

Season 2, Episode 3, Version 2

Dr. Bernadine Futrell

Narrator:

Welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters, a podcast for early childhood professionals and strategic partners, hoping to use research to inform policy and better serve children, families, and their communities. Today we get a federal perspective on the benefits of mixed delivery systems as modeled by Head Start for decades. We also discuss the strategies used to incorporate community voice into options for families. Hosts Richard Gonzalez and Missy Coffey sit down with Dr. Bernadine Futrell, Director of the Office of Head Start at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. That's right now, on Early Childhood Policy Matters.

Missy Coffey:

Hello and welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters. I'm Missy Coffey, Senior Principal Education Researcher, and Director of the PDG B-5 Technical Assistant Center with SRI International

Richard Gonzales:

I'm Richard Gonzalez, Director of the Interagency and Special Initiatives Division, and the federal project manager for Preschool Development Grants Birth through Five, within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care.

Missy Coffey:

Today we're discussing comprehensive early childhood systems. We're so happy to welcome Dr. Bernadine Futrell to the podcast. Thanks so much for joining us, Dr. Futrell.

Dr. Bernadine Futrell:

Thank you so much for having me. It's an honor to be here.

Richard Gonzales:

Dr. Futrell, I think we wanted to start with a very basic question. Why do states need a comprehensive early care in education system?

Dr. Bernadine Futrell:

Thank you. I love this question. I'm going to take us back to Head Start's history. With Bronfenbrenner's work around systems for children and families, where the graphic we hold very dear to our hearts in Head Start has a child at the center, and there are circles around it. Every circle has a different level that impacts that child. It considers all of the various entities, players and things that impact that child, such as school, such as preschool, childcare, access to healthy food. All of that is a part of a system. When you think about out an ECE system and why we need that, the idea is that this comprehensive space includes all the types of programs and services for young children, programs can then become integrated and really start to mirror and reflect what we expect the children to experience when they go to K12 settings, et cetera. What we know about that is, it's that approach, that comprehensive approach, that leads to that long term change that we're all looking forward to and expecting.

Missy Coffey:

Yeah. That's a great reflection on the comprehensive assistance building work across states. I wonder how you see this relating to the provision of more options for parents through a mixed delivery system.

Dr. Bernadine Futrell:

All parents deserve access to a high-quality early childhood programs, no matter where they live or how much money they make. The idea of a system is integrating all the key features around what it takes to move and support children, that includes things such as childcare, such as preschool, such as health. The idea here is to bring programs together, bring children together in a way that parents have a choice and they can know with confidence with that state system, that whatever type of program you're going to, there's some consistency in what the educators know and are able to do. It's the idea of, as a parent, I have options that meet all the needs of my children, then ensuring that every child has access to high-quality programs and instruction so that they can succeed in kindergarten and beyond.

Richard Gonzales:

Maybe the next question that comes to mind for me is, if I'm someone new in the state level and I'm trying to figure this out, and I want to have that effective system that's going to speak to the needs of parents, who do I need to be thinking about, who needs to sit at the table with me, who needs to effectively help me create this system?

Dr. Bernadine Futrell:

I appreciate that question. I always approach questions with, who should be in the room, who should be in this conversation, who should have a seat at the table. Also, thinking who's not here, which voices are we not hearing? Because, it's so important that all stakeholders, not just those who we think are the prime stakeholders, but everybody who will benefit. For Head Start, we've been doing this across the country for years. In every state, Head Start is there, and in most communities. When you start to say, who needs to be at the table, you have to start with the communities that will be partnering with you in it, those who benefit. Again, I think everybody benefits. Having that real opportunity to think about who's in the room, who should be in the room and what perspectives and voice you have there. For Head Start, we've always been an important part of the system in states because we offer that federal to local lens, that lens where the local community is able to inform and move ahead.

Missy Coffey:

Love to hear more on that. Dr. Futrell, specifically, what's the state's role? If you can talk a little more about what role specifically you see states play in building out those infrastructure pieces to support the parental choice that you've mentioned and the community based models that better support the communities that they're serving.

Dr. Bernadine Futrell:

I think the state has to play a strong role in providing support for collaboration across these different program types and being that bridge builder. Also, ensuring that there is a meaningful seat at the table when it comes to making decisions that benefit all children and families. When we're talking about children and families, from a perspective, and for Head Start, we talk birth to five, but it's looking at that whole individual from everything that's happening in the community, everything that happens in the home, everything that happens in the school or the preschool, and extending that, so that child is supported. For the state, I think the states are doing some really great work in building these bridges.

Dr. Bernadine Futrell:

I know some states are putting set asides that guarantee a certain percentage of slots are delivered in community based programs that ensure that the system is mixed delivery. I know there are also states that really support the meaningful inclusion of children with disabilities in their program. It's about being that bridge. I always say looking for the blind spots, the state can play a role in making sure that everyone is at the table. Everyone has equal access to the highest quality, and that there are certain consistencies, again, that parents can expect in their choice, while also letting the local entities and a local communities work together. But the state to me, is the key piece. It's the center, it's bringing it all together and providing that support and that structure that allows things to grow from one or two programs working together, to a comprehensive approach that happens in a state.

Missy Coffey:

In a follow up to that, what do you think the biggest barriers to states playing that role might be?

Dr. Bernadine Futrell:

I think every state is unique and different. I will say that. There's no one barrier that I think all states would probably agree to. I think generally, it's going back to making sure the key relationships are there. As ideas are getting developed, as systems are being unpacked, how to make sure the right players are in the room, because when you have systems, when we say mixed delivery and we get that perspective when it comes to the benefit for parents and choice, but when you start talking about programs that are completely different, that have different accountabilities, even different goals, physically different locations, so one size fits all may not work even within a state. Having the ability to navigate, first to know that, to understand the differences, then also to navigate in a way that brings unity. I think that, I don't want to call it a barrier, let's call it a hurdle.

Richard Gonzales:

Dr. Futrell, if I am a state trying to make sure that I am successful, what are the elements? What should I be looking for to determine that I have in fact been successful in creating such a system?

Dr. Bernadine Futrell:

Thank you. I appreciate that question. What I think about is voice, choice, and results. Voice and choice, that's a part of building an equitable system. Your system is successful if you have the right voices, informing the decisions that are being made, also if there's choice. There's a design where there is an opportunity, again, as we like to think about parents having a choice of what works best to integrate and connect with their own experiences. Where communities have a choice to stand up programs and be a part of a larger system, but also be able to stand up programs that work.

Dr. Bernadine Futrell:

When I talk about results, I mean, what are those outcomes that impact children, families, and communities within the state? Thinking of it from that lens, I would say, use those three metrics to say, do we have the right voices, do we have opportunity for variability in choices, and are our results impacting the three key stakeholder groups that we're targeting, children, families, communities. I think with that, it's going to look different for each state, what that means, but having that as a lens, as a filter, I think is ideal and a way to start.

Richard Gonzales:

Dr. Futrell, you've been talking about the importance of Head Start in the work that you've done in the field these past years. I guess the question I have for you, have you seen examples of innovations or strategies that are taking place, that have led to successfully supporting Head Start, but successfully supporting this community approach, would you have any innovative examples that you could highlight for us?

Dr. Bernadine Futrell:

Oh, yes. There's so many states that are finding ways to really alleviate and address some of those barriers that we talked about. Some states are creating consolidated, local level governance structures that bring together their Child Care subsidy programs, the Head Start, the Local School Districts at the county level. We talk about it as braiding and blending funding. North Carolina in particular, has built a network of over 75 local partnerships that consolidate resources to improve quality and responds to community needs. This is essentially a one stop shop approach that lessen the burdens for parents as they try to navigate between and access the comprehensive services, and also allows for consistency in what is expected.

Dr. Bernadine Futrell:

West Virginia, they passed the state law that ensures 50% of their pre-K classrooms would be in community based settings, including Head Start and Child Care. Each county in that community has community stakeholder collaborative teams that create a delivery plan and budget for the community and for the county's pre-K slot. That's a unified approach to identifying slots. Mississippi passed the Early Learning Collaborative Act that established a pre-K grant program. This program provides grants to early learning collaboratives that are made of the Local School District, Head Start programs in the community, private schools and licensed Child Care centers.

Dr. Bernadine Futrell:

For these collaboratives, they establish stakeholder councils that focus on improving the quality of early childhood education, curriculum assessment instruction, and even program evaluation that really helps to align the programs across the state to better support children and families in their community. These are some examples where the state has put up some supports that really help ensure that the right people are there, that there are opportunities for others to be involved. It brings together different program structures and services that offer families real high quality choices for their children.

Richard Gonzales:

Those are great examples. Thank you so much, Dr. Futrell, for telling us about them. If we had more time, I'd love to have you talk about more states, but we'll let you do that another time. I guess the next question I wanted to ask was, in light of everything you've said already, why is having the mixed delivery system so critical to a successful, comprehensive early childhood system?

Dr. Bernadine Futrell:

That is the essential question. Creating a strong mixed delivery system is important and critical. When you say critical, that really helps to anchor the importance of it. It really allows us to increase the quality of all programs, as well as identifying ways to be more efficient within the system, because there's some things already built in. When you have these silos of excellence, in terms of programming, there may be some inefficiencies when it comes to parents and families having access to the services and support that

they want for themselves and their children. If we're able to better align the programs within a mixed delivery system, we can allow parents and other programs within the system to really know what services are available, what services they are lacking, if there're a program or services they would like to expand or scale. This information really is key to making decisions that really reduce inequities from the program's perspective, from the family's perspective, from the state perspective.

Dr. Bernadine Futrell:

It also can help target investments, where to build, where to scale when it comes to program services. Also, it could flag opportunities for additional support that leads to higher quality programs across the system. Mixed delivery system allows a wraparound from the perspective of a state to really bring in key areas, to highlight and scale things that are great, that we want more of, and to flag things that we might want to consider revisiting how we do it, or layering on additional services when it comes to what's best for children and family. I think we have a once in a generation opportunity to really make the investments, lay the foundation for really strong, mixed delivery, comprehensive ECE system, where no matter where you live, what your zip code is, you have access to a high quality early childhood education program.

Dr. Bernadine Futrell:

To me, having that right, that opportunity is a game changer when we talk about outcomes, not just for children, but for families and for communities. I'm grateful for this conversation. I know for Head Start, we're always thinking about moving the whole community, moving the whole family, moving the whole child. A comprehensive systems approach allows more children to have access and benefit from this idea of a unified approach to serving in communities. I appreciate that and I'm very excited about it. We're up for the challenge, but it is a once in a lifetime, a once in a generation opportunity that we have in front of us. I am grateful to be doing this work alongside all of you.

Missy Coffey:

Well, I'm sure we could talk about this all day, Dr. Futrell, but unfortunately we'll have to leave it there. Thank you so much for sharing your expertise with us today and your perspective. I think it's really helpful to feel, to hear how Head Start is part of the conversation, so thank you so much.

Dr. Bernadine Futrell:

Thank you so much.

Narrator:

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