

Why Does Systems-Building Matter in Early Childhood?

Guests: Dr. Ruth Friedman and Dr. Joan Lombardi

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're looking at comprehensive early childhood systems building, and speaking with two national leaders about the growth of those systems and some ongoing innovations in states across the US. Hosts, Richard Gonzales and Missy Coffey, sit down with doctors Ruth Friedman and Joan Lombardi. 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 Assistance Center with SRI.

Richard Gonzales:

And I'm Richard Gonzales, director of the Interagency and Special Initiatives division, and the federal project manager for Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five within the US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care.

Missy Coffey:

Today, we're very happy to welcome Dr. Ruth Friedman, director of the Office of Child Care with the Administration for Children and Families at the US Department of Health and Human Services. Thanks so much for joining us today, Ruth.

Ruth Friedman:

Thanks for having me.

Missy Coffey:

And we're also happy to be speaking with Joan Lombardi, who directs Early Opportunities; a philanthropic advisement service organization focused on the development of young children, families, and the communities that support them. Thanks for joining us, Joan.

Joan Lombardi:

Sure. It's great to be here with both of you.

Richard Gonzales:

So, Joan, we have a few questions about early childhood mixed delivery systems. We've been getting a lot of questions from the field, and some uncertainty about how a mixed delivery system is different from systems development in general.

So could you talk to us a little bit about your perspective on what exactly a mixed delivery system is, and maybe this whole idea of systems?

Joan Lombardi:

Let me step back for a second, because there's a lot of people that use the word system. And we first have to start with: what do we mean? And really, in its simplest form, a system is a set of things that work together towards a common goal. They create a whole.

And our goal, in the early childhood development system, is exactly that. Our goal is to promote strong, healthy early childhood development. That's the overall goal of an early childhood development system. It really has to be based on the sound principles of child development. And let's just talk about those for a second.

First of all, what do we know? We know that the domains of development in children are integrated, one affects the other. Physical, social-emotional, cognitive, they're integrated. So why is that important when we talk about a system for early childhood development? Because you can't separate education and health, they go together. They're interrelated. And so the system has to recognize that.

Secondly, we know that one developmental period builds on another through the life course perspective. And why is that important? Because when we think about an early childhood development system, we need to design it so it covers the prenatal through five, or the prenatal through eight, years of a child's life. We also know, from child development, that children grow up in families; and families are affected by communities and communities by the policies that surround them.

So the bottom line, before we even start talking about what a system is, we first have to ground it in principles of child development; because that will help us define what it is about the system that we're talking about.

So let me get to your other question though, Richard, which is: what do we mean when we talk about a delivery system, particularly within the part of the overall early childhood development system that is about service delivery? Because I think when you use the word mixed delivery system, you're not referring to the overall system that I just described, but you're looking at one part of that system, the early care and education part of that system, and how you deliver services. Do you deliver them in centers? Do you deliver them in family child care? Do you deliver them to relatives and neighbors and friends, what we call family, friends and neighbors?

In a mixed delivery system ... which the US has always had when it comes to early childhood ... what we are talking about is delivering whatever program you mean, the preschool program or the childcare program, whatever the label is, in that range of settings that are available in any community. That's what a mixed delivery system is.

So you're not just using one kind of program, you're allowing a range of programs. Why? Because that's what parents choose. Parents are using an array of programs and they're changing constantly throughout the life course of a child.

Richard Gonzales:

I think that's right Joan, because the difference between Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge and Preschool Development Grants Birth through Five ... although there was much similarity between the two ... was this real emphasis on all those other supports. It was looking at health, looking at nutrition, looking at the social supports for parents, looking at a greater role for meaningful parent engagement.

Those are things that, while they were part of Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge, they weren't necessarily highlighted. Whereas with PDG Birth to Five, we went out of our way to say, "We're not only interested in your service delivery, whether that be Head Start, child care, pre-K, home visiting, but we're interested in making sure that you're looking at the whole child and the needs of the whole family."

So, Ruth, we would like to start by asking you a question about states and territories and tribes, and why you feel they need a comprehensive early care and education system.

Ruth Friedman:

Thanks, Richard. So I think we want to think about it in terms of what more we should be doing, as a country, for families with young children. I think we need to be doing much more to support our families. And having a comprehensive early care and education system is one essential piece of this.

The reason being that, we need to make sure that children are fully supported when they are out of the care of their parents. That means across all the domains of their development: language and literacy, cognition, health and mental health, physical, social-emotional, and their approaches to learning.

We know that the first five years of life are so important for giving children the leg up they need to thrive. And their early care and education system is just the core component of this. We want to make sure that young kids have comprehensive wraparound services available to them and we want to make sure that we are supporting family wellbeing, because ultimately it is the strength of that family that best helps and supports child development.

Missy Coffey:

So, Ruth, as the director of the Office of Child Care, I'd love to hear your opinion on the role played by child care in the systems building conversation.

Ruth Friedman:

Missy, I think child care is just essential to families and to businesses and to the parents who need it and depend on stable child care in order to go to work and provide for their families. It hits on every piece of our community. And I think we've seen this more than ever during the pandemic, about how vital child care is to the overall functioning of our communities. Our businesses can't function unless families have stable child care, families can't go to work, and children can't have the supportive environments that they need when their parents need to be at work.

So it really is just central to understanding how we can best support children and families during those early years in life.

Richard Gonzales:

So, Ruth, I want to shift for a second. And I wonder if you have any information on how PDG Birth to Five grants are supporting the states in their efforts to implement a comprehensive early care and education system?

Ruth Friedman:

I think the states are really doing interesting and innovative work with their PDG Birth to Five grants. As always, I think the states are leading in finding ways to support in early care. One of the ways we've seen is coordinated enrollment, coordinated eligibility systems, and centralized intake. This is something that can be really challenging at the systems level, because there are multiple funding streams.

My understanding is that Indiana created an online application process for families to access ECE programs and child care subsidy. New Jersey expanded their network of central intake hubs, which provides pregnant women and families easy access to resource information and referrals to community services that promote child and family welfare and to include early childhood mental health specialists.

Which is so important. And there are other states that are also working on these sorts of systems, including Colorado, Minnesota, Louisiana, Oregon, and South Carolina.

We're also seeing states make connections to child welfare systems, which is incredibly important. Washington has used their PDG Birth to Five funds, in part, to help scale the Help Me Grow program, which is working closely with their Department of Children, Youth, and Families, the child welfare piece, to design a referral pathway for substance exposed infants and their caregivers who meet newly defined thresholds, as part of their Plan of Safe Care mandate.

And we're also seeing all sorts of pathways being developed around workforce; professional development, learning and credentialing, there's work being done on infrastructure and articulation agreements, transformation of credits and career and education pathways. The workforce is obviously just critical to developing a high quality early care and education system.

And then we're also seeing transitions from childcare and preschool to kindergarten being better facilitated, which is also a really critical transition point for children. Hawaii has developed online kindergarten transition training modules. Minnesota has developed a kindergarten transition toolkit webpage. And Missouri developed training to support elementary principal's knowledge and understanding of the ECE system.

So states are finding ways to bridge the ECE system with that next step in the elementary schooling. And that's just so important, both for kids as they make that transition but also for parents as they move from the child care system to the public school system.

Richard Gonzales:

So, Joan, let's shift a moment to a discussion and about the infrastructure that is needed to create a comprehensive early childhood system. What would you say that infrastructure is?

Joan Lombardi:

Yeah. Well, that's a very excellent question and really important. So in any one of these sectors, whether it be health, early care and education, family support, there have been infrastructure that have been developed around them; data systems, financing systems, and the policies that go with them, workforce, supports, all the pieces that provide support to the service. I like to refer to that as the infrastructure, it's the bridge that holds all those services together and supports them.

Over the course of time, each one of these different sectors, whether it be health, early care and education and family support, have developed their own infrastructure. And that's one of the issues that we have to deal with now. Because if we want to track what children are doing and how well they're doing, our data systems have to be integrated, our planning has to be integrated and coordinated. That means the people who have traditionally worked separately in their silos, whether it be family support, health, early care and education ... and, again, more and more, the economic development people in a community have to plan together.

And I think one of the more exciting things that I see across the country is when communities come together ... not programs specifically, but a whole community ... and they set a goal, "We want this to be the best place to raise a child. And we want healthy births and children thriving at three, and ready and successful at five. That's our community goal."

You have to reach that goal by working together. Not everybody has to do the same thing. I used to say this all the time, Richard, that when we were working across agencies we don't all have to do the same thing, but we have to row together.

Missy Coffey:

And, Ruth, do you have any additional thoughts?

Ruth Friedman:

So national experts have identified the major components of a state comprehensive early care and education system. The idea is that these components are really essential to building a comprehensive system of services. Those components include a platform of early childhood or mixed delivery programs. So that includes child care, Head Start, Early Head Start, pre-K, programs like home visiting are a key piece of this. It also includes state early childhood policies and standards, which are the base for making sure that programs are high quality and meeting the needs of children's development and wellbeing.

The governing body is also really important. That can be the State Advisory Council or governor's Children's Cabinets. States have found different ways to do this. But it really does seem to be important to bring all those people to the table and make them part of a governing body that can be ensuring that the system that's being developed meets the needs of all the different partners in the system.

You also need state and local coordination structures. This helps state policy to be more responsive and in touch with community needs. And it's really important to have a mechanism for two-way communication and decision-making.

There are other pieces I think that are also really important to the system. That would be things like an accountability system so that we are always moving towards continuous improvement; taking what we can learn from how things are going and how we can strengthen the program in ways that will improve child wellbeing and do a better job meeting the needs of parents and families.

An integrated data system is something that I know many states are working hard on. But there are many challenges and I think we still have a ways to go. But, ultimately, we want to get to a place where we have data systems that help drive data driven decision-making.

It's really also important to include family engagement opportunities, that includes support, training, and leadership opportunities. Head Start has really been a leader in the field for so long when it comes to family engagement. And it would be great to see other early childhood programs able to carry over some of the lessons from Head Start.

Workforce standards and competencies and professional development, I think are really critical. Again, the workforce is the most core piece of providing a high quality setting for young children.

In addition to that, defining other quality programming is really important to quality standards and supports ways in which we can continually work to improve the classroom practices, strengthen interactions between child care providers and young children, and make sure that these programs have all the support that they need in order to provide an excellent environment.

Missy Coffey:

Those are really great examples. And part of that, there's so many different infrastructure pieces there. I wonder if there are innovations that you've seen that demonstrate that shift towards having a comprehensive system?

Ruth Friedman:

Yeah. We absolutely have been seeing a lot of innovation, I think, in the early childhood field in recent years. One area is more innovation in system political governance and financing. There's a trend, across states, to shift their governance approach to one of improved coordination and integration. And states

are also creating dedicated revenue streams for early care and education. The stability of those revenue streams are really, really important for building a strong system.

We're also seeing more linkages between different divisions. So linkages between early learning and child welfare. I think we are seeing better coordination between early learning and special education services. And some states have moved to consolidating ECE divisions within a state agency to try to facilitate some of these connections.

We're also seeing really interesting innovation for stronger system connections. Ohio is one example. They've integrated their monitoring component of their Ohio Step Up To Quality, which is their QRIS, with their licensing system. Individuals who are conducting the licensing visit to ensure that regulated childcare programs are complying with health and safety requirements also conduct the verification visit to determine what that program's QRIS rating will be.

So that's a really great way, both to bring efficiencies and expertise into the system and make it feel like a more cohesive approach for the providers. Ohio has also implemented a joint licensing and QRIS database that supports the verification process and is more efficient for their staff. So that's another great example.

And then we're seeing innovation for their early childhood workforce. States are trying to use some of their American Rescue Plan dollars to help early educators extend their education. Arkansas, for example, is proposing to increase its investment in the T.E.A.C.H. program to over \$40 million in the next two years. Which could mean that thousands of early educators could complete their degrees and contribute to a stronger child care sector.

When the district of Columbia approved its fiscal year '22 budget, it included recurring local funding for part of its landmark Birth-to-Three law in order to increase early educator compensation to parity with public school teachers, to fund early educator compensation. In fact, the DC council raised the personal income tax for individuals with income over \$250,000.

So I think we're really seeing a stronger connection, recognizing that we cannot continue with a system where the child care workforce is so drastically underpaid for the skilled and essential work that they are doing.

Richard Gonzales:

So, Joan, I wanted to go back to something you said earlier about working communities and the way communities can have this holistic approach. Are there innovations that you would point to, or examples that you would point to, that might be valuable for us to emphasize as we try to get states to do more community work around this?

Joan Lombardi:

Well, I think, yes. I think when I was at HHS and we started, one of the first things we did was we brought communities in to talk to us. And I think that's one of the things that states and federal officials need to do, is listen to communities. Because they can tell you what the barriers are to what they're trying to achieve.

And whether it be Bridgeport, or Palm Beach, or Ventura, or Tulsa, all over the country people are coming together across these sectors to create an early childhood development system that meets the holistic needs of children, prenatally through school entry or beyond. I mean, that's what's going on.

The hard part is that policies are not made that way. And so all these policies come down from the federal and state level in these sector buckets, with different infrastructures and different requirements. And so it's a challenge. It's a challenge for people. It's a challenge for families.

One of the really interesting innovations are family navigators. They're helping families figure out how to access services, because it's complicated. And we have to try to make it simpler.

Missy Coffey:

Well, you've both given us a lot to think about. And we appreciate the perspective you've given us on systems building efforts from the field. Ruth and Joan, thanks so much for sharing your time with us today.

Ruth Friedman:

Thanks for having me.

Joan Lombardi:

Thanks Richard. Thanks Missy. Anytime.

Narrator:

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