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Early Childhood Systems Building Resource Guide: Strategic Plans



CHILD CARE

State Capacity Building Center

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Strategic planning is an essential part of early childhood systems building, providing a state and its partners with a coherent vision and roadmap. Chapter 2 of the Systems Building Resource Guide provides an overview of key concepts linking strategic planning and systems building, describing what strategic planning is and its importance to systems building. This chapter presents key elements, quick tips for strategic planning, and dangers to avoid in the planning process. It also provides an organizational design approach that helps to accelerate the work getting done, examples of statewide and city-specific strategic plans, and resources.

Strategic Planning and Systems Building

Strategic planning is “a deliberate, disciplined approach to producing fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization or collaborative is, what it does, and why.”¹ It’s the systematic process of bringing key people together to envision a desired future and develop goals, procedures, and sequential actions to realize that future.² The strategic planning process helps stakeholders examine existing practices; test assumptions; gather, analyze, and synthesize information to frame strategic choices; and anticipate the environment in which the organization, network, or collaborative will be working in the future. Strategic planning helps establish the direction of future work by identifying “desirable, feasible, defensible, and acceptable” missions, goals, and strategies as well as establishing measurable outcomes.³

Strategic planning is a primary driver of systems building because it is a tool for evaluating, aligning, and revising the discrete components that must be connected to establish a system. Strategic planning helps leaders and key stakeholders to define, support, and commit to a shared vision and the belief that the vision can happen.⁴ This process, in turn, increases the likelihood that the vision can be achieved. There is growing demand for ways to “institutionalize programs and policies into durable systems.”⁵ Strategic planning can be complex work,⁶ but is essential to systems building, which “transforms the discrete pieces of direct services and infrastructure into a coherent early childhood system”⁷ with the goal of creating “an orderly assemblage of interrelated programs and infrastructure that provide equitable, accessible, comprehensive, and quality services for young children.”⁸

Strategic planning offers opportunities for stakeholders to unify. There are multiple stakeholders involved in early childhood care and education programs and policy. So strategic planning is a vital way of establishing a common foundation to build, enhance, and sustain systems to improve services and policies for children, youth, families, and communities. Strategic planning brings together diverse interests and unifies them around a clear vision for the future. This process has increasing importance for the early childhood field, which has long been fragmented but is undergoing profound change.

Technical Assistance in Systems Building for State Leaders

Technical assistance to support systems building, including strategic planning, is available through the State Capacity Building Center. Technical assistance may be available through other federal technical assistance centers. Please check with your State Systems Specialist for more information.

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Strategic planning offers benefits to state agencies. The process of strategic planning provides the following benefits to organizations:⁹

- Promotion of strategic thinking, acting, and learning through strategic conversations and deliberation among key actors;
- Enhanced organizational decisionmaking, which is important since studies have found that almost half of all strategic decisions fail due to poor organizational decisionmaking processes;¹⁰
- Enhanced organizational effectiveness and resilience through better management;
- Enhanced organizational legitimacy; and
- Enhanced effectiveness of broader systems.

All of these organizational benefits are essential to inform thoughtful, deliberate systems building efforts. They also help sustain energy, focus, and public value on the ongoing planning and continuous improvement needed to keep systems relevant and responsive.

Strategic Planning in a Nutshell

This section presents the core elements of a strategic plan, provides quick tips for Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Administrators, and highlights some of the dangers to avoid while engaging in strategic planning.

Elements of a Strategic Plan

Every strategic plan is different, but they all have the following components. The following list describes the pieces of a strategic plan in the order that they are typically developed.

- **Mission statement.** This statement is an overarching expression of your purpose and aspiration. It states what goals you want to accomplish and how the organization seeks to accomplish them. The statement is a declaration of why you exist as an organization or partnership.
- **Vision statement.** This short, concise statement answers the question of what your organization or partnership will look like in 5 or more years.
- **Guiding principles.** These statements are enduring, passionate, and distinctive core beliefs. These never change and are part of your strategic foundation. The guiding principles should represent the diversity of the group.
- **SWOT.** A SWOT is a summarized view of your current position, specifically your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Conducting a needs assessment is another way to address needs and gaps between current conditions and desired conditions.
- **Value proposition.** This is a clear statement that includes what you are best at compared to other individual organizations or partnerships by
 - explaining how your organization or partnership solves problems or improves its situation;
 - delivering specific benefits; and
 - telling your partnership's unique story.
- **Long-term objectives.** These long-term strategic focus areas cover a 2- or 3-year time span. They answer the question of what you must focus on to achieve your vision.
- **Strategies.** These are the general methods you use to reach your vision.
- **Short-term goals, priorities, or initiatives.** These items convert the strategic objectives into specific performance goals that fall within the 1-year to 18-month time span. They state what, when, and who, and are measurable.

Key Partners to Involve in Strategic Planning

The strategic planning phase provides CCDF Administrators with the opportunity to cultivate new, and nourish existing, strategic relationships and partnerships. These partnerships build legitimacy and committed leadership for strategic planning efforts.

Successful planning and systems building requires commitment from leaders at multiple levels. In particular, it will be useful to do the following:

- **Short-term goals, priorities, or initiatives.** These items convert the strategic objectives into specific performance goals that fall within the 1-year to 18-month time span. They state what, when, and who, and are measurable.
- **Logic model.** An organized diagram that indicates the planning, implementation, and evaluation of a program.
- **Action items or plans.** These specific statements explain how a goal will be accomplished. They are generally executed by teams or individuals within 1 to 2 years.
- **Scorecard.** You use a scorecard to report data from your key performance indicators and track your performance against monthly targets.

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- **Financial assessment.** Based on historical record and future projections, this assessment helps plan and predict the future, allowing you to gain much better control over your organization or partnership's financial performance.

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Quick Tips for CCDF Administrators and Their Partners

Before you get too far into your strategic planning process, consider the following tips.

- **Deepen your understanding of the current state landscape of early childhood education (ECE).** Look at both services and system administration in order to define the scope of the strategic planning effort. Identify the authorities or agencies that receive funding and administer the programs and services. Seek to understand how they currently interact or collaborate. Assess the current political and budgetary climate in the state as it relates to moving a systems building agenda forward.
- **Pull together a diverse, appropriate group of people to make up your planning team.** Diversity leads to a better strategy. Bring together a small core team of staff and partners—between 6 and 12 leaders and managers—who represent every area of early childhood. Consider the role of existing advisory and oversight bodies and how they will be included. Identify and include experts from outside traditional early childhood domains who may add value to this process. Encourage these key people to discuss with staff, partners, and stakeholders their perception of the future.
- **Allow time for big picture, strategic thinking.** People tend to try to squeeze strategic planning discussions in between other efforts, such as overcoming challenges. To create a strategic plan, you and your partners and team need time to think big. Do whatever it takes to make that time for big-picture thinking, including gathering your partners and team offsite and allowing enough time for planning.
- **Get full commitment from key people in your organization.** Ensure that you have support for strategic planning from your organizational leadership. In addition, if your team does not buy in to the planning process and the resulting strategic plan, this will reduce your likelihood of developing or implementing a successful plan.
- **Use a facilitator if your budget allows.** Hire a trained professional who has no stake in the plan's outcome. An impartial third party can concentrate on the process and can ask the tough questions that others may fear to ask.
- **Allow for open and free discussion regardless of each person's position within the organization or partnership.** This tip applies to everyone, including the CCDF Administrator. Do not lead the planning sessions. Encourage active participation, but do not let any one person dominate the session.
- **Clearly articulate next steps after every planning session.** Before closing the strategic planning session, explain what comes next and who is responsible for what. When you walk out of the room, everyone must fully understand what he or she is responsible for and when to meet deadlines.
 - Determine a timeline for key tasks, plan development, and implementation.
 - Determine a process for internal and external stakeholder engagement.
 - Identify the types of engagement planned for various internal and external stakeholder groups (for example, working groups and focus groups) to acquire feedback on the planning process.
 - Determine other means for collecting input from the broader stakeholder population and building interest and support for the planning work (for example, surveys, and social media).
 - Consider the process for incorporating stakeholder feedback into the planning process and proposal development.
- **Think about execution before you start.** It does not matter how good the plan is if not executed. Implementation is the phase that turns strategies and plans into actions in order to accomplish objectives and goals. The critical actions move a strategic plan from a document that sits on the shelf to actions that drive success.

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- **Make your plan actionable.** To have any chance at implementation, the plan must clearly articulate goals, action steps, responsibilities, accountabilities, and specific deadlines. Everyone must understand the plan and his or her individual role.
- **Test assumptions.** Identify your key assumptions and then step back and think about whether they are consistent with your current situation. Are there data to support or disprove your assumptions? Are your assumptions relevant? Are they based on logic?
 - Identify and test assumptions about state-based policies or regulations that might be posing constraints to systems-building efforts.
 - Identify and test assumptions of disparate agency policies and procedures that must be reconciled to ensure program consistency and streamlined service delivery across the system.
- **Don't write your plan in stone.** Good strategic plans are fluid, not rigid and unbending. They allow you to adapt to emerging opportunities and challenges. Don't be afraid to change your plan as necessary.
- **Make strategy a habit, not just a retreat.** Review the strategic plan for performance achievement no less than quarterly and as often as monthly or weekly. Focus on accountability for results, and have clear and compelling consequences for missed deadlines.
- **Don't forget to plan for sustaining your work.** Create an ongoing process for decisionmaking regarding what, why, and how to sustain work. This way policy, initiatives, and programs connected with your strategic plan are continuously improved, adapted, or discontinued to achieve intended outcomes and goals. Sustainability should be part of the strategic plan.

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Dangers to Avoid When Strategic Planning

Strategic planning can yield less than desirable results if you end up in one of the possible planning pitfalls. To prevent that from happening, here's a list of the most common traps to avoid:

- **Not having a burning platform.** A strategic plan is an outstanding tool if you use it. But you and everyone on your team need to agree on why this effort is important so the plan gets used. What is your burning platform that is causing you to invest in this effort now?
- **Relying on bad information or no information.** A plan is only as good as the information on which it is based. Too often teams rely on untested assumptions or hunches, erecting their plans on an unsteady foundation.
- **Ignoring what your planning process reveals.** Planning isn't magic: you can't always get what you want. The planning process includes research and investigation. Your investigation may yield results that tell you not to go in a certain direction. Don't ignore that information.
- **Being unrealistic about your ability to plan.** Put planning in its place. It takes time and effort to plan well. Some organizations or partnerships want the results but aren't willing or able to make the investment. Be realistic about what you can invest. Find a way to plan that suits your available resources, including your time, energy, and money.
- **Planning for planning's sake. Planning can become a substitute for action.** Don't plan so much that you ignore the execution. Well-laid plans take time to carry out, and results take time to yield an outcome.
- **Not having your house in order first.** Planning can reveal that your organization isn't in order. When an organization pauses to plan, issues that have been buried or put on the back burner come to the forefront and can easily derail its planning efforts. Make sure your organization or partnership is in order and reduce conflicts that exist before you embark on strategic planning.
- **Ignoring your culture and organizational readiness.** Strategy and culture are intimately intertwined. Ignore this fact at your peril—culture eats strategy for lunch (and dinner if you're not careful). With that in mind, adapt your planning to fit what you know works for your current organizational rhythm, philosophy, and needs. A big pitfall is not fitting the process to your organizational needs. Consider a simpler process or one that's more robust based on the organizational culture.
- **Avoiding “no.” Strategy is about defining what your organization or partnership will do to achieve its goals.** No agency or partnership, however, can do everything. A good strategy says “yes” to some possible actions, but says “no” to others. If your mission statement is so broad that it encompasses everything, if your values statement praises all that is good, or if your strategy says that you will be all things to all, then you need to learn to say no.
- **Not connecting to actions. Your strategic planning can produce a reasonable approach to improving supports and services for children and families, and then nothing happens.** Everyone goes back to the office and proceeds as if nothing has changed. Without action steps, the big picture strategy is useless. To develop those steps, the team has to identify actions that are necessary to carry out the strategy. Devote resources—staff and money—to implementation.
- **Vague action steps.** These are examples of vague action steps: “We'll work smarter, not harder,” “We'll foster a culture of accountability,” or “We will honor our partners and clients.” These vague thoughts are sometimes listed as action steps, but they fail to do the job. A good set of action steps helps people to know what to do first. If your strategic plan fails to define what the key team members will do and by when, then it needs good action steps with a definitive timeline.

A good strategic plan does more than urge stakeholders forward toward a goal or vision. A good strategic plan honestly acknowledges the challenges being faced and provides an approach to overcoming them. And the greater the challenge, the more a good strategy focuses and coordinates efforts to achieve powerful results or problem-solving efforts. Accelerating Implementation of Your Strategic Plan

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Accelerating Implementation of Your Strategic Plan

What's needed to accelerate implementation of your strategic plan, argues John Kotter, a leading expert in this area, is an organizational design that has not one, but two "operating systems." One system conducts the everyday business of your organization or partnership, while the second system, more like an agile network, sits alongside to focus on the opportunities and demands of the future. Kotter outlines five principles and eight "accelerators" that fuel this new dual system in his book, [Accelerate: Strategic Agility for a Faster-Moving World](#). The book describes large-scale systems and organizational change. Fifteen years ago, in [Leading Change](#), Kotter offered readers eight steps to create more speed and agility in their processes. Accelerate takes those steps and "turbocharges them." Under a dual operating system, all processes and activities that involve what an organization or partnership already knows how to do stay on the regular, hierarchical side of the company. High-stakes initiatives that involve change, speed, innovation, or agility go to the new agile network.

The principles of Kotter's dual operating system are as follows:

- **Be inclusive.** Important changes are driven by many people from everywhere in the agency or the larger early childhood system. In a hierarchy—whether an early childhood systems partnership or top management in an agency—there is typically a limited number of people who are trusted, and leadership often returns to them time after time. That system doesn't work because these trusted people eventually burn out or move on, and the system isn't inclusive enough.
- **Shift the mindset.** Change from a "you have to" to a "you get to" mindset. With this approach, which emphasizes to partners and staff the privilege of working with great people on important work, you don't have to assign tasks. People who feel privileged to be involved in an effort will volunteer.
- **Don't forget to engage hearts.** Focus on action that is head and heart driven, not just head driven. Most people won't want to help if you appeal only to logic with numbers and research. You must also appeal to how people will feel about doing important work to make big change for the system or agency.
- **More leadership, less management.** For desired results, there needs to be more leadership and less management. To take advantage of unpredictable opportunities that might pass quickly, and to spot and avoid unpredictable threats, leadership is required beyond one leader.
- **Integrate the two operating systems.** There needs to be an inseparable partnership between the hierarchy and the network. The two systems work as one constant flow of information and activity. The approach succeeds partly because the people who volunteer for the network are already working on important issues for the field.

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Examples of Strategic Plans

Taking a look at the strategic plans of others can be useful in getting started. This section provides both statewide and city or community-specific strategic plans, including brief overviews of plans and approaches.

Statewide Strategic Plans

Delaware

Delaware's strategic plan builds on one of its great strengths—the capacity to mobilize across all sectors to address communities' most pressing challenges. A broad-based partnership of policymakers and advocates, early childhood educators and service providers, families, and public/private partners has been responsible for most of the early childhood improvements over the past two decades. That partnership is now expanding and refocused to fully support all children as they grow, develop, and learn. Mobilization of this partnership is the key to sustainability. The Delaware Early Childhood Council has organized committees that will advise and guide the implementation of the strategic plan to make Delaware's early childhood system one of the most successful in the nation. View the [Delaware Plan](#).

Massachusetts

The Massachusetts strategic plan builds on the strengths of the original Massachusetts Board of Early Education and Care's plan and adds new goals, aspirations, and strategic directions for the agency. It provides a clear set of goals, priorities, and actions for a 5-year period. View the [Massachusetts Plan](#).

Michigan

The Michigan strategic plan involved an extensive community input process, building on strengths identified by the many stakeholders who were consulted in the plan development, and identifying system gaps and weaknesses. View the [Michigan Plan](#).

New Hampshire

The New Hampshire Comprehensive Strategic Plan for Early Childhood 2013–2016 identifies common priorities and activities to enhance the coordination and alignment of New Hampshire's early childhood system. The plan was guided by Spark NH, the governor-appointed Early Childhood Advisory Council. Spark NH is a private-public partnership charged with creating a comprehensive coordinated system of programs and supports for young children and their families. The New Hampshire strategic plan describes the complexity of three service sector areas, five system levels, and seven function areas. View the [New Hampshire Plan](#).

Oregon

Oregon's strategic plan was developed by the state's Early Learning Council, covering a 5-year period. It provides a chart-based format with goals, metrics, and strategies. View the [Oregon Plan](#).

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Washington State

The Washington State Early Learning Plan is the state's roadmap for building an early learning system. The plan was created with input from hundreds of Washington residents to help make sure all children in the state have what they need to succeed in school and life. The Washington Department of Early Learning, along with partners at Thrive Washington and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, lead implementation. However, many people and groups will be part of making this plan happen: parents, providers, early learning coalitions, public health professionals, public libraries, state agencies, child care resource and referral agencies, schools and educational service districts, and more. In 2015, Washington passed the Early Start Act, which codified much of the strategic plan. View the [Washington State Plan](#) or its [executive summary](#).

City-Specific Strategic Plans

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

A Running Start Philadelphia, the citywide early learning plan, lays the foundation for providing children with the best possible beginnings in life, while seeking to mitigate the damaging effects of poverty. Guided by the Mayor's Early Learning Advisory Council, the plan brings together a full spectrum of stakeholders to work toward a common goal. To carry out this comprehensive plan, the council is joining forces with parents and caregivers; child care providers; local, state, and federal agencies; advocacy groups; business leaders; philanthropists; and technical assistance and professional development providers. View the [Philadelphia Plan](#) or its [executive summary](#).

Seattle, Washington

Seattle voters approved a tax levy in 2014 to provide “accessible high-quality preschool services for Seattle children designed to improve their readiness for school and to support their subsequent academic achievement.”¹¹ The City of Seattle's Department of Education and Early Learning (DEEL) is managing this investment. The Seattle Preschool Program Plan is a comprehensive guide for all operational details related to the first 4 years of the Seattle Preschool Program (SPP). The Seattle Preschool Program Implementation Plan sets forth the principles and policies for SPP. It also describes the requirements, application procedures, funding mechanisms, and evaluation criteria for all SPP-funded programs and services. This is a data-driven framework that holds government agencies, and those with whom they contract, accountable for tracking and reporting the results from the investment. View the [Seattle Plan](#).

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Resources

Frameworks for Strategic Planning

[*Accelerate: Building Strategic Agility for a Faster-Moving World*](#) (John P. Kotter, 2014)

This book is based on an award-winning article in the Harvard Business Review by leadership expert John Kotter. Accelerate provides a framework for being more successful in an often turbulent world. Kotter explains how traditional organizational hierarchies evolved to meet daily demands. For most organizations—public and private—the hierarchy is a singular operating system. But this system is not built for an environment where change has become the norm. Kotter advocates a new system—a second, more agile, network-like structure that operates in concert with the hierarchy to create a dual operating system. This new system allows organizations to overcome challenges and make progress toward goals and results.

[*Applied Strategic Planning: How to Develop a Plan That Really Works*](#) (Leonard Goodstein, Timothy Nolan, and J. William Pfeiffer, 1993)

Applied Strategic Planning shows managers a clear, effective way to identify and carry out strategic objectives. It presents organizational culture, integration of operational and functional plans, performance audits, gap analysis, and values clarification. The book also covers aspects of the planning process, including the following:

- Determining if an organization is ready for strategic planning
- Effectively communicating a corporate vision
- Recognizing the role of culture in changing strategic direction
- Understanding the various roles of a consultant
- Writing effective mission statements
- Creating contingency plans

This book includes charts, diagrams, and checklists along with examples.

[*Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations: A Guide to Strengthening and Sustaining Organizational Achievement, 4th edition*](#) (John M. Bryson, 2011)

Bryson provides a strategic planning model and outlines the reasons public and nonprofit organizations must embrace strategic planning to improve performance. The book offers leaders, managers, and students detailed guidance on implementing the process and specific tools and techniques to make the process work.

[*Trying Hard is Not Good Enough*](#) (Mark Friedman, 2005)

This book is for managers and decisionmakers in many different settings. The author provides practical methods for taking actions that are simple and are based on common sense, use plain language, produce minimum paper, and are actually useful to managers, community members, and decisionmakers.

The book's Results Accountability framework can be used to improve the quality of life in communities, cities, counties, and states.

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Planning and Assessment Tools

[Mind Tools](#) (Mind Tools Ltd., 1996–2015)

Established in 1996, Mind Tools helps people in leadership roles at many different levels within organizations—ranging from senior executives to young professionals. The website provides information about hundreds of useful skills and techniques. The site is often refreshed with new materials that can help you make personal development an ongoing part of your life, keeping your skills fresh and up to date. The [Strategy Tools](#) and [Creativity Tools](#) are particularly helpful.

Toolkits on Strategic Planning and Systems Development (BUILD Initiative, n.d.)

[Strategic Planning at the Community Level](#). The resources and tools in this toolkit support cross-sector, community-level collaborations aimed at developing comprehensive strategic plans that are logical and data driven and include policies, programs, and practices. The tools include strategic planning process checklists and templates, as well as examples of local strategic plans.

[Systems Development through Shared Action](#). These resources, tools, and examples support the planning and implementation of activities that cross systems and programs and focus on systemic change. Areas of shared activities work include coordination of resources and referrals and professional development.

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