional development based on need, and that outreach and recruitment activities are targeting the most vulnerable students in the district. Simultaneously, the education program development specialists review the district's budget workbooks, which provide projected enrollment and a line-item budget that explains how the districts will be using state pre-K funding. The budgets also provide information about teacher degrees and compensation. DECE uses this information to ensure that teaching staff have the proper degrees and credentials (bachelor's degree and P–3 certification for lead teachers) and that the school districts are paying teachers according to the state's parity policies. This review process is extensive and lasts from November to

April to allow time for the specialists to review the plans and speak directly to districts should they have any questions or concerns.

While these data are valuable in terms of being able to examine projected activities, staff in DECE do not have the information on actual implementation that they would like. When needed, districts are asked to revise and resubmit their plans. One respondent explained that DECE wished it could have more information on what the districts planned for the preschool program and what they actually did:

> One of the things that we're uncovering is that they [the districts] project a year out, so I'm looking at plans for 2021, but I don't necessarily know if what they projected for the '19–'20 year is what is really happening. [Districts may say in their projected plans], we're going to get [Teaching Strategies] GOLD [child assessment] training. We're going to get training in supports for [English language learners]. And we don't, in turn, have a mechanism to see those agendas, that this was facilitated by this person for this group, and even better yet, this is how we use that information.

Whenever funding is available, DECE also contracts nearly annually with NIEER to conduct assessments of classroom quality. To date, NIEER has published three reports based on data collected for the Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study (APPLES): an *Interim Report* through kindergarten, *Preliminary Results through 2nd Grade*, and a *Fifth Grade Follow-Up*. An additional report on results through high school is set to be released in the coming months. These reports showed benefits for children who attended the preschool program over those who did not. NIEER has also conducted a number of studies in collaboration with DECE, including a validation study of Grow NJ Kids, the state's quality rating improvement system (QRIS); an evaluation of preschool self-contained classrooms; and an examination of the state's 16 federal preschool expansion grant (PEG) districts.

NIEER also conducts annual classroom assessments of classroom quality on preschool programs in each of the state's three funding streams. Staff at DECE appreciate these assessments because they provide a glimpse into what happens on a daily basis in the preschool classrooms:

> I like having the NIEER data, even if it's not a representative sample [at the district level], because it gives us something independent of what the district may be collecting on their own, through their own observations.

During the early days of Abbott Preschool implementation, the DOE formed the Early Learning Improvement Consortium (ELIC), made up of researchers from local colleges and universities, to assess the quality of the program. The ELIC published three reports evaluating the program from 2002–2005: *Inch By Inch, Row By Row, Gonna Make This Garden Grow; A Rising Tide;* and *Giant Steps for the Littlest Children*. These reports documented how classroom quality and child learning improved throughout those three years, and by 2005, "children were entering kindergarten with language and literacy skills closer to the national average than in prior years."[lxxxiv]

Continuum of Learning

DECE is working to strengthen the continuum of learning in the state, both through aligning the system of pre-K–third grade education and connecting across other agencies, divisions,

and partners to ensure a comprehensive early childhood system. DECE's role in supporting the alignment between preschool and K–12 is limited due to a combination of issues, including limited state staff, local authority, and the current rapid expansion of preschool, a priority of the governor. A respondent explained that:

> For years, early childhood was set off by itself and we went about doing our work. Having our court case kept us focused on preschool. This also had its downside, because as we were not always being more collaborative with other divisions and departments didn't always happen. The rest of the work went on in the Department [of Education] that we weren't always involved with. A lot of times we got picked up on the back end of opportunities. So, that became problematic because there wasn't a lot of continuity. We were putting out our messages, and other offices were putting out their messages, and they weren't always the same, or at least they weren't perceived as always being the same or aligned.

To help alleviate any inconsistencies in practice, DECE, especially the Office of K–3 education, is working to align learning standards, classroom guidelines, and policies from preschool to grade three:

> Now we represent preschool to third grade, but our K to three part is really about best practice within the world of standards. So, it has forced us to do more collaboration because we do collaborate on the standards. But our job is really—has been around best practice and rigor kind of coming together for a happy marriage.…Same thing with administrative code.…So, one of the things is children from pre-K to two cannot be suspended for long-term suspensions.

DECE is focusing on a "push up" approach, meaning that developmentally appropriate practices, like barring long term suspensions, are pushed into the higher grades rather than pushing practices that would not be beneficial to young students into preschool.

To promote best practice, DECE highlights school districts that manage transitions well. One respondent noted that DECE "wanted to put out best practice documents and videos that highlight districts who are doing really good work around transition, around family engagement, and we wanted to put out tools that would really help districts understand there are other ways to implement the standards and help children be ready for state testing." Additionally, the division provides training on the guidelines around how districts should be structuring their programs for K–3 students to meet the standards in a developmentally appropriate way.

In addition to strengthening vertical alignment, DECE works with other divisions within the DOE, other agencies, and external partners to strengthen the horizontal alignment of early childhood programming. Preschool is not universal in the state, so young children are served in a variety of settings before they enter the K–12 school system. In order to create a comprehensive system for young children, close collaboration between the agencies is required.

Owing to the number of agencies represented in the IPG (DCF, DHS, DOH, and DOL), this group provides a strong, unified voice for early childhood in the state. The deputy assistant commissioner explains the work that the IPG does:

> We come together on a monthly basis to talk about the work in the birth to 5 space. And trying to coordinate our resources, our efforts, and really being a unified voice of the state to say, "Hey, we're going to ensure that we don't do one thing on one side of the house that affects the other side of the house. Or if things happen, because they always do, how do we align that?" So, everywhere we would go, we would invite each other. If we got invited to be at the table, we'd say to our counterparts, you should come with us so that you get a really good understanding of what is going on, birth to 5. That became what we did. So, when we met with the governor's office, we were there together. If we happened to get invited to a meeting, we made sure, for the follow-up meeting, that other people got invited.

When discrepancies in policies across agencies arise, the IPG also serves as a way to align requirements to ensure that providers who must adhere to guidelines from multiple agencies have a clear path for compliance. One respondent provided an example to illustrate this collaborative alignment:

> When we changed the rules for lead in the drinking water, we put out one set of standards and DCF has another. DCF was coming up for renewal, so they tweaked theirs. Now DOE is coming up for renewal, going from a six-year cycle down to a three-year cycle, because we contract—a lot of our children sit in contracted Head Start providers. We want to be on the same cycle as licensing so that programs aren't doing lead testing and putting out money for something they've already done under another agency. So, we're going to move away from our six-year cycle and move to a three-year cycle so that we're in alignment with DCF.

Aligned efforts like clarifying rules and requirements for detecting lead in drinking water help to provide a more cohesive system, both for young children and for the providers that serve them.

The IPG also works strategically to place initiatives and projects into the agency that has the needed capacity, capital, and connections. If one agency is at capacity with its projects when an opportunity for federal funding arises, they look to other members of the IPG to step in and take the lead on the grant so that NJ's early childhood system as a whole benefits. Similarly, in some cases, one department may have an easier time procuring materials or services than another. If that happens, initiatives can be shifted between them to allow them to accomplish goals:

> It's also been a way for us to share resources. So, when we did our PDG grant, DHS, even though they're not the lead, they paid for the consultant. They had resources to pay for a consultant.…There's no way for us to write a grant right about now.…And we remind people, if we didn't have that relationship, I don't know what we would have done.

In addition to interagency collaboration, the pre-K program was designed to incorporate a larger system of supports for young children and their families. Districts are required to hire one family worker for every 45 children in private provider settings and one social worker per 250 children enrolled in district-operated classrooms. (Head Start programs have these supports already built into their programming.) The role of these individuals is to promote communication with families and connect families to social services and community resources. Funding for these positions is built into the state per-pupil amount. Each district

is required to have a Community and Parent Involvement Specialist (CPIS) who also is funded using state dollars. This position serves as the parent liaison and oversees the required Early Childhood Education Advisory Council (ECAC). The ECAC is a district-level advisory committee that includes community stakeholders (e.g., pediatricians, child care providers, mental health agencies, parents, local business owners, etc.) who review program implementation and support transitions from preschool to grade three.

Managing Resources

In FY 2021, DECE's Office of Preschool Education managed a Preschool Education Aid (PEA) budget of $874.2 million. NJ has set per-pupil rates, so funding is allocated by projected enrollment for the following school year. One issue that was raised by a respondent was that while DECE oversees budget projections, no one from the department currently oversees actual spending for each district, which can lead to a misuse of pre-K funding:

> We don't oversee the budgets. We approve budgets, but again, they're projections. Once we've approved the district's budget, how money is expended is not overseen by this office. And we're finding disconnects, where in our system the county offices are responsible, but only for standard things like budget transfers over a certain amount or out of instructional support into non-instructional support. How districts actually are using the dollars isn't overseen by the department.

Regarding oversight of spent funds, it is important to note that although the Office of Financial Accountability (OFAC), a separate office in the NJ DOE, conducts audits on some districts each year, the findings are always a year behind. As a result, it is difficult to take corrective action.

Conclusion

DECE has a long history, grounded in the implementation of the former Abbott Preschool Program, of overseeing high-quality programs and supporting program implementation within its districts. The functions described by DECE staff in the Office of Preschool Education and the Office of K–3 Education directly support districts as they implement comprehensive programming. Although the scope of the office includes pre-K through third grade, the majority of the work within the office, as examined in this study, is around preschool program implementation. Unlike K–3 education, DECE oversees all aspects of the pre-K program, and while it supports K–3 implementation, it does so in conjunction with other offices in the DOE.

Despite limited staffing, the Office of Preschool works closely with district personnel to ensure that all programs meet NJ's standards and guidelines. Collaboration with the districts is made more difficult during preschool expansion, as the number of districts increases, many of which have not previously implemented any type of pre-K program, let alone one with comprehensive guidelines and standards. DECE strives to overcome staffing shortages and provide the comprehensive technical assistance it aims for by "borrowing" highly qualified staff from school districts.

DECE also leverages relationships with partners, other agencies, advocacy organizations, and research organizations to conduct work that limited staffing may otherwise preclude. DECE and the DOE did not have the capacity, for example, to apply for the federal PDG B–

5 grant, but the DCF did. Through the collaboration within the IPG, NJ was awarded over $50 million in federal funding that will be used to support young children. Similarly, DECE does not have the capacity to conduct research studies to evaluate the effectiveness of the preschool program, but instead contracts with NIEER to do this work. Finally, advocates like ACNJ and Pre-K Our Way help DECE to push for preschool expansion and additional funding for the office and ACNJ has been an active partner in supporting applications for state funds. While DECE may not be able to perform all of these functions in isolation, leaders within the division have worked tirelessly to build these relationships to support programming in the state.

VI. A Case Study of the Effectiveness of the West Virginia Department of Education's Office of Early & Elementary Learning Services

Ellen Frede, Kaitlin Northey, and Katherine Hodges

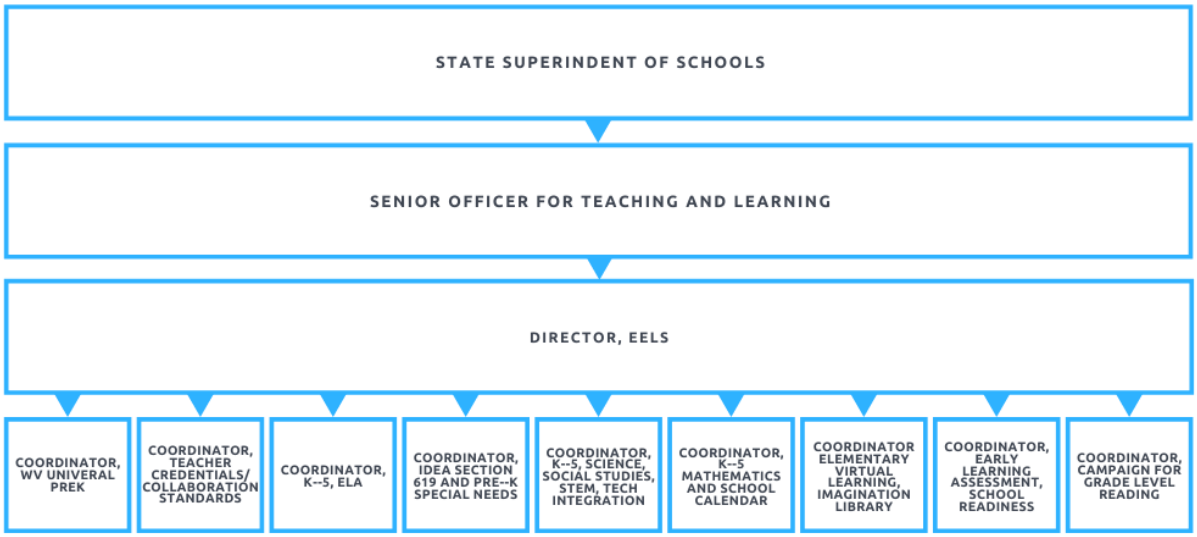
Overview of WV's Office of Early and Elementary Learning Services

Located within the Office of Teaching and Learning, the Early & Elementary Learning Services (EELS) oversees preschool through grade five programs in the WV Department of Education (WVDE). [1] The Director of EELS reports to the senior officer for Teaching and Learning and works closely with three other services teams within that division as well as multiple offices within the Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR).

Office Structure

Currently, staffing of EELS consists of nine coordinators and one program assistant who reports directly to the director (see Figure 13).

Figure 13: WV Department of Education, Early and Elementary Learning Services Organizational Chart (March 2021)



Office History

EELS was established in 2012 when the WVDE divided the K–12 office into two offices, one overseeing pre-K to fifth grade and the other sixth grade through high school, known as the Office of Middle and Secondary Learning. WV has a long history of public preschool, starting in 1983 with the Public School Early Education program, which authorized school districts to serve children prior to kindergarten. The current WV Universal Pre-K program was initiated in 2002 with a mandate to expand to full enrollment in all 55 counties by 2012

[1] Please note that the WV Department of Education changed the name of its SOEL in March of 2021. It requested that we use the new office name and the slightly revised office structure in the case study. As this does not substantively affect any of our analyses or findings, we have honored that request.

(each county is one local education agency, or LEA. A distinctive feature of the original legislation is the requirement that at least 50% of the children be served in collaborative arrangement with Head Start and child care programs and that joint oversight of the program be provided by WVDE and the DHHR.

Office Funding

With the exception of the Section 619 coordinator who is funded through federal IDEA, EELS staff is entirely funded with state dollars. State funds also support a half-time position in the Office of Special Education to oversee the Campaign for Grade Level Reading, which reports to the director of EELS for this initiative. State law constrains the WVDE to operate with a budget of no more than 1.5% of state aid, resulting in a modest discretionary operational budget for EELS of $135,000 in addition to personnel, longitudinal evaluation and Campaign for Grade Level Reading costs.

The WV Universal Pre-K program is included in the school funding formula, with district funding determined by enrollment. Our respondents believe that this funding mechanism improves sustainability and continuity of the program. State funding of $7,316 per pupil in 2018–19 was very close to that of K–12 but funding rose to $11,052[lxxxv] per pupil once contributions from Head Start, IDEA, and TANF were included.

State Child Demographics

Figure 14 provides basic demographic data on WV's young children. The majority of children are non-Hispanic White. Roughly 30 percent of children between the ages of 0 and 4 live in poverty.

Figure 14. WV DEMOGRAPHIC DATA (2019)

- 98,484 children under 5
- Race breakdown
  - 90% White
  - 4% Black/African American
  - 1% Asian
  - 5% Two or more races
- Ethnicity breakdown
  - 3% Hispanic
  - 97% Non-Hispanic
- 30% of children under 5 live in poverty (<100% FPL)

Selected Indicators of WV Universal Pre-K Effectiveness

Figure 15 notes that WV's Universal PreK program met nine out of 10 NIEER quality standard benchmarks for the 2018–19 school year. Per-pupil funding was ranked eighth, with roughly two-thirds of funding received from the state. As a universal pre-K program, funds are distributed directly to county LEAs.

Figure 15. WV Universal Pre-K Data

- Met 9 or more NIEER quality standards benchmarks each year since the 2013–14 school year
- State spending per child ranked 8th in the nation, at $7,316
- 6% of 3-year-olds and 59% of 4-year-olds (13,534 children) attended WV Universal Pre-K
- Fully met 11 and partially met 3 (1 could not be determined) of the 15 Essential Elements for High-Quality Pre-K
- Results of a longitudinal study showed positive impacts of pre-K on children's learning at K entry.

FINDINGS

Research Question 1: What Are the Structural and Organizational Capacities of EELS?

As part of the interviews conducted, we posed questions about EELS' structural and organizational capacities. These helped us team learn how the SOEL defines its authority, develops its goals and strategic plans, and operates as part of the system. Our analyses of the data for this question suggests that WV is distinctive for including the entire preschool through fifth grade continuum in its early and elementary learning services, for the long horizon built in for scale-up of pre-K, and for offering universal access to 4-year-olds. We also found a number of other distinctive, if not unique, characteristics of the administrative structure of EELS, including governance of the WV Universal Pre-K program (WV UPK).

Expanding the Authority of the Office from School Readiness to Pre-K to Fifth Grade

Initially, early learning in the WVDE was a small unit focused on school readiness, which is defined in WV as "a comprehensive approach for families, schools, and communities to work together to provide all children opportunities to succeed and become lifelong learners."[lxxxvi] The initial team administered only the state-funded pre-K program but over the years the early learning experts in WVDE successfully advocated for establishing an Office of Early Learning and, in 2017, expanding the scope of the office to include preschool through fifth grade.

During the initial pre-K expansion years, the office concentrated on supporting that expansion, which meant assisting all preschool providers (LEAs, child care, and Head Start) in understanding and implementing the regulations. It also meant developing and revising regulations. As WVDE EELS staff explained, their technical support and expertise were needed at every level, from the school board to the classroom:

> A lot of it was system building. That's where they [LEAs] were struggling. They were struggling with funding, equity, capacity. I think they had done a really, really good job of laying the foundations. But when you put pen to paper in how you carry

> out that action with 55 very, very different boards of education, a superintendent has to answer to them. We were asking them to do things that was so far out of the realm of anything they had ever experienced in K–12.

As school readiness became a clearer focus for the WVDE, the Office of School Readiness was established. One of our respondents explained that they had to help the rest of the WVDE understand early learning: "It was a full K–12 approach. If you had a math coordinator, they were going to be the expert for kindergarten through 12th grade." The small staff was successful at establishing the importance of the early years, the need for specialized knowledge of early learning and teaching, and the value of a comprehensive approach necessary in early education. An informant noted,

> We really got folks in that K–12 world to realize what we were doing down here in the early childhood world was much more than just working with 4-year-olds and ensuring that they had a quality classroom. They didn't realize how comprehensive the early childhood pieces were. So here all of a sudden is this K–12 world seeing us bringing folks on family engagement or on social-emotional development or on health and wellness, seeing our standards written very differently. They were more comprehensive—focusing on environment and space. And it challenged a lot of them.

Expanding the Office of School Readiness into EELS P–5 resulted from a convergence of national interest in this continuum and building on the successful reputation of the WV UPK that had earned the respect of the rest of WVDE and the state leaders. An informant pinpointed the shift:

> In 2012 is when we went to the P–3 Institute at Harvard....We had every inclination that we were walking back into WV with a much bigger, bolder plan. By the time we left there, we showed up back in front of the assistant superintendent and the state board with a comprehensive early learning plan. And we actually convinced the Board of Education at that time to separate all of K–12 and that their focus on early learning needed to be P–5. They actually included fourth and fifth grade in that.

Currently, EELS shares leadership in pre-K–12 initiatives, which has often meant a push-up rather than push-down approach in P–5, resulting in a more intentional focus on the whole child into the upper grades. Our informant said,

> Things like principal academies or superintendent meetings—we weren't pushed down on the agenda anymore. We were now looked at as a full-fledged office that every elementary principal was looking to us now for guidance. They weren't looking to just this generic K–12 office. And we could take advantage of that and actually leveraged that as they wrote policy. Well, now we have somebody at the table when they're writing policy too. All of a sudden that year there's this flagship policy in West Virginia known as 2510. During that time period is the first time ever that the words "developmentally appropriate practice" were now going to be included, all the way through middle school. And for them to take some of our ideas and begin to implement them—and I want to be sensitive to social-emotional need, dispositions of learning, approaches to learning—and see them wanting to do this up through that middle school–high school level was really, really fascinating.

Goals and Strategic Plans of EELS

EELS's purpose as detailed on its website is to provide a system of support that:

- Advances a unified commitment to excellence and equity in early and elementary education;
- Establishes strong foundations for early learning from school readiness through fifth grade;
- Closes the literacy achievement gap by third grade; and
- Ensures all children are on target to achieve career and college readiness.[lxxxvii]

These EELS goals are directly derived from and link to the overall goals which guide the WVDE Strategic Plan. Developed collaboratively with the State Board of Education, the Strategic Plan is streamlined into major initiatives that all connect to the "3E's" (educational pathways, employment, and enlistment). EELS is often held up as the example of how a seemingly disconnected office can have goals that lead to attainment of the 3E's. This process and relationship are described by one WVDE leader:

> One of our big priorities for the board and the department right now, of course, is college career readiness, but there's this idea of 3Es....Everybody owns these priorities. And so, I'll bring [EELS director] to the table and say, "How does what you're doing in preschool or kindergarten or elementary ed—how is that impacting educational pathways, employment, and enlistment? You serve a role here." And by the time she's done explaining to 250 members of the Department of Education the role that pre-K plays in that, we're opening up these dialogues here to where we're all going, "whoa, wait a second." Child nutrition now is stepping in going, "wait, we play a very key role in that. If they're not healthy"—oh, wow. Here go the domino effects. Children who are hungry may have poor attendance, may have poor behavior—impacts learning. We all have these roles to play.

How EELS Operates as Part of the Larger State System

Collaboration is infused within the structure and organization of EELS, across the WVDE, across state agencies providing a model for the collaboration expected in the counties for implementing WV UPK. This emphasis on collaboration is seen throughout state government. Enhancing cross-agency systems building to increase efficiency and collaboration is a priority of the governor, who even assigned an additional leadership role in another department for a senior leader in WVDE to heighten cross-departmental understanding.

The leadership and staff within EELS clearly value collaboration as a means to improve functioning but they also see it as a necessity, given their small number of FTEs. With many initiatives, a team is a necessity, partly to ensure appropriate expertise, but also to serve all 55 counties. An example of collaboration across the WVDE: shared positions, such as the Section 619 coordinator position that was recently moved into EELS, with a dotted line to the Office of Special Education (OSE), even though the funding for IDEA Part B is in the OSE. Or, when it became clear that there was a need for a part-time coordinator to oversee the Campaign for Grade Level Reading, the OSE literacy specialist was assigned to work part time in that capacity, with a dotted line to the director of EELS. This position is now

full time in EELS, focusing on early literacy but with a concentration on children with disabilities. Content specialists in the Office of Middle and Secondary Education regularly provide expertise and work on EELS initiatives, and EELS is assigned P–12 initiatives to coordinate across offices.

Having offices physically together is seen as an aid to collaboration, as described by one EELS coordinator: "we're all in the same room. Typically, I will just get up and walk over and say, hey, here's what I'm thinking, or what do you think about this? So that we can brainstorm a lot." According to one WVDE leader, cross-office collaboration was strategic:

> When you start seeing interactions within an SEA and you see how offices interact with one another, there are these silos—whether you like it or not. So there's these special-ed silos—that's our money, our initiatives. There are Title I federal program silos—our money, our initiatives—career and technical education. And what I wanted to do was create a system to where, if I can't break those silos up, then I'm going to create a system where each one of those silos are going to have to work with these different offices individually and independently, so that it will be one system. But you just can't have this overarching way you're going to deal with P–12. You're actually going to have to break down and have conversations with us about what a P–5 approach looks like or a middle school or a high school.

For the work of EELS, collaboration across state agencies is evident in committees and in the governance and administration of birth to kindergarten initiatives, including the WVDE Advisory Committee on a Comprehensive Approach to Early Learning, a cross-agency P–5 task force. According to the website, the task force focuses on "quality, excellence, equity, foundations, school readiness through fifth grade, closing that literacy achievement gap, and really setting that trajectory for college and career readiness."[lxxxviii] EELS website describes the task force's purpose to be building systems that use continuous quality improvement across pre-K–fifth grade to make advancements in the following areas which align directly with the WVDE goals and strategic plan:

- School Readiness
- Third Grade Literacy Proficiency
- Pre-K through Grade Five Standards and Support
- Early Learning Workforce Development

From its inception WV UPK has been mandated to be a collaboration among the county school district, child care programs, and the Head Start agencies. In each of the 55 county school districts, at least 50% of the children must be enrolled in Head Start or child care classrooms, called collaborative classrooms. In 2018–19, 82% of the classrooms statewide were collaborative.[lxxxix] Although the program is administered by EELS, policy direction, oversight, and technical assistance is provided by the WV Universal Pre-K Steering Team. As the state interagency and interdepartmental administrative team, the steering committee includes representatives from EELS, the Office of Child Care, and the Head Start Collaboration Office, and the Section 619 coordinator for special education.

Having the joint governance of pre-K in code forced development of a cross-sector approach that holds up under disruptions. As one respondent told us that the steering team

> is working well at this point because the wrinkles were ironed out a decade or more ago. In spite of the fact that it was in code and you had to do it, at the state level there were some knock-down, drag-out fights before, and they got through it, they established a strong system. And a strong system, while it might suffer when there's movement or transition, if it's a strong system, then it will hold. You might lose a little bit of water in your tank, but it will hold most of it and then you replenish it and figure it out.

The state Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC), which is closely linked to the steering committee, has a much broader but encompassing mission to create a high-quality, coordinated system of services that support early childhood development, from prenatal to age 5. The ECAC membership is also broader and includes representatives from relevant state agencies as well as community representatives, parents, advocates, and local service providers across child care, Head Start, education, health, and other fields relevant to the well-being of young children.

Another example of this cross-agency systems building is the fact that the chair of the ECAC is chosen from a neutral state agency, as the chair described: "What they looked for was a neutral party that was neither a representative of Department of Ed nor a representative of DHHR, who could facilitate the conversation between them, essentially, and other parties as well."

The collaborative state structure was designed as a model for the county WV Pre-K Collaborative System. One respondent explained:

> One thing is we try to model here [at the state] is what we expect in counties. We have our [cross-agency] pre-K state leadership team, and the pre-K person here at the state department [of education], doesn't make any decisions without her child care partner and her Head Start partner. If she has to make any decisions, they pull that steering team together; they model exactly what we expect in counties....Working and pulling those people together at the state level and strengthening that really helped that at the county level, I believe.

In each county, the collaborative core team like the steering committee includes representation from the school district, child care, Head Start, and preschool special education. Mirroring the state ECAC, the larger county collaborative early childhood full team also includes a parent/guardian of a preschool child; representative(s) from the WV Birth to Three System Regional Administrative Unit, local Department of Health and Human Resources, and/or a representative of the Child Care Resource and Referral agency; school health representative; classroom teachers; representatives of the Family Resource Networks; representatives of the Parent Education Resource Center; faith-based early childhood program providers; and others. All child care programs are included. The purpose of this collaborative system is to ensure access to comprehensive resources and to promote continuity for children and families, from birth through elementary school. The joint governance at the county level is also seen as essential for diagnosing and ameliorating local. A county collaborative team member noted "We can also address things as a part of that team, looking at what needs to be done, how do we approach it?"

The legislative mandate for at least 50% of the children to be served in Head Start or child care center classrooms is viewed as critical to successful expansion of the WV UPK, but initially many providers from all three sectors were concerned they couldn't meet the

mandate and the state had to provide more specific guidance, especially on budgeting and contracts. As one respondent described it,

> When people started seeing it was really going to happen, we were going to have to implement Pre-K....we [the state] began to work more with the finance office. We began to work more, having them do budgets to show the collaborative partners. We had child care, different people that were fighting us because they felt like it was going to shut down all the child care. We had Head Start—because it was very territorial—Head Start directors that were just, this is going to take all of our kids away. And thank goodness for the foresight of our legislators, who saw that and put in that there had to be 50 percent collaboration for each county.

Preschool special education is one of four primary constituents of WV UPK and was built into the system to ensure that children with disabilities were included in the pre-K program with their typically developing peers. One of our interviewees said, the pre-K program has assisted in meeting the requirements of a least restrictive environment:

> Our expectation is [that the preschool classroom is] the first option and that's what the IDEA expects as well. And a lot of it has to do with how we wrote the policy originally on, that this will include kids with disability if determined appropriate by the IEP committee. The majority of our kids [with IEPs], probably over 80 percent, are served in the Universal Pre-K.

Research Question 2: What Conditions Enable EELS to be Effective?

This research question focused on the conditions that impact the effectiveness of EELS, in addition to the organizational structure and authority of the office. Conditions may include political and public will, leadership and staffing, and other contextual factors such as funding and larger state policy constraints. Analysis of the data for this research question suggests that in WV, combining strong state champions with savvy early learning leaders, knowledgeable staff, and well-crafted policy have created conditions that supported expanding and sustaining early learning programs.

Political and Public Will

Support for early learning is widespread in WV and has continued through multiple changes in elected and appointed officials. Including pre-K in the state funding formula stabilizes its funding. However, legislative and appointed champions are not passive in their sponsorship and have supported initiatives that improve early learning, such as elevation of the preschool office to the Office of Early and Elementary Learning, funding the Campaign for Grade Level Reading and the Math4Life supports system, and completing a feasibility study on expanding pre-K to serve all 3-year-olds (underway now). Funding for a longitudinal study of WV pre-K and the early grades has also received support from the legislature and the state board.

Having legislation and a supportive state board, coupled with a history of early learning in the counties, assists in the stability of the program. An informant noted:

> There have been several superintendents [of education] since I've been here. And, honestly, there are times when we utilize the fact that, for example with Pre-K, there is legislation. There is legislation now for early literacy. And we have state board

> policy to back up that legislation. All these things are already so ingrained in our counties.

Stable funding with established policies may be a critical but not sufficient for the sustainability of the early learning system. Therefore, working with political champions is seen as part of the strategy to ensure ongoing support. One leader described this:

> West Virginia is very blessed in the sense that, for example, pre-K is included in the state aid funding formula regardless of where the children are sitting, whether it's in a public building or in a Head Start program or a child care center. Those things have been determined, and, yes, that's a win for children in West Virginia in programming, but that is something that I certainly hope won't go away. But if it did, it would be something that the legislature would decide. Those things are challenging because those public resources—and I can see when we go to our national meeting, for example, I see other states and I always feel so thankful that we do have an infrastructure, that we do have these public resources coming into our early learning programs.

This support is enhanced because ECE leadership in WVDE and in other agencies has direct access to legislative champions. A senior administrator at WVDE said, "we really had strong staff working directly with the legislature. [The director] is on a first-name basis. So I think that has been a huge piece of evidence of political will." However, this political support does not always mean that the funding is seen as sufficient. And the support from the districts is not unanimous, as this informant described:

> I think the number one thing would be the funding, because I think it takes so much more to run an early childhood program. I think also...some of the districts still don't see pre-K as important as it should be. But they are doing a very good job of blending the resources, when we look at things like transportation. We look at things like the teacher's assistant or having aides on the buses, or whatever. That is just so much more expensive, having fewer kids in a classroom, just having the needs in the early childhood programs, I think just has more cost. So I think it [increasing funding] would be a legislative thing.

There also are few avenues for increasing funding for EELS initiatives and therefore sometimes it is better for advocates to just "lay low," as one informant told us:

> We've talked about [creating sustainability for the office]. We know that the closest thing we've got right now is that early literacy line item. And, again, it's not guaranteed. At this point in time it's not—we wouldn't be able to politically go ask for additional funding. I think we've seen times when we've had support. But, again, the message of—I don't want to say no news is good news—but, in a way, that's true. So, our current legislature has continued to allow these programs to move forward.

EELS is strategic in advocating for policy change with the state board, as well. New or existing policies are generated or revised in EELS in consultation with the Pre-K Steering Team and other stakeholders. These are then vetted through the WVDE hierarchy and placed before the state board strategically, to limit the number of decisions at each meeting. This strategic advocacy is particularly well illustrated in the following example, in which

EELS staff learned from what other states were doing and used national initiatives to influence key policymakers to improve policies and provide funding for new initiatives. In 2013, the governor expressed concern about improving third grade reading proficiency and was considering implementing a third grade retention policy, which was not supported by EELS staff. The early learning staff took advantage of his interest to invite representatives of the governor's office to attend a meeting on early literacy. An informant said,

> The meeting, I'm sure, was great. But the purpose of the meeting was to take some of the governor's staff, have them around these early childhood people we could introduce them to. You can't be a prophet in your own land. We came back from that meeting and [the governor's] crew directed us to assist with writing the legislation. "Tell us what we need." And that's when the Campaign [for Grade Level Reading] kicked off.

However, the success of pre-K may impede policies for other ECE programs, because many leaders equate ECE with pre-K and as a result may neglect child care or 0–3 initiatives. This may be hampered by the lack of a tradition of strong early childhood advocacy groups in WV, although this may be changing, according to one informant:

> I feel like [support for child care from elected officials] is kind of a neutral. I don't feel not supported or supported. When people think of early childhood, they really do think of pre-K. They're not thinking, necessarily, a lot of them, of child care and the number of children that are in child care—those younger ages. That birth to 3. That birth to 4, kind of thing. They're really thinking—when they hear *early childhood*, they think pre-K. We have some grassroots organizations that are really looking at this and trying to say, "this is not a babysitting—a child care issue. This is an economic issue. This is a workforce issue." So, we're trying to get and participate in that type of conversation, as well.

Quality and Evidence of Effectiveness

WV has shown a commitment to ECE and has steadily increased the number of NIEER quality policy benchmarks met over the last 10 years. It currently meets nine out of 10.[xc] It does not earn the professional development benchmark because there is no policy that requires teachers to receive ongoing, classroom-embedded support. However, the close collaboration with Head Start results in the majority of classrooms receiving these supports and EELS encourages counties to implement these teacher support practices.

Evidence of a statewide commitment to quality and improvement is evident in the WVDE investment of its limited operating funds in a longitudinal study of the effects of attending WV UPK.[xci] The study has found that classroom quality, as measured using direct classroom observations, in the seven counties included in the study mirrors most national data, with acceptable quality in pre-K and lower-quality scores in K and first grades. In second grade, however, the quality rebounds and approaches that of pre-K. Not surprisingly, child assessments reveal that children who attend pre-K make greater gains than those who do not, but these gains converge through the grades and no significant differences remain at the end of second grade.

In our interviews, respondents were clearly familiar with the results of the study and referenced its influence on their decision-making. This commitment to quality is also

reflected in the group consensus on defining and meeting the elements of quality and ensuring that all children get access to the same services and resources. As one WVDE leader told us:

> I think that's one of the things that we bring to the table here in West Virginia—is that we got everybody to this idea of this shared vision for young children, but just because the policy was there and you're building capacity, it wasn't going to be good enough. It had to be quality. And I think that's one of the things we did well—was chunked out these areas of quality we knew we had to hit. So from about 2010 on, we really began to figure out what do we want to do. We know we want to tackle certifications for teachers. And we want to respect our child care partners and our Head Start partners. How do we do that together? How do we create a system that we're all moving in the same direction? We wanted to tackle assistant teachers. Meals—there was a period of time there where, holy cow, you would have thought that everybody from the USDA down to an average Joe cafeteria cook was going to lose their mind that we were going to offer meals to our child care partners. If you want to call these kids public school children and we're all one system, then everybody gets the access to all of the services and all of the resources.

Leadership

Strong public and political will can provide support for EELS leadership and staff, but an effective SOEL is defined by the quality and capacity of the leadership and staff.

Agency and Office Leadership. WVDE state superintendents have changed multiple times since 2002 and there have been varying degrees of attention to early learning. In contrast, the Office of Early Learning leadership is unusual in its stability. The current superintendent of education in WV joined the department almost two decades ago to administer the pre-K program, and the current executive director of EELS came to the department shortly thereafter and was his successor in administering the pre-K program before being asked to lead EELS when it was formed.

Respondents from within and outside of EELS believe leadership has been effective partly because of its deep, cross-sector experience, as this informant notes: "You have to have those relationships built and you have to have good strong leadership. Folks with experience who have been in the trenches, just having that background knowledge is invaluable." This expertise is augmented by a leadership style that is valued by staff, supervisors, and partners. One person in the office told us,

> The director's style of leadership is: here are your talents, go forth and do what you do best. And she's so supportive of our efforts. She really had a hard time giving herself the authority to say, "this is what you need to be doing," but yet she does it in such a gentle way that you feel like you have a lot of autonomy to be creative and to do. And while she gives us a great deal of freedom, there are also high expectations. And her door is always open, so we can go and kind of bounce things off of her. And she has such a good knowledge about the political climate. She knows how to manage crises. We've had some situations happening out in counties—those are handled so gracefully and beautifully. And if something just falls apart, you never know it, because she makes sure that whatever happens stays within a certain realm and it doesn't become bigger than it should.

EELS Staff. The expertise of the leadership is mirrored by EELS staff who have deep, multiple, cross-sector experiences in ECE. This respondent's history is fairly typical: "I worked in higher education. I worked as an outreach program director, before that, a coordinator. I've been a teacher." A few report coming to WVDE in order to have a greater impact, like this person:

> Four-year-olds. That's what keeps me coming into work. It bothered me to leave the classroom, but I got to help more families. My mentor and college professor said, "you were helping 20 as classroom teacher, then you were helping 36 at an early childhood center [as a local program administer]; [now] you're going to help 663." Okay, I get it. Now, my work impacts thousands of children and families. We must continue to see them as very important, to know that it's kids and families whom our work supports; that's what keeps me coming to work.

The office is effective because of this expertise, common mission, and a desire to serve and guide the field but not direct it. Staff members' history in the counties and work on program reviews builds relationships, which are critical for making change. As one EELS staff person describes it:

> Our mutual respect for each other is incredible. There are lots of different personalities in our office, and while we all have different beliefs and different values, one of the things we all come in with, every single day is [the fact that] this isn't about us, it's about the children and how do we help kids. And that unifying goal, I think, makes us very successful. And the other thing that makes us very successful is that we all have a passion for what we do and what we have done. The best thing is to get around the lunch table and start talking about stories that you have with kid experiences and just to hear how lovely they were as teachers, and to know that they bring that background passion and understanding to something that they're working for every day, it's kind of—it's really—it's inspirational.

Respectful relationships developed in the field were mentioned by a number of EELS respondents. For example, "the people are so knowledgeable and they're so willing. I feel like this whole office is about service, service to the teachers." Staff members are possibly following the approach of the leadership when they indicate that respect is manifested in seeing their role as guiding and facilitating, not mandating and directing:

> I think relations are a huge piece of it. When you have those relationships, people know that what you're doing is supportive. The worst thing that ever happened in pre-K is someone walked in a room and said, "I'm going to tell you how to do this." Yeah, that will not work. And from my perspective, it's about coaching, because you do have local control; as long as you're meeting the policy there's really nothing we can do. But to really move the needle you have to be supportive and strengths-based. Then you get people to move the needle themselves, and that's what you want to do because you can't be everywhere, and the system needs all the experts and it needs everybody to figure out how to get on the same page.

System Supports

EELS is somewhat constrained by its limited operational budget of $135,000, which some attribute to early skepticism about the WV Universal Pre-K program's viability. Any new

initiative has to be directly funded by the legislature or pieced together from existing funding streams. One person told us, "people didn't really believe that it was going to come to be. So funding, we never really had the funding. It was just always minimal." There is a pervasive approach at EELS of making a virtue out of necessity, which can be seen in how the office deals with limited operational funds, a small staff, and the restrictions of local control.

Size of EELS Staff. EELS is staffed with nine coordinators, a program assistant, and a director to provide support for preschool through fifth grade. WV reports having 5.5 FTE to oversee the pre-K program, which must include staff from other offices and agencies.[xcii] With this level of staffing, WV ranks 25th in state-level oversight and support out of the 44 states with state-funded preschool. Informants noted that EELS is understaffed relative to comparable offices (e.g., OSE and OMSL), hampering its ability to meet some goals, especially supporting a coherent P–2 approach. A person in the office said,

> We do not have enough staff to focus on pre-K through two continuous quality improvement efforts and instructional quality, to really look at that. [One coordinator] is probably the closest thing that we have, at this point. And she really helps out a lot with those program reviews with pre-K, and so her time is consumed. And so, I feel like our expertise is great. I would love to see an additional emphasis on pre-K–2.

However, an unintended benefit of a small staff may be that there is added incentive to collaborate within and across offices and to amplify a focus on building local capacity. An interviewee said:

> There aren't enough of us to go out and do all the professional learning that counties might request. We are a relatively small office compared to some other offices at the Department of Education. And there are so many, you know, educators out there who are hungry for professional learning and counties that request professional learning. And we—we certainly do all that we can, but we have to have a balance with our coordinators here in our office. We can't have them on the road 24/7. So we have to build capacity at the local level. And some counties have been very proactive at doing that already. Other counties, we're still working with them to help them come along with that idea.

The lack of staffing is somewhat ameliorated by the long tenures of the staff, almost all of whom have been in early education at the WVDE for more than five years, with many over 10 years. Elevation of existing staff provides evidence of a "grow your own" strategy. This long-serving EELS staff person explains the need for succession planning:

> I'll be 55 this year, and [another coordinator] is 55, and [another] is 54. So not only are they going to have to start thinking about how they are going to replace us, but how do they find people that are going to have the knowledge or the experience. Because I tell you, when I came in, this office was relatively new, and so how it develops and grows is really this generation's job, but how it's sustained is going to be another generation's.

Having a small staff and a limited budget has prompted EELS to be inventive in supporting improvements. One respondent said:

> They think out of the box. They try to use every possible resource to do the things so that—not to work around legislature or—but maybe to streamline some of the bureaucracy, that's just part of the DNA of any department like that. So I'm thinking that they are effective in bringing people in to build their capacity of what's needed in schools and how to provide that support to them. And so, that part is the effective part. Because if they had not done that and they were relying on just the people they have, they wouldn't have much of a chance to do that, because it's a big—it's a state of 55 counties. And they're effective recruiters of resources—if that makes sense.

***Local Control*.** Respondents regularly refer to local control as restricting the role of EELS. Because WV UPK is in statute and funded through the school funding formula, the same restrictions apply. A respondent from a child care agency describes the difference in authority across the agencies:

> Just from the perspective of CCDF, we're state controlled. So, if we make a policy, it's the policy everywhere. Where I've talked to other folks in other states where they're—they may be locally controlled or county controlled, and I've always thought, I would never, ever want to be involved in a place where you had to have 55 different eligibility rules. I think our Department of Education is in a little bit of that because, while we do have a state department of education, counties are locally controlled. So, I don't envy their challenges that they face.

This response illustrates how tricky it is to lead when local control pervades, driving EELS staff to find other ways to effect improvements: "The department pays for any county who wants to utilize [a specific literacy assessment] pre-K to third grade. You can use it county-wide, you can use it in one school, one teacher can use it. Whatever meets the county's needs, the department pays for that screening." Paying for the one tool was an attempt to incentivize consistent data, but it resulted in only about half of the counties using that tool, with the other half reporting a variety of different data. This obstructs system-wide, data-based decision-making.

At the same time, local control may have inadvertently led to an emphasis on building local capacity, and this may require thinking about the role of the state differently. An informant said,

> The balance that we play between micromanaging, or thinking that we can micromanage, these systems to how do you create systems to where we're allowing the local districts to make smart decisions. And it took me a little while to realize—I [need to] do a better job at the SEA building policies, building a system that helps them understand early childhood and make good decisions.

Research Question 3: How Does EELS Enact the Six Major Functions of an Effective SOEL?

This research question explored how senior leaders and staff in EELS carry out six major functions of a SOEL, as discussed on page 9 . We delved into what staff do to implement programs and support quality, what functions they see as most important, and what challenges they see in implementing policy to achieve goals. Each staff member carries out a set of functions on a daily basis to operationalize their authority (research question 1), that

together with the enabling conditions (research question 2) provides a road map for effective SOELs.

The work of EELS is guided by the goals set out by the P–5 task force, which are in turn derived from the state strategic plan. The four priorities—School Readiness, Third Grade Literacy Proficiency, Pre-K through Grade 5 Standards and Support, and Early Learning Workforce Development—are evident in the initiatives and functions of EELS staff and partners. Consistent with other state teams, respondents see the functions as interdependent but ultimately focused on developing the policy infrastructure to improve teaching and learning. One said,

> I keep going back to the Guiding Instructional Quality though because that really looks at what's happening in the classroom. I'm thinking about direct impact, I guess. The program quality really looks at the infrastructure, to me, and that's critical too. Because if you don't have an infrastructure to be supportive of high-quality environments, then you're not going to have the instructional quality or you're not going to be as likely to have the instructional quality. Then again, you have to look at the educator competence and how to build that continuously for lifelong learning.

Promoting Policies that Undergird Program Quality

The WVDE has one accountability system, with overarching administration from the Office of Support and Accountability (OSA). OSA coordinates teams from across WVDE offices to conduct targeted reviews to oversee and support implementation of program standards and state regulations. The director of OSA explained that "our accountability policy lays out the expectations of schools and districts" to implement the seven "West Virginia Standards for Effective Schools, which are researched based and which all of our work aligns with—across the entire department."

EELS staff serve on these review teams, but they are also responsible for a discrete UPK program review conducted under the aegis of the Pre-K Steering Team coordinated by EELS. Linked to the larger district review, the UPK process monitors fidelity to Policy 2525, which details all regulations for UPK. One review team member explained the components of the review to us: "access—how do you make sure that every child has the opportunity? And then we look at their collaborative team, the curriculum, instruction and child assessment, and we look at their continuous quality improvement process." The review process, mentioned in most of our interviews, is clearly a priority function of EELS. It consumes a large amount of staff time over multiple days for each of the 18–19 districts reviewed each year. Consistent with the collaboration which characterizes WV UPK, the review team "meet[s] with the [county] core team. The core team includes that director, a Head Start rep, a child care rep, and the special ed rep," one person told us. Most reviews require follow-up from core teams who submit a Continuous Improvement Plan based on the review. An interviewee said, "they have commendations, recommendations, or required follow up. If their enrollment process has issues, then we come back in about 90 days. And that's the one that you don't press go, you don't collect $200, you've got to fix this now."

Beyond consuming a fair amount of staff time, other evidence of how the review process is valued is clear, according to one interviewee: "It holds them somewhat accountable. If we didn't have the pre-K steering committee, the audits would not be going on; there would be no ensuring that Policy 2525 is being followed. They make the recommendations. They

can't hold them to it. But by making the recommendations, doing the audits, having counties submit their [Continuous Quality Improvement plans], there is—there's some oversight to it." This perception appears to be shared by county core teams, as well. According to one person, "in 2018, we updated the process with a group of stakeholders, but they loved the process so much that they didn't change it as much as I wanted them to."

Head Start and child care are integral to WV UPK, and Head Start funding is necessary to support quality. However, EELS had to work to make the different standards for programs coherent and to ensure that all understand the relationship. As one EELS staff person explained:

> When I go into a county, when our team goes into a county and they're struggling, we have to pinpoint: what's really your obstacle here? "Well, Head Start has all these rules." What rules? What rules are you talking about? Because 2525 performance standards and even child care licensing were blended years ago. And that's where I think the system has allowed us to be better at [coherent program policies].

Building an Integrated System to Guide Instructional Quality

EELS's approach to building an integrated system to guide instructional quality is set out in the pre-K to fifth grade implementation guide, which "provides suggested guidance for developmentally appropriate structures, practices, and environmental designs for classrooms."[xciii] This guidance, in a suggested self-assessment format, is clearly aimed at ensuring that various instructional components and assessment methods are linked to the state learning standards. Recommendations on standards, assessment, and instructional practices permeate the document, but "curriculum" is not specifically mentioned. This is likely because curricular decisions are clearly the purview of the local districts in WV. EELS staff report that they have a central role in helping districts implement the whole system of instructional quality, pre-K to grade five, in which learning standards influence local curriculum decisions. Assessment based on the standards should lead to planning for how the curriculum is delivered to individuals and groups of students. As one informant noted:

> We promote standards here at the department. Curriculum really is a local-level decision. Our goal is: here are the standards; this is what students need to be able to know, understand, and do; and here are some strategies that can help you develop your curriculum to get you there.

In addition to the self-assessment guide, EELS uses the review process to enhance understanding and connection among learning standards, assessment, and curriculum. It reviews documents to "see if the teachers seem to understand the standards, that they seem to be implementing the standards." This leads to some direct professional development (PD). An EELS staff member said, "[we] do a lot of training on the [statewide formative assessment system] and try to show teachers how the standards and the [assessment] work together." EELS also provides modules for PD on the standards on its website, as reported by a district supervisor: "There will be modules for English language arts, so it's a year-long PD for ELA standards. Then there's one for math. There's one for—I mean, everything that we do."

EELS considers this support necessary because using standards to guide instruction that follows a developmental progression is hard for some teachers to do. As one respondent stated:

> Standards [are] a rather new concept in that they're not goals for teachers, they're not...a discrete check-off list. They're written in a progression. All of those are new ideas for teachers that they didn't have prior to this. And now it's, "here are your learning goals, and you can teach them at any time you're building this understanding for your students." And it's really hard [because] we still have county people who want to create checklists, pacing guides, those kinds of things that aren't applicable to this kind of learning. And while you can create a pacing guide, like at what time of year you want to teach something, you should be teaching your standards as they build on each other.

Similarly, EELS staff see a role in helping teachers understand the value of formative assessment. One staff member said,

> If we're going to make progress and really close those gaps, we're going to have to start requiring our kindergarten teachers: "I'm sorry, it's your job. You mark where they are, and no, not everybody is emerging when they come into your classroom. Get to know your students." That is when we're going to see a big difference. And that's my soapbox.

Supporting Educator Competence

Respondents report that EELS is not able to provide extensive and comprehensive support to educators due to limited staff time, small operating budgets, long distances, and the constraints of local control. Although this has resulted in more targeted and "first-come-first-served" professional learning offerings, interviewees suggested that it has also led to innovative methods of delivery which include the following examples.

- Cascade training: "Right now we're in the process of putting together this West Virginia Master Educator Fellows, which is a group of, eventually about 120 educators across the state that are the best of the best. That we can train here as a group and then they can go out into the different regions."
- Podcasts: "We've found with the webinars, specifically, was that we didn't have great participation at all. So, one of the literacy specialists actually thought of the idea of doing a podcast. And we're excited about that because they can just listen [whenever it's convenient]."
- Online communities of practice: "I'm in the process of creating these communication tools through [Microsoft]Teams, where I'm sending out invitations to all of the mentors that have been trained since 1995. They can share ideas and stuff just for the mentors. For the fellows, I have one developed for them and then for my National Board Teachers, just having a place for them to collaborate with other like-minded teachers."

EELS regularly co-facilitates with other offices in the WVDE to infuse ECE expertise into other professional learning initiatives. For example, there is concern that elementary school principals' specialized knowledge of ECE is limited. The EELS director said a primary goal

was "to continue to help district-level staff build capacity for professional learning around early and elementary education and instruction and best practices." Sharing this expertise is an integral part of EELS's stated purpose, "to support and implement a pre-K through fifth grade system of support" which, as can be seen in its logic model, is seeking to support district teams to implement program policies. And as one leader in another office described:

> [EELS] staff have participated in professional development that we have provided for those schools [in identified districts that are struggling] as well as the Principal Leadership Network. So we rely on them to share information about early learning as we're working with our principal leadership.

State-funded preschool in WV has always required that teachers meet public school certification requirements. When UPK expansion began, the state devised multiple pathways to ensure that the teaching staff in child care, Head Start, and public school classrooms could become qualified for teaching young children, including the following:

- Providing coursework for teachers in collaborative settings who have bachelor's degrees so they can obtain a Community Lead Teacher Authorization, which qualifies them for a UPK classroom in a collaborative center
- Allowing either special education or early childhood education certifications in district classrooms where all teachers must obtain dual certification
- Developing online ECE coursework, which can be credit-bearing or used to renew certification or obtain the Community Lead Teacher Authorization
- Offering high school assistant teacher credentials

Using and Managing Research and Data to Improve Policy and Practice

Across the WVDE, a strong data culture was reflected by most respondents. In addition to the extensive review process described above, they detailed the use of multiple data sources for internal decision-making and for informing and influencing external stakeholders. Data systems in WV are designed to be coherent with, and relevant to, goals and strategic planning. As one respondent shared:

> We have an early literacy action plan that each county early literacy team does each year. It is based on the ESSA requirements and it's actually aligned with the state board and the state department's. We use that data to help inform whether or not we're moving the needle at the county level to see how we can prepare resources and get the resources out there.

There is a sense that the continuous quality improvement system that is integral to UPK elevates the perception of pre-K at the local level. As reflected by one EELS respondent:

> I do think that part of our strength is being able to go out and do those classroom reviews. Other grades don't have that. We look at lesson plans, we look at implementation of standards. So I think that makes it different, that it comes from our level. It's not just done from the Head Start director or the pre-K director.

The WVDE has developed and supports the use of a longitudinal data system that begins in pre-K. The Early Learning Reporting System (ELRS) is implemented to ensure ongoing and reliable assessment of progress toward meeting the WV early learning standards. The ELRS

includes child-level data from a statewide performance-based assessment tool, health information, a measure of English language learner progress, and analysis of special education progress. The ELRS is linked to the student longitudinal data system, which includes assessments of child progress annually, beginning in third grade. Additionally, there is a state mandate to conduct literacy screening annually kindergarten through second grade, but the choice of tools is a local decision. Pre-K classroom quality is assessed annually in every pre-K classroom.

The investment of limited EELS resources in a five-year longitudinal study of the effects of the pre-K program through third grade is further evidence of the strength of this data culture and reinforced by the decision to repeat the study for another five years, which shows a commitment to using data to improve even when the results are difficult to hear. As one EELS coordinator said, "The longitudinal study has really given us that hard data that we needed to say, 'we need change.'" Furthermore, EELS is strategic about how and when to report research and data so they are both useful and timely. The EELS Director explained, "We're thinking about our purpose and who's actually looking at [our annual data report] and how to make it more useful because we want people to benefit from it." In addition to releasing annual reports on early literacy and pre-K, EELS ensures that relevant data are directly available to the districts. An EELS coordinator gave these examples, "With the online platform called Zoom West Virginia, they can get a lot of their data. And then the Early Learning Reporting System has really been automatized a great bit over the past."

Internally, use of the ELRS and other data, including the longitudinal study, is mostly focused on helping districts to identify their own areas of need and effective ways to respond. The data are integral to monitoring program standards in the annual reviews, but the main purpose is to build district capacity to improve instructional quality by providing a system for change. One of our informants described the response to the longitudinal study to illustrate how data are used broadly:

> The first year after the kindergarten year we saw abysmal data, and it hurt. It hurt. But we're data-driven, so now we have the research to back up where we need to go. So we began working with kindergarten programs. We've been working with the literacy specialists. We've been working as a team to really put those goals—the action steps to meet the goals—into place. I mean, that's the most purposeful way you can do this whole process. We need to work with higher ed; we need to share this data with them. Those counties [in the sample] also get aggregated county data, and so they have that to work with their continuous quality improvement processes and their strategic plans. We're going to need to take it further, statewide, use the data to drive what we're doing, but also use the data—again, encourage them to use the data locally.

The longitudinal study also brought into clearer focus the gap in data on child progress and in instructional quality from K through grade three. One respondent felt this finding opened up further questions: "We have this huge gap in instructional support that shows that all the good work we're doing here [in pre-K], where we have data that supports that growth, is being lost here [in K–2], and we don't know why." As a result, EELS has designed an initiative to use the longitudinal study reports in professional learning communities it has formed across counties. Over 35 counties have participated in virtual meetings to explore

how to use the results, with other local data sources, to determine where improvements could be made.

Collaborating to Strengthen the Continuum of Learning

Continuity and coherence vertically (across grades) and horizontally (across sectors and aspects of child well-being that complement learning) are enabled by the formal, legislatively mandated governance structure which supports systems-building in pre-K with efforts from birth to second grade. The broad pre-K to fifth grade scope of EELS and the P–5 task force also provide structural support for the continuum of learning. The WVDE provides a context for this through the many initiatives that encompass educational and cross-sector collaborations (nutrition, health) in pre-K through 12th grade.

Vertical continuity. The goals and strategic plan of the WVDE support a birth to college or career continuum, and staff from different offices and divisions work together to provide support, technical assistance, and accountability throughout the P–12 spectrum. One senior leader described EELS as a model for this continuity:

> Because of the work and the history, they had to go through to grow and articulate what they do, how they do it, how they connect to both—birth to 3 as well as the K–12 system. I think they are naturally in a position to help people understand that as you're putting this puzzle together as a state education agency, it's not about your office and only what your office does. You have to be able to articulate that my office helps create the seamless approach from the time a child's born until they [enter postsecondary education].

For example, EELS staff are critical partners in the math4Life initiative, which provides substantial support to school districts across the P–12 spectrum "to institute best practices, challenging pedagogy, and student engagement strategies to improve students' mathematics achievement," according to the WVDE website.[xciv] One respondent described the partnership in colorful terms: "When we facilitate a training we try to have two people—the early elementary and a secondary person—...[and] in the Office of Special Education, the numeracy coordinator, and we create the triumvirate of happiness."

A primary example of EELS's P–3 approach is the Campaign for Grade Level Reading, a legislatively-funded literacy initiative "to elevate the importance of literacy development in the state to close the reading achievement gap by third grade," according to the WVDE website.[xcv] This continuum has strong support from senior leadership: "What we're doing with the early childhood programs articulates upwards so that there is transition to kindergarten and student achievement and literacy skills that are mastered by kids by the end of grade three."

The four "big rocks" of the Campaign for Grade Level Reading encompass many components of a robust P–3 continuum of learning and illustrate the intersection of vertical and horizontal continuity. As one respondent described the "four big rocks": "high-quality instruction for pre-K through third grade, school readiness (whatever happens from birth up to first grade), extended learning (connecting counties to after-school partners, summer learning programs), and finally attendance." Through a contract with Marshall University, EELS provides literacy specialists and other support to school districts to enhance early literacy P–3. County school districts receive funding from the state and create an action plan

that must be approved by WVDE and supported by the literacy specialists. Partnerships with local community organizations and across sectors are developed to enhance Campaign goals. EELS staff drive this work and provide statewide professional development and online support.

EELS also emphasizes the significance of continuity by requiring annual transition plans from each of the school district Pre-K core teams. One local county respondent explained the use of data in the plan: "We're all putting that data into the database for the early learning standards so we can get our child outcome reports [to] identify if there are issues with transitioning." EELS staff members see part of their role as helping others understand the birth to fifth grade continuum. One told us that

> oftentimes people will say, "Oh, and then pre-K." We stop them and say, "What is your perception of difference?" And that's my job. And it's not that folks don't want to, it's that they don't understand. And even the linkage between our infant and toddler programs that are available to the pre-K system. That's just as important.

According to one school district leader, the P–12 continuum of learning is permeating education, and this is in large part due to the leadership of the staff at EELS and the WVDE:

> We're very much a pre-K through 12 system. And so, when we're looking at curriculum, and standards and everything, we're making sure everything bridges beginning in pre-K. And a lot is due to the leadership of the Office of Early Learning here. So, the leadership here—this is a pre-K through 12 state department. It is becoming in all counties. And they make my job, actually, very easy.

Horizontal alignment. In WV, there is a long-standing vision for developing a system with the child at the center that is not defined by program or funding stream, but it has not been fully realized. The culture of cross-agency collaboration is set by the governor, whose interest is partly to increase efficiency; the organizational structures described previously provide the necessary foundation for supporting the continuum of learning from a whole child perspective. Multiple respondents indicate that collaboration in pre-K is settled policy but there are always bumps along the way and there is a system of support to negotiate solutions.

The composition of the ECAC at the state and local levels is comprehensive across all sectors related to young children's development, learning, and well-being. The subcommittees reflect multiple sectors (e.g., health, higher education, professional development) and are co-chaired by a council member and community member. These subcommittees develop integrated service initiatives that support a robust continuum of learning system.

The relationship with the June Harless Center at Marshall University in implementing the Campaign for Grade Level Reading has facilitated community involvement locally, especially related to literacy. For example, all 55 counties now participate in Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. The WVDE was prohibited from doing the fund-raising that is required but it was able to include this in its contract with the university. The literacy coaches promote the coordination locally under the direction of EELS. One respondent explained that the partnership includes "the library commission, but also representatives of things like

birth to 3. A lot of my work is networking with those other partners that reach the families more than maybe the state Department of Ed would."

Collaboration to support the continuum of learning across sectors is uniformly viewed as settled policy. Any issues that arise are resolved locally, unless others in the state must step in. As a senior WVDE leader said:

> I think there's more trust that is really established now through these collaborative agreements. So that Head Start, child care, and the Department of Education are working in harmony right now. Those wars were fought hard and settled. There could be still some outstanding issues that emerge, and that's normal in a family or in any organization. But I think that they have trust for one another that they know how to resolve the issues right now.

With support from the state, child care directors have developed confidence to advocate for themselves. A WV child care administrator said, "They feel pretty confident doing it themselves. But they had some supports in place. And they support each other.'" Respondents said that the cross-sector collaboration is successful because all involved realize that they can more effectively meet children's and families' needs when they work together. A respondent described that, "More services are provided to children and families and, by blending funds, you can serve way more students than you could just as a Head Start entity or just as an LEA."

EELS is seen as critical to building a system to support a continuum of learning but also to facilitating a community of practice among the counties. As a local representative describes:

> It starts here [EELS] because there's so much collaboration here, and then collaboration from here with the counties. The directors collaborate with each other. I don't hesitate to call them and say, "hey, I need help with this, I messed up, what should I do, I have this great idea, you might consider trying it." During our conferences we're given time to collaborate and get together and share. It's actually how we know each other. If I didn't know them, I would not reach out to them.

EELS conferences are designed to be about all aspects of the system of support for child learning and well-being, in order to influence practices locally. An informant said,

> There will be a section on literacy, a section on health, a section on collaborating with Head Start, a section on community collaboration. You can also bring parents. The idea of collaboration begins here. And then, in your community, you really have to get everyone on the same page, talking the same language, even with the attendance piece. It really helped that we talked to the pediatricians and everyone. Just all of us talking the same language to the parents, collaborating. And that we're all on the same team for the child.

The cross-sector teams at the local level are instrumental in assisting school districts in supporting the continuum of learning. For example, a local district leader says,

> In our county, we have Imagination Library. And we pay for that with Title I. But part of the issue with phonemic awareness is families—some of our children have 1,000 hours of pre-literacy development before they come to us, and some have zero. We just did a community campaign on that. We met with pediatricians. We met with WIC. We met with [WV] Birth to Three. We met with the DHHR. We met with the

hospital, the birthing unit. And they actually register the families now, at birth. But just discussing the importance of this so that we're all speaking the same language to families. So, we have that before [the children] ever come to us.

Efficiently Managing Public Resources

As with other issues of coordination within the WVDE, there is a strong emphasis from the leadership that whatever funds come into the department are used to move the strategic priorities forward. Specific initiatives such as the Campaign for Grade Level Reading require appropriations from the legislature. However, for other work, one senior leader explained, "they're going to need these three or four other offices that are working with them and I expect their budgets to also blend to support that." The leader described how this braiding and blending of state funds within the agency is expected at the district level. Another respondent gave this example of maximizing funding across sources for training to offset a tight operating budget: "It's a blending of child care dollars, home visitation, Birth to Three, and a little bit of Head Start, and a little bit of special ed dollars. We can maximize our training."

EELS works with the Office of School Finance to provide user-friendly tools and technical assistance to counties on managing pre-K budgets. Budget constraints and local control have necessitated presenting new initiatives as opportunities. As one person told us, "we're not going to require it. We're going to strongly recommend the coaching models. If we mandated it, we would've had to include the funding."

Conclusion

EELS in WVDE was essentially formed on the foundation of the WV UPK, which seems to have influenced the mission and approach of the office. The transformation into a P–5 office was primarily a result of the successful reputation of the UPK, which had earned respect of the rest of WVDE and the state leaders. UPK continues to have the support of political leadership and has steadily grown in numbers served and in quality. Three components have helped ensure its sustainability: legislation, which required at least 50% of the children be served in Head Start and child care classrooms; shared governance at the state level, which serves as a model for county-level governance; and funding of UPK through the school funding formula.

EELS staff and leadership have deep, multiple, and cross-sector experience in ECE prior to coming to EELS. This experience may be part of the reason that personnel have a collective desire to serve and guide the field but not direct it. This approach to guidance is likely influenced by the strong emphasis in WV state law on the autonomy of counties. EELS uses data and incentives to spur change based on needs seen in the field when the policy cannot be included in regulation. There is a strong emphasis in EELS on building local capacity, as well, which is necessary, given district autonomy.

VII. Overview of our Findings: Twelve Key Takeaways

In this final section, we provide a brief summary of the four SOELs we studied and then highlight twelve key takeaways or "lessons" about the essential contributors to SOEL effectiveness.

State SOEL Snapshots

AL's Department of Early Childhood Education (DECE), the only separate state agency in our study, clearly benefitted from its broad authority and the direct line to and unwavering support from its various governors and legislatures. AL's DECE was unique among the four states in having funding to support a structure of regional directors and staff to guide quality and accountability at the local classroom level. DECE operated flexibly as an agency while holding itself and its grantees to high levels of accountability. This focus on high standards and responsiveness provided evidence that DECE used to prove to its funders, decision makers, and other stakeholders that it could effectively implement a high-quality pre-K program that delivered results.

MI's Office of Great Start (OGS) in the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) was the only SOEL of the four we studied that had an explicit focus on birth through age 8, with responsibility across four offices for all major programs, including state funded pre-K, child care, early childhood special education and early intervention, Head Start, and family engagement. OGS has benefitted from bipartisan support for early childhood education. This support builds on MDE's priority: the health and well-being of children and youth from birth through college and career readiness. OGS's recent move to the Division of P–20 System and Student Transitions seems to have established its early childhood programs as a cornerstone of education policy in the agency and possibly in the state.

NJ's Division of Early Childhood Education (DECE) was established in response to the court-ordered Abbott Preschool program, which anchors much of its work in high-quality preschool components that continue to be the standards for the program. The established mixed delivery system drives DECE staff to collaborate with other state agencies overseeing child care. A recent advocacy campaign, capitalizing on the widespread and bi-partisan backing for preschool expansion, has been instrumental in supporting Governor Murphy's annual increases in funding. DECE is working to broaden its scope to create greater alignment with K–3 but is constrained by limited staffing and lack of direct authority over K–3, which rests with other divisions in the Department of Education and in local districts.

WV's Early and Elementary Learning Services (EELS) is distinctive for including the entire pre-K through fifth grade (P–5) continuum in its SOEL and offering universal access to preschool for 4-year- olds. EELS has effectively made use of national expertise to guide the work of its WV Pre-K-Grade 5 Task Force. The task force supports a broad set of goals for children's health and well-being and fosters cross-agency collaboration by means of a legislatively mandated shared governance structure which includes EELS, the Office of Child Care, the Head Start Collaboration Office, and IDEA Part B. WV is innovative in leveraging resources to meet its goals, including stretching EELS limited staffing capacity.

Study Limitations and Cross-Case Commonalities

We sought to use our four case studies to outline the capacities and characteristics of high-performing SOELs. Of course, one limitation of our findings is the nature of our sample. We not only limited our data to four SOELs, but limited our potential sample to states that met eight or more quality policy benchmarks in the NIEER 2019 *State of Preschool Yearbook*[xcvi] and 11 or more of the 15 essential elements identified in *The Essential Elements of High-Quality Pre-K: An Analysis of Four Exemplar Programs*.[xcvii] Other states that do not meet these criteria may be equally informative for illuminating critical aspects of effective SOELs. This may particularly be the case in terms of the degree to which missing elements contribute to challenges with the delivery and execution of programs aimed at enhancing young children's learning and development.

Our data collection efforts were wrapping up at the end of January 2020. Thus, this study provides a portrait of effective SOELs during what might be considered their "normal" operation. It therefore is important to note that the data we collected reflects what was in place at the time of our study and will not reflect changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite these limitations, our findings offer a set of 12 key takeaways regarding the structure, authority, and organizational capacity of SOELs; the importance of what might be termed the "enabling context"; and the functions critical to supporting children's early learning outcomes. Although these interrelated lessons relate specifically to the pre-K and other ECE programs overseen by these four states, we offer them for consideration to stakeholders in other states who seek to improve the effectiveness of their SOELs. The lessons are not presented in chronological order, each are important, and inter-dependent.

***Lesson #1: Emphasize an SOEL governance structure that provides sufficient authority*.** Our findings do not suggest that structuring an SOEL as a separate state agency is more advantageous or leads, in and of itself, to greater effectiveness. Instead, what seems to be critical is an elevated position in the hierarchy for early childhood, with supported from the governor, provides an SOEL with greater access to decision makers and visibility within the state. AL, as a separate state agency reporting directly to the governor, began with a leg up on the other states in defined authority to carry out its mission. However, MI's OGS, NJ's DECE and WV's EELS used organizational structures within their respective departments of education which placed them at the center of the educational pathway and afforded opportunities for alignment across the education system. This organization does not seem to have restricted expansion or improvement of programs for young children, if as in the case of NJ and WV, there are strong sustained partnerships with the agency overseeing child care.

Lesson #2: Focus on the horizontal and vertical aspects of child well-being and early childhood education. Focusing on the whole child, both horizontally across all domains of learning and well-being and vertically up through the grade levels, is grounded in an understanding that domains of learning and development are integrated and that progress across domains supports their overall well-being and enables their ongoing success. These four SOELs had a vision and goals, within their organizational structure, that drove toward designing and supporting coherent practices across grade levels that provided a common language for educators, parents, and community partners to promote continuity in learning.

In MI and WV, a whole child philosophy permeated the agency and was evident in its goals and ways of working. Each SOEL was placing increased emphasis on the alignment and coherence of policy across the age/grade spectrum: in MI and AL, prenatal to grade three; in NJ, preschool to grade three; and in WV, preschool to grade five. They were supporting initiatives to increase capacity of teachers, administrators and other stakeholders in strengthening the continuum of learning. For example, in AL the pre-K–third grade early learning continuum was collaboratively developed with the department of education and aligned to the governor's Strong Start, Strong Finish education initiative.

Lesson #3: Identify a set of priorities, with quality at the core, and pursue them relentlessly. Quality was key to the shared vision in each of the states. Each of the SOELs studied had a relatively small set of goals and priorities for their work. All four states were driven by strategic planning processes that informed their vision and engaged staff and stakeholders in continually examining the goals and setting achievable targets. When governors also made early childhood a priority, this interrelated set of factors helped each SOEL remain focused on the shared vision of quality. In MI, the four goals set by the governor in 2011 continued to drive the work and remained relevant through leadership changes, ongoing strategic planning with the staff, and reports to collect the perspectives of stakeholders and to identify needs. In WV, the Pre-K Through Grade 5 Taskforce originally produced a logic model in 2012 that was aligned with the governor's priorities and continued to update the logic model to drive the work to build a comprehensive approach to early and elementary learning.

Lesson #4: Regularly assess whether SOEL performance is meeting its goals. In this study, we investigated whether our proposed framework of "six functions of highly effective SOELs" actually captured the salient work of an effective SOEL. The functions include improving program quality, guiding instructional quality, supporting educator competence, using research and data, strengthening the continuum of learning, and effectively managing public resources. We found that these constructs did, in fact, capture the critical functions of what these SOELs do on a daily basis to carry out their authority. While each SOEL had a different focus or emphasis on specific functions, each of the six functions were seen as important. Respondents saw the functions as interdependent, with different staff roles emphasizing different functions. At the same time, the SOELs primarily focused on developing the policy infrastructure to improve teaching and learning and ensuring accountability for public funds. Each state developed systems to provide guidance on budgets and costs. For example, in AL monitors had a specific role in examining budgets and expenditures as appropriate for the pre-K program. SOELs can use these six functions to demonstrate the complex nature of their work; to advocate for sufficient capacity and resources to implement them well; and to identify specific aspects of their operations that could be strengthened in order to achieve their programmatic goals.

Lesson #5: Create a data culture that improves decision-making and influences funding. Each state invested in research on its pre-K program and other programs it administered to provide data for quality improvement and to demonstrate to legislators the results of their investments. Using data to drive decision-making was part of the culture in these four states, and they made the data publicly available to support programs and drive public and political will to increase support. In all states, data on the quality and impact of the pre-K program (and other programs in some of the states) led to increases in funding. AL had the most

robust data management system for the programs it operated and was working to build an Early Childhood Integrated Data System, as was NJ. All four states commissioned or conducted research to pilot and expand programs, to identify needs, and track trends. For example, MI commissioned independent research for its programs and also used the state data system; WV has a robust P–12 data system. NJ and WV both had research partnerships with NIEER to bolster their capacity for data and evaluation.

Lesson #6: Use organizational capacity to replace a program mentality with a systems approach. How the SOEL is structured to leverage organizational capacity was different in each state, in part derived from the history of the SOEL and evolving over time due to political priorities and other contextual conditions. Yet, each SOEL sought to break down programmatic silos, create buy-in around a common set of goals, and ensure coherence across programs and agency initiatives. The matrix organizational structure used in AL seemed to facilitate and incentivize shared responsibility and collaboration among staff. In MI, the organizational structure of OGS leveraged the capacities of each of its four offices to ensure individual program accountability while ensuring the coherence of early childhood policy both across the division and the agency. In WV, staff members worked across the agency to achieve their goals, and within the EELS, some had responsibility for programs that crossed other divisions. EELS stretched its capacity and co-funded positions through internal and external partnerships. NJ secured early childhood leaders on loan from the school districts to increase the capacity and in turn grow district-level staff.

Lesson #7: Build on the expertise and experience of leaders and staff. Highly capable and effective SOEL leaders and staff have a commitment and passion to serve children, teachers, and districts. Furthermore, each SOEL, led by the senior leader in each agency, established a culture within the organization that valued cultivating leaders and long-term staff that had deep and broad expertise in ECE, institutional knowledge, and strong relationships. They also benefitted from the opportunity to grow their own leaders and elevate staff members with experience. In NJ one senior leader had been in the agency for more than 19 years with increasing responsibility; in WV the first director of the EELS was recently promoted to the state superintendent of schools and initially brought in the current director. In each state both senior leaders and staff had a depth of experience in the field, were highly regarded by their colleagues and stakeholders, and were deeply committed to improving the lives of children and families. All staff we interviewed had a high level of commitment to their work and each of the leaders had a deep respect for their staff and their expertise.

Lesson #8: Ensure adequate SOEL capacity. We found that adequate capacity was more than just numbers (or FTEs) of staff. An effective SOEL needs a sufficient quantity of highly capable staff. A 2019 study we did of state early childhood specialists found that a large number of staff members intended to leave state agency work in the next five years.[xcviii] In our current study, we found a clear awareness of the need for succession planning and elevating junior staff into leadership positions. A wide variance in numbers of FTEs in each of the SOELs we studied is partly because of variations in scope, authority, and general level of funding. This is to be expected, as Minervino said, "state staffing levels are rarely just a matter of the size of the program, but also depend on other program design and policy issues including the division of responsibility between state and local levels."[xcix] Our study was not intended to identify the number of state staff necessary to fulfill core agency tasks, so further research is needed to answer that question. Our study did find

evidence that SOELs were not able to accomplish all that they wanted to for children because of restricted staff capacity. For example, the amount of technical assistance, district and program support, and support for quality could have been enhanced with additional staff members with the right skill sets.

Lesson #9: Build collective capacity within and across sectors and systems. Our findings support previous research: infrastructure from the SOEL to the local level is critical to drive quality and accountability and create energy across the system focused on achieving goals for children. AL had the most robust system of regional directors, monitors, and coaches to work with local districts and communities to implement the preschool program and state/local Children's Policy Councils. WV used a shared governance model at the state level for the UPK program that was the model for shared governance at the local level. In NJ, DECE built local capacity and comprehensive support for teaching and learning. Districts were funded to provide coaches for curriculum and assessment implementation augmented by specialized support for inclusion and dual language instruction for the PreK program. In MI, intermediate school districts provided support to local programs, and the Early Childhood Investment Corporation, publicly and privately funded, created a system of supports to local programs, that engaged families and parents in a leadership program.

Lesson #10: Authorize SOEL leaders to cultivate political will. Bipartisan political support for early childhood education was a key factor in the visibility of each SOEL, although this played out differently in each state through governor, party, and leadership changes. AL, MI, and WV had political support through multiple governance and leadership changes. In NJ, pre-K has benefited from bipartisan support, but this support has weathered changes in governance in large part due to a court mandate. Senior staff of these SOELs made it a key part of their role to build relationships with legislative staff and other allies. They were intentional about providing legislators with information and data on the programs they oversaw. For example, as one of his first tasks, a deputy superintendent in MI's OGS developed an education policy guide to provide legislators with key information and contacts on OGS programs and people. The assistant commissioner in NJ's DECE had previously worked on the governor's staff, and WV's assistant superintendent at the time of our study cultivated political allies over a long history in the state. The leadership of senior staff and their position in the hierarchy contributes to their effectiveness at cultivating political will.

Lesson #11: Gather diverse perspectives to augment effectiveness and build sustained collective support. Collaboration was highly valued and an integral way of working, both within the SOEL and with external stakeholders, in all four states. Collaboration was not an end in itself but a primary driver in meeting strategic goals that encouraged all parties to keep at it when decisions were difficult. Our findings suggest that relationships are just as important as policies and priorities to support continuous improvement to reach high standards for all children, regardless of setting, auspice, and funding. In order to expand and sustain quality, these states recognized that diverse perspectives are needed. This was evident in these states in both formal mechanisms and informal opportunities for staff to work together on specific projects or policies. Each of the states had strong early childhood advisory councils or collaborative groups. In NJ, the Intergovernmental Planning Group (IPG) was established in code to create greater coherence and collaboration across state agencies overseeing health, child care, and workforce, and was born of the need to

strengthen state agency collaboration and alignment. In WV, the shared governance model with county collaboratives helped to break down silos and leverage resources. MI's Parent Leadership in State Government was designed to empower and support families in early intervention and home visiting programs in the state. In AL DECE oversaw the State Children's Policy Councils and facilitated the work of the local policy councils.

Lesson #12: Establish a coalition of key champions and unlikely allies. SOELs cannot achieve their goals alone. Expanding and sustaining high-quality programs requires a diverse set of voices, especially those that might not typically have their voices heard. Advocates are one of the critical partners—but not the only—in garnering public support and funding. In NJ, many advocates have fueled the growth of the preschool program and collaborated with state agency staff to bolster their capacity. In AL and MI, champions have played a key role in advocating for increased funding for early care and education programs and working with state staff on many committees to set or revise policy. WV was unique in working less with outside advocacy organizations instead benefitting from strong relationships with stakeholders and legislators who play the role of advocates.

Conclusion

As these lessons demonstrate, an effective SOEL that achieves goals for children and manages public resources efficiently, is greater than its governance structure alone. In these four states, carrying out the programmatic functions necessary to ensure scale and sustainability of quality programs and services required highly capable leaders and staff, guided by a strong vision, a clear set of priorities, cross-agency collaboration, and stakeholder engagement. Gubernatorial support is particularly helpful as is sufficient authority of the senior leader to influence and drive policy. Effective SOELs used research and data to guide continuous quality improvement and increase legislative support, elevating the visibility of their early learning systems. When the SOEL functions at a high level and operates on a consistent basis, state staff are able to devote attention to a more immediate policy or programmatic concern, as well as long-range planning.

As the country begins to emerge from emergency measures to keep children and teachers safe during the pandemic, states are taking steps to rebuild and reimagine early childhood education. A hallmark of an effective SOEL is their ability to adapt to change. State capacity matters enormously in realizing goals for young children. The next steps suggested by this research are to examine the key aspects of effective SOELs and the lessons identified in this study of four leading states with a national study of all states. We need to learn more about how to build capacity at the state level to ensure diversity and equity. Then, more robust tools can be developed to support state agencies to enact and implement policies on behalf of our youngest children and their families.

Appendix A: Selected Acronyms and Key Terms

State Acronyms	
DECE	Department (AL) or Division (NJ) of Early Childhood Education
MDE	MI Department of Education
NJDOE	NJ Department of Education
EELS	Early and Elementary Learning Services (WV)
WV DOE	WV Department of Education
Key Terms	
Blending (funds)	Using money from two or more funding sources together to pay for a specific part of a program or initiative. In blending, costs are not necessarily allocated and tracked by individual funding sources.[1]
Braiding (funds)	Coordinating two or more funding sources to support the total cost of a service. Revenues are allocated and expenditures tracked by different categories of funding sources. In braiding, cost-allocation methods are required to ensure that there is no duplicate funding of service costs and that each funding source is charged its fair share.
Continuum of Learning	A coherent system of care across age and setting, including robust family engagement policy, aligned prenatal to grade 3 policy and practice at the state and program level, and engaging stakeholders (cross-sector agencies, advocates, and organizations) in the transition of children across ages and grades of schooling.
ECE	Early care and education
ECIDS	Early Childhood Integrated Data System
ELA	English language arts
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
LEA	Local education agency
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress
P–20; P–5; pre-K–grade 12; PK–12th; pre-K–3	Prekindergarten through age 20; prekindergarten through grade five, prekindergarten through grade 12; prekindergarten through grade three
PDG	Preschool Development Grant
PDG B–5	Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five
QRIS	Quality rating and improvement system
RTT-ELC	Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grant
TANF	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

Appendix B: Data Analysis and Writing Approach

Data Analysis Approach

All of this study's interview transcripts were analyzed using Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software.[c] We used the literature that guided our theory of change, logic model, and interview protocols to create a coding frame comprised of clearly defined, mutually exclusive codes. As we coded the data, some additional codes were added to the frame, based on themes that emerged from interview transcripts. We developed intercoder reliability (the ability to independently select the same code for a unit of text)[ci] through a process of isolated coding, coding comparisons, and in-depth discussions. We met regularly (weekly or every other week) to discuss our coding process, any inconsistencies in coding, and emerging themes. These meetings were a key part of the analysis process and led to increased intercoder reliability as we created a shared and nuanced understanding of the coding frame.[cii]

As recommended by existing literature,[ciii] we developed intercoder reliability by coding the same transcripts individually and discussing their coding rationales. When all team members consistently reached over 85% agreement, we progressed to coding 20–25% of each interview transcript for three of the first five interviews, and then again at three other points in the analysis process. In addition to these intercoder reliability checks, one member of the research team was assigned to double code 10–15% of each interview transcript throughout the research project to check for coding drift. Instances of coder disagreement were brought to the meeting for discussion and clarification.

First, we coded and analyzed data from interviews conducted with participants who worked in the SOEL. Coded excerpts were sorted by research question and we identified patterns that could be grouped into larger themes or concepts. Through further analysis and discussion, we identified preliminary findings for each state. Next, we completed the same analytic process with data from participants who worked outside of the SOEL. We compared emerging themes from this data to what was found from those working within the SOEL. We examined instances where patterns did not align and, whenever possible, used publicly available materials and data to validate participants' accounts and our preliminary findings. For each state, we identified the key overarching themes that best addressed the three research questions.

Drafting the Report

There were five members of the research team and each had a role in drafting and editing the report. Lead authors were assigned to each state and wrote the first draft based on the analysis described above. The second and third authors reviewed the first drafts and provided edits or comments. Based on the initial drafts, we met every other week to discuss emerging themes across the four case studies. Lead authors refined their findings as a result of this iterative process and the case studies were reviewed by an outside technical editor for further revisions. Then, the draft case studies were shared with the individuals within each state who were interviewed and quoted and revised again by the lead author.

During the discussion of the findings (noted above), we began to identify the cross-case study themes and common lessons across the four case studies. The lead author wrote the initial draft of the "key takeaways" section, and all authors reviewed and revised the key

takeways. All sections of the report went through an extensive internal review. Finally, the technical editor reviewed the full report and provided suggestions for clarity and consistency across each section.

This study aimed to answer the question: regardless of governing body, *what are the structural characteristics, organizational competencies, and programmatic functions of effective State Offices of Early Learning (SOELs?* The case studies focused on the SOELs in Alabama (AL), Michigan (MI), New Jersey (NJ), and West Virginia (WV). These four states were chosen using our theory of change and available data to ensure that they had rigorous policies and coherent program standards already in place. The findings indicate that an effective SOEL that achieves goals for children and manages public resources efficiently, is greater than its governance structure alone. In these four states, carrying out the programmatic functions necessary to ensure scale and sustainability of quality programs and services required highly capable leaders and staff, guided by a strong vision, a clear set of priorities, cross-agency collaboration, and stakeholder support. Gubernatorial support is particularly helpful as is sufficient authority of the senior leader to influence and drive policy. Effective SOELs used research and data to guide continuous quality improvement and increase legislative support, elevating the visibility of their early learning systems. Based on this research we offer 12 key takeaways regarding the structure, authority, and organizational capacity of SOELs; the importance of what might be termed the "enabling context;" and the functions critical to supporting children's early learning outcomes. State capacity matters enormously in realizing goals for young children. The next steps suggested by this research are to examine the key aspects of effective SOELs and the lessons identified in this study with a national study of all states. We need to learn more about how to build capacity at the state level to ensure diversity and equity. Then, more robust tools can be developed to support state agencies to enact and implement policies on behalf of our youngest children and their families.

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About NIEER

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, conducts and disseminates independent research and analysis to inform early childhood education policy.

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