State Early Childhood Systems: Examining Program Integration

Introduction

Research emphasizes the importance of high-quality early learning experiences to young children's growth, development, and success in later life (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Allen & Kelly, 2015). Despite this knowledge, many States struggle to overcome a highly fragmented and siloed approach to service provision, and this fragmentation can affect the quality, equity, and sustainability of early learning services. In order to provide young children and their families with equitable access to high-quality early learning experiences, States have been developing infrastructure to alleviate fragmentation. This infrastructure—professional development, accountability, quality, financing, standards, regulations, governance—is a critical part of the early learning system. This paper focuses on governance and its role in integration, informed by research suggesting that a State's capacity to effectively oversee and manage the early learning system will affect how the system functions (Goffin, Martella, & Coffman, 2011; Kagan & Kauerz, 2012; Kagan & Gomez, 2015).

State governance enables services to be administered to children and families. Governing entities, for example, authorize monies to be distributed and resources allocated within individual programs. The de facto approach to governance of early learning in States, however, has been a compartmentalized approach—also called program-level governance (Kagan & Kauerz, 2008; Gomez, 2014). Compartmentalized approaches to governance do not provide mechanisms for unifying policies and programs within a particular State. The most that States with this fragmented approach can hope to achieve is good coordination across programs and funding streams.

An essential function of contemporary early childhood governance is to ensure that there are linkages among the programs and services that have historically been administered by different entities. As the field grows and seeks significant improvements in the quality, equity, and sustainability of early childhood services, new approaches to governance have emerged that attempt to create such linkages. Some States are adopting approaches to governance that transcend programmatic and fiscal boundaries in order to ensure that services and programs are managed more systematically, while others still adhere to a compartmentalized approach. To learn more about each State's governing arrangements, review the resource titled National Overview of CCDF Services Administration and Governance. Some States, however, are moving beyond creating linkages across programs and services and instead are focusing on integration to create seamless, high-quality, equitable supports to early learning programs and the early childhood workforce, and services to young children and their families.

Purpose and Document Structure

The State Capacity Building Center (SCBC) helps States build high-quality early learning systems and services. Given the emerging research on governance, coupled with States' rapid work on designing and implementing early learning systems, SCBC has developed this paper as a resource for States that are considering innovative approaches to integration. The purpose of this paper is to focus on integration by (1) providing a conceptual framework for understanding governance functions,(2) showcasing practical work in States on integration, and 3) discussing implications of that work for state leaders. The first part begins with definitions of governance, distinguishing among the concepts of coordination, alignment, and integration as they are discussed in the research literature. Predicated on these definitions, the second part offers seven case examples of States that have achieved integration within and across subsystems and offers insight into the process by which the States

achieved subsystem integration. The third part concludes with lessons learned and helpful strategies for States wishing to create integration within and/or across subsystems.

Summary

This paper explores the topic of subsystem integration as a way of improving the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of services delivered to the early childhood field. We provide a conceptual frame for analysis that explains the relationship of integration to specific governance functions. We then define and discuss the concepts of coordination, alignment, and integration, highlighting the importance of each to system development. There is a focus on the concept of integration as a new and innovative approach to system development in early childhood, and then we present several empirical examples of States that have started creating integrated subsystems within their state early childhood systems.

State case studies illustrate that the process of integration is not easy or immediate. Rather it is a process that requires intentionality, foresight, time, and resources. Integration at the state level is often a process of "retrofitting" preexisting subsystems as an effort to alleviate problems of duplication or inefficiencies in the system. Of the seven States that were interviewed for this paper, all cited integration as a ways to achieve program quality. Furthermore, each interviewee corroborated the thesis present in the literature advancing the argument that integration is an important step in system building, one that goes beyond coordination and alignment. The information presented in this paper—both empirical and theoretical—is intended to be helpful to States focusing on system development.

Part 1. Defining and Describing Coordination, Alignment, and Integration

We start with a review of the literature on governance functions and then define and discuss the strengths and limits of coordination, alignment, and integration for system development, noting the governance functions associated with each. A discussion focusing on how coordination, alignment, and integration affect system integration ends this section.

Functions of Early Childhood Governance

In early learning, understanding of governance is continually evolving. This paper draws on a functional perspective of governance, defining it as the means by which a governmental entity allocates decisionmaking authority and ensures accountability across the public and private sectors. In this conceptualization, the role of governance is to ensure that the myriad programs for young children and their families are coordinated, but also that they are of high-quality, accessible, adequately funded, cost-effective, and are supported in their mission and vision. (Kagan & Kauerz, 2012)[1]

Research on governance has revealed three common characteristics of governance: form, durability, and function (Kagan, 2015). *Form* is the structure of the administrative entity or entities that oversee programs and services for

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[1] Earlier definitions of governance adopt a strictly structural stance that focuses on the form of the entity itself rather than specific functions (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). In these conceptualizations, governance is defined as a bureaucracy: what constitutes governance in early childhood education is any administrative body with funding and authority to implement programs (The Build Initiative, 2013; Satkowski, 2009).

young children and families. *Durability* is the dimension of governance that allows it to be sustained over time and across political and economics shifts. *Functions* can be defined as any of the actions undertaken by a particular administrative entity. An exploratory study of early childhood governance revealed eight functions common to States that had consolidated the majority of programs and services for young children into one administrative agency.

These eight functions are as follows:

1. Allocation

2. Accountability

3. Collaboration

4. Planning

5. Regulating

6. Outreach and engagement to stakeholders

7. Improving quality

8. Setting standards (Gomez, 2014; 2015).

Figure 1. Governance Functions

1. Allocation
- Financial resources
- Human resources

2. Accountability
- Compliance
- Consistency
- Data (collection and analysis)
- Alignment

3. Collaboration
- Within entity
- Across entities
- External

4. Planning
- Programmatic
- Financial

5. Regulating
- Program licensing
- Individual teacher certification

6. Outreach and Engagement
- Families
- Community
- Polity

7. Improving Quality
- Program
- Workforce

8. Setting Standards
- Program
- Professional/workforce
- Learning

Source: Gomez, 2014; 2015

These functions are an integral part of an early childhood state system, and are often typically carried out in tandem. For example, allocation of human or financial resources often requires that a State first engage in planning functions. An administrative entity might engage in collaborative activities with external partners to ensure that they can implement programs with consistency, a subfunction of accountability. Program standards, for instance, could be developed to go above and beyond regulations and could contain quality indicators that programs could meet voluntarily; this type of interaction is common in the implementation of a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS). While not all States will carry out all eight governance functions, all States carry out some of these functions.

States need to engage in a variety of these functions in order to create early childhood systems that are coordinated, aligned, and integrated.

Coordination

Historically, the field of early childhood has been characterized by a market-based, mixed-delivery approach to services. Publicly funded programs like Head Start, state-funded prekindergarten, and child care assistance programs typically have been available to serve a subset of income-eligible families with young children. Programs services are delivered through public entities and private entities. The majority of early learning services are both provided in the private sector and financed privately. This mixed-delivery funding and service approach has resulted in a patchwork of programs and services (Kagan & Cohen, 1997). Recognizing this, scholars and policymakers began to experiment with ways to overcome this fragmentation.

The first efforts to move away from fragmentation were focused on **coordination** among programs. Coordination can be defined as "a set of arrangements under which programs and activities work with one another" (Kagan, 2011, p. 14). The goal of coordination is to increase communication and reduce duplication in service via a formalized set of arrangements, collaboratively developed and agreed on by individuals responsible for managing their respective programs. This set of arrangements would typically be supported by an individual who would act as a coordinator and provide support to the programs from the governmental agencies administering the programs (i.e., resources and finances, common standards, and joint planning) (Sugarman, 1991). This approach was successful in alleviating some of the fragmentation of the early care and education field, particularly the fragmentation caused by multiple funding streams created by local, state, and federal governmental agencies. Governance functions commonly associated with coordination include c*ollaboration*, *outreach and engagement*, and *planning*. State agencies wishing to keep each other informed about regulatory changes to specific programs, for example, might engage in collaborative planning meetings on a regular basis.

Recognizing the utility of coordination to overcome fragmentation, the Federal Government developed three notable state-level coordination policy levers. First, the Child Care and Development Fund, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, included a section devoted to collaboration and coordination, in which States had to articulate the ways they were supporting formalized efforts of coordination and collaboration among the different programs aimed at helping young children and their families (Administration for Children and Families 2003; 2005).

Second, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act included provisions for coordination among and across agencies, which catalyzed many of the early coordination efforts between agencies responsible for implementing services to children with special needs aged birth to school entry (Turnbull, 2005).

Third, building on the long-standing tradition in Head Start programs of collaborating with local stakeholders (e.g., parents, school districts, community organizations) and informal coordination with state governments, the Federal Government created a mechanism to formally foster collaboration between state-run programs and the Head Start grantees operating locally in each State. The Administration for Children and Families (ACF), beginning in 1990, funded in each State a Head Start State Collaboration Office (HSSCO) for the purpose of "augment[ing] Head Start's capacity to be a partner in state initiatives on behalf of children and their families" (Administration for Children and Families, 2013, p.1). Furthermore, in each HSSCO, a coordinator would be responsible for supporting the creation of multi-agency and multi-program partnerships at the state level.

Other recent efforts to enhance coordination include the creation of advisory bodies at the state level responsible for carrying out decisionmaking related to coordination activities. Some States, for example, created children's

cabinets or early learning councils composed of stakeholders from various parts of the early childhood field. These bodies were convened for the purpose of fostering greater cross-program collaboration and to engage in information sharing, outreach and engagement efforts, and system planning (Satkowski, 2009). In addition to state-driven coordinating bodies, the 2007 reauthorization of the Head Start Act fostered Early Childhood Advisory Councils, and modest financial support was provided to States to create these councils (Head Start Act of 2007, 42 U.S.C. §9801). The purpose of these councils was to promote coordination among the various agencies and stakeholders in the state who work on behalf of young children and their families.

These federal policies and state-driven coordination efforts did reduce fragmentation in States, but they did not eliminate it. Coordination is a governance function that relies on cross-agency and cross-program collaboration, which is often informal and dependent on individuals who have authority over a particular program or funding stream having the time and resources to engage in coordination activities. While still, critical for developing collaborative relationships with others who are administering programs and services to young children and their families, coordination is limited in how far it can advance system development (Kagan & Kauerz, 2008). A compilation of state and territory coordination efforts for child care and prekindergarten is available from ACF in the document titled *Quick Facts: State and Territory Coordination Activities To Support CCDF Services.*

Alignment

In engaging in coordination efforts, many States have started realizing that coordination is insufficient to achieve the outcomes they desire for programs and services. As such, states have started to look for ways to reduce duplication and streamline services. **Alignment** is the process of ensuring that the policies, regulations, and standards to which programs that serve young children must adhere are configured so that they are non-duplicative, streamlined, and of high quality (Schultz, 2015).

Alignment can occur within one subsystem or across subsystems. Alignment within one subsystem, for example, could be work on standards alignment. Many States are making sure early learning and development standards (ELDS) are consistent and compatible with the content of curriculum and assessments administered to that age cohort (i.e., horizontal alignment), while others are aligning ELDS with the state standards for kindergarten through 12th grade (i.e., vertical alignment) (Kagan, Scott-Little, & Reid, 2009).

Alignment can also occur across subsystems. For example, States can work to align health and safety regulations with program quality standards, such as those developed for a QRIS. In this way, the regulations serve as a baseline for increasingly rigorous program standards. Alignment can also occur at the policy level. For example, States can create workforce policies that apply to multiple types of early learning programs to ensure that all programs are held accountable to the same sets of teacher and administrator qualifications (Allen & Kelly, 2015).

Governance functions associated with system alignment include *allocation, accountability, planning, quality improvement, and standard-setting* functions. Alignment may also require *regulatory* functions. The process of aligning standards inevitably requires engaging in planning processes, and likely requires human and fiscal investment. Furthermore, the goal of alignment is enhanced consistency in the standards and regulations to which programs must adhere, so accountability functions, and functions associated with quality improvement, will be leveraged to create an aligned system.

Several States have recognized the need for alignment within their early learning systems in order to bolster quality, ensure equity, and to create more rigorous and valid accountability mechanisms (Schultz, 2015; Kagan, Carroll, Comer, Scott-Little, 2006). Charged with developing a set of research-based recommendations to improve accountability efforts in state early learning systems, the National Accountability Task Force emphasized that horizontal and vertical alignment of standards, curriculum, and assessment is a fulcrum of accountability policy (National Accountability Task Force, 2009. Recognition of the need for alignment is not limited to the literature on early learning systems. Scholars attempting to discern why many children who have participated in high-quality early learning programs experience a fade-out effect by third grade have posited that a lack of alignment between the curriculum, assessments, and instructional approaches used in the preschool years and those used in primary settings may be a contributing factor (Jenkins et al., 2015).

Integration

Going beyond alignment and coordination is integration. Alignment can be considered a precursor to system integration, though the two are not mutually exclusive. **Integration** can be defined as the merging of two previously distinct subsystems into one new subsystem that has increased or enhanced functionality. One example of subsystem integration is the merging of monitoring duties of child care licensing with monitoring for QRIS standards, as has taken place in Ohio. While innovative and interesting to many States, integration represents a new approach to early childhood system building.

Because integration is a new concept for early childhood, we look to the research literature in other fields, particularly policy studies, to help crystallize the utility of integration in early childhood systems. A helpful concept from policy studies is known as the boundary spanning policy regime (BSPR). A boundary-spanning policy regime (BSPR) is defined as a formal "governing arrangement that spans multiple subsystems and fosters integrative policies" (Jochim & May, 2010, p. 307). Pioneers of this concept, Jochim and May note that the "dominant characteristic of a BSPR is the ability to integrate and to knit policy across the "relevant subsystems" or policy entities for the purpose of reducing fragmentation and solving complex problems. Strong BSPRs have the ability to bring about integration of subsystems and elements of those subsystems to reduce policy fragmentation. Strong approaches to governance can be categorized as BSPRs since they have the ability to bring about integration.

The BSPR is a useful for examining policy problems that require comprehensive approaches for alleviation (May & Jochim, 2013). BSPRs are grounded in the idea that it takes a strong policy regime to accomplish integration—a regime with authority to make the necessary changes within the system (e.g., revising regulations, developing standards, reallocating staff) in order to overcome fragmentation. A strong BSPR is characterized by considerable authority to make policy changes (May & Jochim, 2013) and requires enactment of most, if not all, of the eight governance functions described previously and depicted in Figure 1 (Gomez, 2014). These governance functions serve as inputs enabling system integration (Kagan, Araujo, Aguayo, & Jaimovich, 2016).

There are challenges and limitations to integration—chiefly, that it is difficult to achieve and sustain. Findings from research on implementation science emphasize that new interventions take between 2 and 4 years to create, operationalize, and sustain (VanDyke & Naoom, 2015). Ambitious system-level innovations like integration could take even longer. Fixsen et al. (2005) make the point that new interventions/structures/cycles often fail because change is difficult to sustain. Critical to the success of integration is allocating the appropriate amount of human and fiscal capital as well as adequate time to implement the reform and to make adjustments based on feedback from staff and consumers (i.e., early childhood programs). An additional limitation is that integration at the subsystem level will not solve policy problems like chronic underfunding of the early childhood system. Likewise, while integration may bolster program quality and help States achieve system coherence, it often requires significant fiscal investment up front, which may be a barrier for many States (Gomez, 2014).

Discussion

Coordination, alignment, and integration are not mutually exclusive. Rather, depending on a State's context, culture, values, and goals with regard to its early childhood system, a combination of coordination, alignment, and integration, or all three may exist within the system and serve different purposes. For example, in States where certain early learning programs are under the auspices of a state department of education (e.g., typically publicly funded prekindergarten) and other early learning programs are under the auspices of a state department of health and/or human services, integration of program management may not be possible. In such cases, coordination between agencies and alignment of program and workforce standards could be beneficial to enhancing the services provided to children, families, and the workforce.

Authority is a prerequisite to carrying out any kind of governance function, but the degree of authority needed to achieve subsystem coordination is far less than is necessary to carry out functions needed to accomplish alignment and integration. To achieve subsystem integration, States often have to undertake reallocation of human and fiscal resources, as well as revise regulations and standards. Such actions would likely require approval from policymakers in the executive or legislative branches of government.

Not to be underemphasized, coordination and alignment are critical to system functioning; the examples of such efforts and their relevance to system development presented earlier highlight how the field is thinking about coordination and alignment to further its efforts to create functional early childhood systems. Coordination is the beginning point of systems building, and is useful in instances where system stakeholders want to begin to bring together previously siloed programs and services (Kagan & Cohen, 1997). Alignment goes one step further than coordination, enabling consistency across programs and services by creating a unified set of standards to which all programs must adhere. Alignment is critical to achieving higher levels of program quality and ensuring equitable access to these programs (National Accountability Task Force, 2009).

As states grapple with the challenges and opportunities of building early childhood systems, coordination and alignment continue to be key outcomes for these systems. As system-building efforts mature, however, some States are adopting theories of change that embrace integration as a desired outcome. In Pennsylvania and Maryland, for example, part of the vision for governing these State's early childhood systems was to "insist on alignment and integration across all programs" (Dichter, 2015, p. 62) for the purpose of creating a set of challenging yet achievable expectations to which all early learning programs would be held (Graffwallner, 2015). Integration, it seems, is the final frontier of systems building—a proposed elixir to the persistent problems of duplication, inefficiency, inequity, and low quality in early childhood.

Attempting to provide concrete and viable examples of coordination, alignment, and integration at the state level, part 2 of this paper offers three state case examples of early childhood subsystem integration and discusses other State's efforts to achieve alignment and coordination within and across subsystems.

Part 2. State Case Studies of System Integration

To understand States' efforts to achieve subsystem integration, we conducted semi-structured interviews with individuals working in the following seven States: Georgia, Maryland, Mississippi, Ohio, Oregon, South Carolina, and Washington. Of these States, three had recently completed integration of two or more subsystems—Ohio, Oregon, and Washington. We present these efforts here as distinct case studies, and briefly summarize the remaining four States' work on integration. Interviews with each of the seven States rendered important findings about the particular aspects of the integration efforts in those States, including the challenges catalyzing the need to develop a more integrated approach. Each interviewee also offered important insights into the *process* of system building. Findings from all seven States are presented after the case studies as part of a cross-case analysis that identifies common themes.

Methods

The process of data collection and analysis for this paper employed qualitative methods. We relied on a "snowball sampling" technique to identify States working on subsystem integration, meaning that we contacted individuals working in ACF's federal technical assistance network to determine which States were working on subsystem integration and, of those States, who within them might be able to speak about that ongoing system building work. Interviewees were contacted and asked to participate in a single semi-structured interview and were provided the questions in advance. Following the interview, each interviewee was provided with a transcript of the interview and was asked to review it for accuracy. For those States featured as case studies, interviewees were also given copies of the case study drafts to review for accuracy prior to publication.

Case 1. Monitoring Integration of Ohio's QRIS and Licensing

Ohio has integrated its monitoring component of the Ohio Step Up To Quality (SUTQ) QRIS with its licensing program. That is to say, individuals who are conducting the licensing visit to ensure that regulated child care programs are complying with health and safety requirements set forth by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) also conduct the verification visit to determine what that program's QRIS rating will be (i.e., retention and renewal of the rating level or an increase/decrease of the rating level). The purpose of this integration is to ensure that programs receive a high quality of services with regard to licensing and SUTQ

verification, ensure consistency in what is being communicated to programs about licensing regulations and SUTQ standards, and reduce duplication in staffing and fiscal expenditures.

The history of the reform effort in Ohio begins with the 2005 pilot of the SUTQ subsystem. ODJFS created a new unit of specialists to conduct verification visits to programs participating in SUTQ. The staff working in the new unit were given the same job classification as those staff who conducted licensing visits. In fact, many of the individuals working in the licensing unit at the time applied for positions as SUTQ specialists. As SUTQ transitioned from the pilot phase to full implementation, more SUTQ specialists were hired in five district offices throughout the state. This meant there were two parallel units in each district office: one unit that conducted licensing visits and one that conducted SUTQ verification visits. The two units communicated minimally even though their caseloads may include the same programs. Often times, district office licensing staff would drive 2 to 3 hours to visit a program and find their counterpart at the program conducting a SUTQ verification visit. Essentially, ODJFS was paying two staff to travel to monitor the same program in different areas, meaning there were duplications in staff time and travel. More importantly, however, this was overwhelming and often confusing to providers, especially if staff from other state agencies (e.g., the food program) happened to show up on the same day. To address the problem, ODJFS attempted to implement coordination mechanisms where the staff from both units would communicate regularly, but this was challenging, especially if there was turnover or a change in leadership at the child care program level.

In 2011, Ohio applied for and was awarded a Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge Grant (ELCG). Part of the OH ELCG plan necessitated that the State focus on collaboration and coordination within and across state agencies. These efforts began with enhanced collaboration between the ODJFS and the Ohio Department of Education's (ODE) public preschool program. Historically, ODJFS and ODE had communicated minimally, but ELCG provided the necessary inducement for these agencies to work together to develop a jointly administered QRIS. At this time the SUTQ subsystem changed from a three-star to a five-star program that would apply to child care *and* publicly funded preschool programs in Ohio. This alignment was groundbreaking in that it helped ODJFS and ODE staff begin to think about systems development in new ways. This new thinking included a revision of the way that licensing and SUTQ verification visits were conducted.

State agencies analyzed the monitoring structure of sending two separate staff to conduct licensing and SUTQ verification visits. They thought there might be a way to merge the two units and have one individual complete both tasks for a particular program. Although there was some resistance to this idea among a few state staff, most were ethusistaic about the concept. To propose a change was to propose a philosophical shift, as the licensing and SUTQ verification visits had been viewed as accomplishing wholly separate tasks with different purposes. It was always believed that SUTQ is built on top of the licensing standards and that quality cannot be achieved without minimum health and safety. Therefore, serious licensing violations may impact a program's elieebility to participate in SUTQ and remain apart of SUTQ. As such, licensing visits were an important baseline to SUTQ verification and not completely separate.

After some deliberation and after reaching out to other States and to federal TA partners, ODJFS staff decided to try integrating the units as an experiment. From a human resource allocation standpoint, the SUTQ and licensing specialists were classified as the same type of employee, so integration of the two units was easy to achieve. From a culture standpoint, however, the process of integration needed to occur gradually. There are now 75 staff in the integrated unit, and it has taken about 1.5 years to cross-train the staff from both units. ODJFS began with small cohorts to allow for discussion and cross-pollination of ideas.

As with any new concept, staff had to adjust to the dual work in their caseload. In December 2016, Ohio will implement a joint licensing and SUTQ database which will make the verification process more efficient for staff. However, ODJFS and ODE leadership continues to assess the integration for effeciencies and effectiveness and is open to revisions as appropriate. Addtionally, staff are encouraged to reflect on the process and to make recommendations about how to further streamline or enhance the monitoring process.

ODJFS has not yet implemented any formal measurement process to determine whether the integrated approach to monitoring is successful. This is, in part, because staff are still in the beginning stages of implementation. Feedback from providers has been positive though. Notably, providers have expressed relief in not having to distinguish among different state roles. One person can now answer any question that the provider has.

By 2020 all early childhood programs in Ohio receiving public funds must be rated by SUTQ, and by 2025 all programs have to have reached a three, four, or five-star level. These ambitious targets for enrollment and movement are driving the work of the ODJFS leadership and monitoring unit. ODJFS and ODE acknowledges that it will need all staff well trained long before 2020 so staff can provide as much support to providers as possible. To that end, the ODJFS' goal is that by November of 2016, all specialists will be trained on all job functions and be appropriate staff reliable with each other in how they conduct monitoring visits (e.g., scoring criteria on the Ohio Classroom Observation Tool, interpreting the standards), and the new monitoring unit will be fully operational.

Case 2. Integration of Multiple Subsystems in Oregon

The Oregon Early Learning Division (ELD) within the State Department of Education has integrated several aspects of its early childhood system, including integrating its professional development (PD) registry and its QRIS subsystem with its licensing/regulatory subsystem. Specifically, Oregon has developed a data system that links the PD registry with the State's licensing database. Licensing staff now have access to program staff's PD record, and can easily check to determine whether they have completed the annual professional development required by licensing standards. Prior to 2012, licensing staff had to examine paper files at child care programs to determine whether the staff had met professional development requirements. Even more cumbersome, family child care providers were required to mail PD certificates to the central office. These forms would then be sent to licensers to verify that the program had met the requirements for the year.

As for the QRIS subsystem, Oregon has built its QRIS off of the foundation of licensing. Prior to thinking about quality, a program must first meet all health and safety standards. ELD developed the QRIS standards under the premise that if the standards are contained in licensing standards, the QRIS standards do not need to address them. In this sense, there is good alignment between the licensing and QRIS standards. Oregon's unified data system, however, enabled ELD to take quality assurance once step further by linking the licensing data to the QRIS subsystem.

When an early childhood program applies for Tier 2 (called commitment to quality) through Tier 5, ELD conducts a compliance check via the database. A program may not have more than two "serious valid" complaints within a 2-year period. If the database shows that a program has exceeded this limit, they cannot retain their rating or move up a tier. To achieve this level of integration requires not only a streamlined data system, but also a high level of collaboration between the compliance/licensing staff and the QRIS monitoring staff. If, for instance, a program is a Tier 3 and the licenser gets a report of a complaint, the licensing staff will reach out to the QRIS staff to have a conversation about whether the compliant should be classified as a "serious valid" complaint. If it is, the staff will work together to develop a corrective action plan for that program and to determine whether it is appropriate for the program to maintain its current rating.

The principal theory of change behind integrating the PD and licensing and the licensing and QRIS subsystems stems from a belief that the ELD should support all subsystems and, whenever possible, these subsystems should be integrated. Integration helps support early childhood programs to achieve quality. Integrating PD and licensing, for example, helped state officials better understand the needs of the workforce. Once the integration had been completed and data was available about what types of PD providers were participating in, ELD modified the standards to be clearer about what trainings were acceptable for licensing standards and what could serve as a baseline set of PD for QRIS. Additionally, it was important for ELD to work closely with licensers to understand what compliance issues were common so they could develop PD to address these issue. Moreover, ELD's philosophy of quality situates basic health and safety requirements as precursors to quality. If a program is out of compliance, it cannot be considered to be quality, regardless of its QRIS tier level. As such, developing mechanisms to communicate issues of compliance to QRIS staff and provide TA/feedback to the program was paramount.

Up to now, Oregon's efforts at integration can be described as retrofitting already existing subsystems to achieve integration. Undoubtedly, this type of work comes with challenges, both technical and process in nature. Interviewees from Oregon acknowledged that any type of system change will alter people's work. It was a major culture shift when the database was first created. Licensers had been verifying PD via paper, and now they had to rely on information input into the database and had to trust that the individuals inputting the data were doing it

correctly. The work of humans is inherently relationship-based and making the transition from human relationships to a data system can engender a feeling of loss. That was a challenge that staff and leadership had to work to overcome. This type of culture barrier was also present when integrating licensing with the QRIS monitoring. When the compliance checks began to matter to a program's rating, it increased the stakes for the licensers and child care programs. Providers had to get used to the fact that their issues with compliance could affect star retention and movement over a longer period of time. Licensers had to become comfortable that findings that they reported would have a bigger impact on the program's status within the QRIS than previously.

Despite these challenges, ELD staff are looking toward the future and hoping to create new policy reforms so that integration is present at the outset. Oregon is about to launch a new preschool program Preschool Promise. This program is an expansion of publicly funded preschool that will make use of a mixed-delivery model and will require all participating programs to adhere to the QRIS standards. It is this type of alignment and cross-program integration that Oregon hopes to continue in the future. To guide this work, ELD has launched a "breakthrough team," which has been charged with thinking creatively about building systems on top of systems. This team has already come up with new ideas that ELD is working on implementing. For example, the State is developing a process through which intentional referrals can be made from licensing to child care resource and referral agencies to expedite TA to programs that need it; developing nonexpiring licenses; and examining how licensers can conduct monitoring for quality standards above basic health and safety. ELDS feels these ideas will help Oregon continue to move from coordination and alignment to full system integration.

Case 3. Washington's Integrated Subsidy and QRIS Subsystems

Washington State's Department of Early Learning (DEL) has integrated its child care subsidy program with its QRIS, Early Achievers (EA). Once programs have achieved a certain Star level in the EA system, they can get reimbursed at a higher rate than the State's market rate for children/families who are eligible for child care subsidies. The tiered reimbursement rate that providers receive is based on actual payments for each child. For example, if a child is in care for 20 days, the program bills for 20 days of care in the month and receives a total base payment of $400 (20 days x $20/day). If the provider is rated at a level 3, they get an additional tiered reimbursement payment of $60 (15 percent of $400) for that child in that month. The goal of this policy reform is to acknowledge the fact that a commitment to continuous quality improvement and to achieving higher levels within the EA system has fiscal implications. The tiered reimbursement approach to subsystem integration is designed to support programs by offsetting the cost of quality care.

Washington State began working on integrating subsidy with its QRIS nearly a decade ago. In 2005, the QRIS was piloted in Washington on a small scale. As a result of this pilot, DEL quickly realized there was a high cost associated with attaining and then maintaining higher levels of quality. Programs at higher EA levels could not be sustained by baseline subsidy or by private paying families alone. Washington needed to support with one time capital investments but also ongoing investments. DEL reached out to other States to learn how they met these needs, and found that some States had attempted to alleviate the fiscal burden of quality on early childhood programs via a tiered reimbursement approach. DEL brought in a consultant to figure out how to set tiered reimbursement rates.

DEL needed to take into consideration several contextual factors in designing the tiered reimbursement system. One major factor DEL needed to consider in setting the rate for tiered reimbursements was the contracted rate the State had negotiated with the SEIU 925—the labor union that represents family child care providers and license exempt providers in Washington State. Another factor was the Child Care and Development Fund required market rate survey. DEL and the consultant used these rates (SIEU negotiated rates and market rate) as data points to develop base rates and the tiered increments of reimbursement for the QRIS for the family child care system, and adopted similar rates for the center-based programs. To date, DEL has been successful in increasing the base rate for family child care providers, but less successful for centers. The reimbursement rates are still slightly under the true cost of care. To attempt to alleviate this issue, DEL will do another cost of quality analysis in 2017 to look at what it takes to achieve quality across location and program types. These data will be used to make the case for additional funding.

One major challenge that DEL faces is that it is now mandatory for all programs that accept child care subsidy to participate in EA, and in the next few years these programs will need to attain a Star 3 (this is a result of

legislation passed in 2014). That requirement has spurred DEL to determine what that right connection is between cost of quality and subsidy rates. Tiered reimbursement may become less of an incentive to participant in EA and to move up in the levels now that law requires participation. DEL, however, views it as its job to make sure the reimbursement rates are attractive enough to compel providers to accept subsidy and deliver high-quality care. This includes making the case to policymakers for additional financial resources as needed.

Two additional challenges relate to those individuals that DEL is charged to serve: early childhood providers and families. As DEL makes system changes that push programs to achieve higher levels of quality, there has been an increased level of anxiety among the workforce. DEL continues to figure out ways to acknowledge providers' commitment to young children and their history of work while also encouraging them to pursue higher levels of educational attainment. The additional financial supports provided to programs via tiered reimbursement and other fiscal awards associated with higher levels of EA can ease some of the anxiety associated with additional professional development. The challenge in working with families is that many are not attuned to the importance of early learning, especially high-quality early learning. DEL's outreach to and engagement with families has yielded information about families' priorities with regard to selecting care: affordability and convenience. As such, DEL is working to develop a system where affordability and convenience align with quality; tiered reimbursement is the first step in achieving that goal.

DEL staff remain committed to increasing the degree of integration present in their early childhood system. At present, DEL is undergoing a major alignment effort. All standards—licensing, Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (Washington's state preschool program), and EA—are being revised for horizontal alignment. Recognizing that DEL developed these sets of standards under different circumstances and for different populations, it now knows that there are providers working in various settings trying to navigate three (or more) distinct sets of standards. After DEL completes the process of standards alignment, it will begin to figure out ways to integrate program monitoring with coaching and professional development supports. DEL is also interested in thinking about how to integrate QRIS monitoring with licensing, as has been done in Ohio.

Other State Integration Efforts

In addition to the integration achieved by the three states highlighted via full case studies, Georgia, Maryland, Mississippi, and South Carolina are engaged in integration efforts that are important to include in this paper.

Georgia and Maryland both have consolidated approaches to governance; the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) and the Maryland Division of Early Childhood Development (DECD) within the State Department of Education administer the majority of programs and services targeted to young children, their families, and the workforce. Given these approaches to governance, both States think about policy and program management in an integrated way. Stated differently, the structure and functions of DECAL and DECD enable these States to govern in an integrated way. Rather than needing to seek authority from, or collaborate with other entities to make policy changes, DECAL and DECD, as entities, are imbued with that authority.[2] Interviewees from both States emphasized that they have the advantage of taking a system-level view rather than focusing on a single program or subsystem. DECAL, for example, has fully integrated data and research into its different state programs (e.g., preschool, QRIS). The information technology and data staff are all at the table with program and policy staff when it is time to make decisions.

In South Carolina, the Division of Early Care and Education has developed an integrated approach to program accountability. The process of integration began with recognition that the licensing process was inefficient; early childhood programs would sometimes have to wait years to get their licenses. What division staff found was that the health and fire inspection component of the licensing visit was what was holding up the process. Division staff worked to get the fire and health marshals to be under the division's purview so that the process could be streamlined. Now the fire and health marshals work directly with the licensers, and there is a feedback loop about what is going on in programs. The division director has a way to hold health inspectors accountable for

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[2] Though not discussed in the Washington case study, it should also be noted that Washington's Department of Early Learning is a consolidated approach to governance. Consolidated approaches to governance can be defined as an entity under which the majority of early childhood programs and services have been subsumed.

completing their portion of the licensing visits, and the compliance visit process is completed efficiently. The division approaches much of its work from an accountability lens. The division structure, communications, and policies are all streamlined and aligned, for the purpose of ensuring that early childhood programs receive the feedback and support they need from the division to provide high-quality services to young children and their families.

Mississippi is focusing on developing an integrated data system that will link its licensing unit to the agency that is the Child Care and Development Fund lead. Mississippi's challenge is that the licensing unit is housed in the Department of Health while the remaining services to young children and families are housed in the Department of Human Services. As such, an integrated data system is seen to be an essential component of streamlining supports to programs and for holding programs with compliance issues accountable. At present, the two departments are coordinating with each other via formal information sharing. There is recognition from both departments, however, that an integrated approach to data management is essential. Integration is especially important for the small amount of mutually exclusive clients served by the Department of Health and Department of Human Services (i.e., the Department of Human Services serves some nonlicensed programs that are in the subsidy program, while the Department of Health serves some programs licensed but not in the subsidy program). Developing a data system linkage will allow both departments to know immediately if there are compliance issues so that subsidy payments can be halted or revoked. Mississippi also recognizes that an integrated data system is essential for numerous other reasons, some as simple as changing or updating phone numbers or the primary contact at programs.

Part 3. Cross-Case Analysis: Findings and Lessons Learned from State Interviews

Each State featured in part 2 has its own unique story, and its efforts at integration have been driven by state-specific policy challenges as well as each State's culture, context, and values. Indeed, when asking interviewees what advice they might provide to other States thinking about integration, all interviewees stressed that what they had accomplished in their States was very context-specific and may not work for others.

However, there was some consensus among interviewees. Findings yielded seven commonalities related to the integration process, the challenges of integrating across programs and subsystems, and lessons learned. Organized by theme, States wishing to engage in integration find these common findings useful to take into consideration when developing a vision and plan for integration.

Problem Identification, Vision Setting, and Planning

Interviewees from each State began the discussion about integration with a historical perspective about why integration was needed. Embedded in these histories was a vision for how the State might solve a policy challenge. Whether it was for the purpose of reducing redundancies—as with Ohio's monitoring system—to expedite processes that were taking too long and placing an undue burden on programs—as with South Carolina's fire marshal inspections—or to offset the cost of high quality education and care—as with Washington State—each State identified a policy problem and developed a vision for how to solve that problem.

Once a vision was articulated, States began the process of planning for implementation. Each State's planning process differed; some moved toward implementation fairly quickly, preferring to experiment with different solutions (e.g., Ohio), while others engaged in a more formalized and iterative planning processes for moving forward with solutions to the identified policy problem(s) (e.g., Oregon's breakthrough planning teams). Regardless of the timeline set by States for developing a plan and then moving from planning to implementation, all began with a planning phase. The planning phase enabled each to garner support and solicit input from stakeholders within the government (e.g., governor or agency head, individuals from lateral units), and from individuals within the early childhood community (e.g., early childhood advisory council members, teachers, directors) who would inevitably be affected by the integration reform.

Transparency

The second commonality among States was an emphasis on transparency throughout the integration process. Closely related to the findings about engaging stakeholders in the planning process, there was consensus among the interviewees that transparency was key during the process of enacting the system changes required to achieve integration. In Maryland, for example, transparency has been a hallmark of governance integration since the policy reform began in the early 2000s. The interviewee emphasized the need to engage all possible partners (even nontraditional partners) as early in the process as possible. The more people who are aware of the change, the less chance there will be that a critical partner will be excluded.

Interviewees did distinguish between transparency in information sharing and the individuals involved in the planning and implementation work. That is to say, all interviewees felt it was important to have a high degree of transparency and a constant flow of information to all stakeholders about the integration reform, but the number of people informed about the work was greater than the individuals actually involved in the planning and implementation work.

Human Resource and Fiscal Allocation

The third theme that emerged from the data was related to allocation. As States began working to integrate within and across subsystems, one of the first planning tasks to be completed was determining what resources needed to be allocated in order to successfully implement the envisioned integration reform. In all cases, fiscal allocations were necessary—both reallocations of existing dollars from one program/subsystem into the proposed reform as well as new allocations. In some States, new allocations requested were to support infrastructure development and, as such, were a one-time or limited-time investment. In other States, new allocations were required to support the success of the integration itself (e.g., increasing the tiered reimbursement rate required Washington to come closer to the actual cost of care). States wishing to engage in subsystem integration may wish to conduct a fiscal analysis of both the startup costs/infrastructure costs associated with integration as well as ongoing costs.

In addition to fiscal allocation planning, States needed to engage in planning for human resource allocations. As noted in the Ohio and Oregon case studies, integrating two previously disparate subsystems required reassigning personnel, and sometimes the creation of new jobs. In some cases, States had to plan for the time and cost of training staff. For example, Oregon staff had to learn a new data system, and Oregon staff had to be trained on new monitoring processes as well as on inter-rater reliability. Given these findings, resource allocation is a potential important consideration for States thinking about integration.

Culture Shifts

Closely associated with the issue of human resource allocation, a fourth finding from all State cases is the issue of culture shifts taking place, both within government and in the field as a result of integration. As stated previously, each State articulated a policy problem that they sought to alleviate via integration. Solving the problem meant changing the existing conditions and, in many cases, how the subsystems themselves operated. Change meant that there was a necessary adjustment period for internal staff affected by the integration reform. Each interviewee talked about allowing time for staff to adjust to the reform. In some states, like Ohio and South Carolina, staff were intimately involved in designing the integration. In others, like Mississippi and Oregon, staff were affected by the change once it was completed (i.e., the data system was built and they needed to learn how to use it). Regardless, all interviewees emphasized giving staff time to learn the new technical processes associated with integration, but also to reflect on and navigate the changes in work culture that inevitably occurred as a result of the reform.

In some States, there was also a shift in the culture of the early childhood field at large. In Washington, Maryland, and Georgia, for example, integration brought about new sets of standards and regulations, as well as new quality assurance processes. In Ohio, early childhood programs had to adjust to one visit for both licensing and QRIS instead of two. Many of these changes were received positively, but interviewees reflected on the integration process and acknowledged that system change can create anxiety among early childhood program staff. States underscored the importance of developing mechanisms through which providers could express concerns, ask

questions, and learn more about new expectations. This could come in the form of a toll-free hotline (e.g., South Carolina created this as a way to allow providers an easy way to ask state staff questions) or holding public forums throughout the State to disseminate information about the changes.

Time for Implementation and Reflection

The fifth theme identified by interviewees was the need to allow adequate time for implementation of the components of integration. Some interviewees discussed this issue in terms of the need for creating a series of feedback loops. Feedback loops can be defined as mechanisms through which individuals involved in the integration can implement the reform (or a component of it), gather information about how the reform works, and use that information to make changes to the implementation process as needed. Implementation itself requires sufficient time to be done well, but building in time for feedback loops adds a layer of complexity and will require additional time. States stressed the need for building in ample time for this type of reflective work.

Beyond Coordination and Alignment: Integration for Continuous Quality Improvement

When asked whether they thought coordination and alignment were different from integration, all interviewees said yes. This is the sixth commonality among interviewee's responses. Interviewees' comments about coordination focused on the voluntary nature of coordination and collaboration, stating that this was important but often did not go far enough toward creating system coherence. All interviewees recognized the importance of alignment to system functionality, especially with regard to horizontal alignment of different sets of standards (e.g., licensing, QRIS) and assessments.

With regard to integration, interviewees' conceptualizations of integration focused on the intertwining or blending of subsystems as the essence of integration. Stated differently, alignment and coordination target two separate subsystems to enable them to work together. Conversely, interviewees felt that integration was when the system worked as whole.

Many interviewees framed their work on integration as being couched within a continuous quality improvement (CQI) framework. The seven interviewees saw themselves as stewards of the early childhood system, and felt that a major aspect of their roles was to work constantly to create an efficient and effective early childhood system that supported programs and providers to provide high quality-early learning experiences to young children and their families. They viewed integration as the necessary next step in the CQI cycle. The notion that systems work is not static, but a continuously evolving process of improvement—of which integration is a critical part—could be a useful to States that are in the process of conceptualizing their systems and attempting to discern what integration might mean for their States.

Outreach and Engagement

The seventh area of consensus among interviewees was recognition that they had a responsibility to act as educators and advocates for the systems work they were trying to accomplish. Interviewees, for instance, cited a need to be able to clearly convey to policymakers the importance of creating subsystem integration so that policymakers would be more willing to invest the fiscal resources needed to accomplish subsystem integration. In Washington State, this undertaking entails educating policymakers on the econometric returns and the neuroscientific research about the importance of children's experiences during the first 5 years of life to brain development.

In addition to policymakers, interviewees cited the need to engage with agency counterparts who might be able to contribute to the design of the integration reform. In Ohio, for example, the ODJFS bureau chief meets with his counterpart in the Department of Education regularly to ensure good coordination and consistency. This relationship proved fruitful when beginning the process of integration, because the Department of Education had recently implemented a similar reform and could share lessons learned from its experience.

Several interviewees stated that they viewed early childhood programs and providers as the main constituents of systems, rather than young children and families. Children and families, while still important to provide outreach to, were the clients of programs and providers. Within this paradigm, they sought to ensure that the system was designed to support programs to become the highest quality possible, so that programs and providers could effectively support young children and their families. Integration was a primary mechanism through which system coherence could be achieved, but integration could not occur without regular engagement with programs and providers to garner buy in to the reform. States thinking about integration may find utility in this way of thinking about programs and providers as the primary clients of state systems.

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