The Texas Early Childhood Systems Integration Group: Engaging State Leaders to Capture Early Childhood Collective Investments and Impacts

IN BRIEF
Texas’ Early Childhood Systems Integration Group is a collaboration of seven state agencies and divisions focused on addressing issues and opportunities related to service delivery and coordination and broader systems that impact the development and well-being of young children and their families. The group offers a strategy for coordinating and aligning resources through cross-agency collaboration—a model that may be especially effective in states without a coordinated early childhood governance structure. Using federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting funds, the Prevention and Early Intervention Program leads this cross-agency effort to identify opportunities to coordinate services and systems to achieve greater impact. A facilitator helps the group use the results-based accountability framework to collect and present data.

In April 2018, ASTHO interviewed Sarah Abrahams, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services’ deputy associate commissioner for prevention and early intervention, and Jeremy Triplett, Texas Department of State Health Services’ Title V maternal and child health director, to learn more about the integration group, its process for engaging stakeholders and maintaining momentum, the key ingredients to the group’s success, and their recommendations for other states and territories that want to strengthen partnerships to support early childhood systems integration.

BACKGROUND AND GOALS

In 2013, early childhood agency leaders from four state agencies met to learn more about their agencies’ early childhood programs and services and areas of overlap. What began as an effort to better understand the early childhood landscape evolved into a coalition of seven agencies focused on coordinating services and systems to achieve greater impact for young children and their families.

The Texas Prevention and Early Intervention Program, which also oversees the state’s home visiting program, leads and provides staff support for the multi-agency Early Childhood Systems Integration Group. The group emphasizes the importance of coordinating services, as well as improving and strengthening the broader early childhood system within which services are delivered. According to Sarah Abrahams, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services’ deputy associate commissioner for prevention and early intervention, “In a state the size of Texas, there will never be enough prevention dollars to serve directly every family that presents with need; the need is too great, and the dollars are too small.”
Systems integration can enable population-level changes that reduce risk factors or increase protective factors within a community, even if they do not provide direct services. Integration, by reducing duplication of effort while more closely focusing resources on the most pressing issues, can help states and territories better use limited resources to help populations in need. For example, like other states, Texas’ home visiting program only serves a fraction of families that may need or want those services. “We are never going to be able to move the needle if we rely on direct services alone,” Abrahams says. “If we want to see population-level change, if we want to move the needle, we have to do both.”

Integrating early childhood services and systems has a strong scientific basis. Decades of research shows that there are effective population-level approaches to addressing the needs of children and caregivers to support responsive relationships, reduce sources of stress, and in the process help children and families thrive. Federal and state governments currently invest in a wide array of services and programs to support healthy child development, but these efforts do not always work in tandem. Better coordination and integration of the various early childhood services, data, and systems can help ensure that young children and their families receive the services they need to reach their developmental potential.

To that end, the Early Childhood Systems Integration Group addresses issues and opportunities related to service delivery, systems, and data coordination. Members include leaders from Texas Department of State Health Services’ Maternal and Child Health program, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services’ Prevention and Early Intervention program, Medicaid, Texas Health and Human Services Commission’s Early Childhood Intervention Services, the state workforce commission’s child care services program, the Office of the Attorney General’s child support division, and Texas Child Protective Services. The group was formed to collect and capture collective early childhood investments and impacts. Members accomplish this goal by:

- Highlighting activities that showcase mission alignment, shared vision, and collective investment.
- Focusing on data to tell the story.
- Creating buy-in around naturally-shared accountability.¹

TARGET POPULATION

While the member agencies’ various programs and services may serve specific populations, the Early Childhood Systems Integration Group focuses on strengthening and integrating those systems and services that affect young children and their families in communities across Texas.

IMPLEMENTATION STEPS

Since 2013, Abrahams and leaders in other child-serving agencies have taken the following steps to establish and guide the Early Childhood Systems Integration Group. As shown below, the group has expanded and evolved over time to address unmet needs—such as when the members determined that they did not have a clear picture of all the existing early childhood data—and take on new work when opportunities arose. The group’s implementation steps are summarized below.
Convening the Core Group
In 2013, as a new state employee charged with overseeing the Texas Health and Human Services Commission’s collaborative initiatives, Abrahams convened leaders from the Texas Department of State Health Services’ Maternal and Child Health program, Medicaid, and Texas Health and Human Services Commission’s Early Childhood Intervention Services, to learn more about the agencies’ work, constituencies, and areas of overlap. Initially, the four agency leaders focused on understanding each other’s programs and services and how they intersected at the local level. However, according to Abrahams, it became clear from those discussions that there were “untapped opportunities for cross-agency collaboration with other programs serving families with young children.”

For example, through these early conversations, partners learned that two state agencies funded the same local community-based organizations to provide Early Childhood Intervention/Part C and home visiting services, which both have federal funding sources that have identified opportunities for collaboration. “We realized we hadn’t explicitly incentivized or encouraged or talked about how those efforts were coordinated at the local level before,” Abrahams says. This experience prompted the group to articulate the collective impact of their agencies’ existing investments to ensure that local contractors knew one another and “had opened the gates for referrals” across agencies.

Engaging Other Key Early Childhood Decisionmakers
After starting small, the group realized within the first year that certain key state early childhood leaders were not at the table. “We had come together as leaders looking for support and felt there were opportunities for better coordination,” Abrahams says. To fill the gaps, the original members identified and engaged leaders from other agencies, including the state workforce commission’s child care services program, the Office of the Attorney General’s child support division, and Texas Child Protective Services.

Abrahams noted that the core group intentionally sought out members who were decisionmakers within their agencies. Unlike states with consolidated early childhood or early learning divisions, states like Texas with decentralized governance models disperse early childhood services and programs across multiple agencies that report to different leaders. “We don’t have the same leadership chain,” Abrahams says. “In order to have intentional and focused collaboration, we can’t rely on our infrastructure to provide that; we have to build it outside of the existing infrastructure.”

Providing Staff Support
Recognizing a need for staff support to facilitate and advance the Early Childhood Systems Integration Group’s work, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services allotted a portion of funds from HRSA’s Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program to allow a staff member to schedule and facilitate meetings, collect documents, create a directory of the members’ early childhood programs, and identify shared counties of focus.

Developing an Early Childhood Crosswalk
In 2017, the group created a crosswalk document to capture participating agencies’ performance measures and accountabilities. Members used the crosswalk to identify areas of shared priorities.

Examining and Learning from Local Systems Integration Efforts
The group realized that state agencies were making an intensive investment in local systems
collaboration efforts. The coordination efforts varied across communities, but Abrahams says that the group quickly realized that “we were pushing our local coalitions to move beyond service coordination work to also support systems change work.”

For example, every community in Texas that receives federal or state home visiting funds must participate in or lead an early childhood systems coordination group. Community coalitions have the option of utilizing a method such as a Results-Based Accountability (RBA) framework to identify the community’s priority outcomes. One Texas community, led by the Ready Kid San Antonio Coalition, identified happy, healthy, and school-ready children as their three desired outcomes. An RBA scorecard provides population-level indicators—such as the percentage of preschool-aged children enrolled in school or the percentage of children in families experiencing employment instability—that quantify the community’s progress toward these goals. (Please see the appendix for the Ready Kid San Antonio Scorecard.)

Using the RBA framework, the city of San Antonio developed a community dashboard, or visual scorecard, to measure population-level changes. The dashboard allowed stakeholders to direct resources to improving those outcomes they identified for children and families. The state-level integration group took notice. “We felt like there was an opportunity to replicate that methodology at the state level,” Abrahams says.

That prompted the Early Childhood Systems Integration Group to ask, “What can we really do to implement systems change and be better systems partners?” Despite the group’s progress in identifying state-level early childhood data and shared accountabilities to its grants, federal funders, and legislators, group members determined that they did not have a way yet to “tell the story” about the impact that Texas state government was having on outcomes for children and families. “There is a lot of good, innovative work happening here, and the interagency group recognized that we didn’t have a collective way to explain what our current impacts and investments in children were,” Abrahams says.

**Adopting Results-Based Accountability to Capture Early Childhood Impact**

The state-level integration group then took steps to use data and a dashboard framework to present how Texas investments were making a difference for children and families. “It’s about storytelling or trying to capture the work that’s already happening rather than projecting work that might happen down the road,” Abrahams says.

In 2017, the group contracted with Clear Impact, which certifies practitioners in the RBA framework, to facilitate meetings and walk members through the framework. According to Jeremy Triplett, Texas Department of State Health Services’ Title V maternal and child health director, a consistent and neutral
facilitator led a structured, facilitated process through which the group reviewed and analyzed data and identified specific domains of shared interest.

To start, the group lined up all its existing reports, accountabilities, and data requirements and identified a publicly-available and accessible data set that would help to tell the early childhood story. “We were explicit at the beginning that we weren’t trying to create a data project; we weren’t interested in identifying data that we weren’t already collecting or that wasn’t already publicly-available or that wasn’t being reported on,” Triplett says. “We were really focusing on building a house with the materials we already had.” For example, while members agreed that addressing maternal depression was a high priority, they lacked an accessible population-level metric. Therefore, the group decided to forego adding maternal depression to the dashboard until members could identify available data points.

The dashboard (which is not yet publicly available) identifies four early childhood domains: “children are healthy,” “children are safe,” “children are school ready,” and “children reach their full potential.” The dashboard displays indicators and trends for each of the domains (for example, it lists the percentage of pregnant women receiving prenatal care in the first trimester as one of the indicators for the “children are healthy” goal) as well as simple arrows to depict year-to-year trends. According to Abrahams, the Early Childhood Systems Integration Group’s results-based accountability work has helped members identify and track the places where priorities and accountabilities are aligned. “It’s allowed us to focus on those places where we have shared accountability,” she says.

REPLICATION AND SCALING

Texas’ approach offers a unique pathway for other states that want to strengthen partnerships to integrate early childhood systems. The collective impact and cross-agency coalition approach can be especially effective in states without a centralized early childhood office or agency. Moving forward, the group plans to develop the scorecard to track early childhood outcomes and continue to identify opportunities to better coordinate and integrate work at the service and early childhood systems levels.

TEXAS RECOMMENDATIONS AND KEYS TO SUCCESS

Staff support, a structured process, and a common goal are among the factors that have supported the Early Childhood Systems Integration Group’s ability to achieve its goals. The group’s key ingredients and recommendations are summarized below.

**Emphasize Quality Service Delivery and Coordination and Systems Change**

Texas’ early childhood leaders recognized that a dual approach of improving service delivery and coordination and addressing broader systems changes is necessary to achieving the biggest impact for children and families. Systems integration efforts can support population-level changes that improve outcomes for families not receiving direct services and address the communities within which families live.

**Leverage Federal Funds to Support Systems Integration**

Early childhood systems integration is aligned with federal home visiting requirements and objectives,
and therefore presents an opportunity for states to use MIECHV funds to support integration initiatives. The federal legislation establishing the MIECHV program requires state grantees to demonstrate measurable improvement in several benchmark areas, including maternal and newborn health, and coordination and referral for other community resources and supports. Thus, federal MIECHV funding offers states flexibility to support early childhood integration to attain improvements in the legislatively-specified benchmark areas.

**Keep the Trains Running**
Triplett and Abrahams agreed that dedicated staff support and attention to details—what Abrahams called “Meeting and Convening 101”—is a key ingredient to the group’s success. Abrahams said that sustaining members’ commitment requires two key things: demonstrating and celebrating tangible progress, and behind-the-scenes, pre-meeting preparation to make the most effective use of members’ time when they convene as a group. Abrahams said that funding for staff support enabled Texas Department of Family and Protective Services’ Prevention and Early Intervention program to assume critical project management duties—such as scheduling meetings, providing materials and data ahead of time, and orienting new members—to “keep this train moving.”

**Engage and Support Decisionmakers**
Members recognized the importance of engaging agency leaders who are authorized to make decisions on the agency’s behalf. The group is not implementing an initiative at the program level, but instead addressing coordination at the systems level. Therefore, Abrahams noted that it is important to have leaders around the table. The group meets every six to eight weeks, and member attendance was key to the group’s progress.

**Provide Training and Technical Assistance**
Triplett says that having a consistent and neutral facilitator helps the group develop competency with the RBA framework and process. “It was refreshing to have a facilitator who was an expert on the specific framework,” he says. Moreover, having an established framework accelerates the group’s progress, because members are not getting bogged down with having to develop their own process for collecting and displaying data. “We know what’s expected,” Triplett says. “We know what to do from point-to-point, measure-to-measure. It’s a consistent pattern of tasks we [perform], and it allows us to speed up.” Seeing the progress and impact further energizes the group to move forward, Triplett says.

**Have a Clear Goal and Know What Your Group Will (and Won’t) Accomplish**
Members decided early on that they were not an aspirational or target-setting group and would not be making recommendations, asking for more funding, or changing the way agencies measure outcomes. “We are trying to make the best, most efficient use of resources we’ve been given,” Abrahams says. “We took a practical, bite-size chunk out of an already-existing process to make it better.” Triplett added that having a clear goal—which is to better explain or “tell the story” about current early childhood investments and collective impacts for the state’s children and families—is key to the group’s success. “Having that common goal helps you see you’re part of a bigger picture,” Triplett says.

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APPENDIX: READYKIDSA COALITION SCORECARD

The ReadyKidSA Coalition Scorecard

The ReadyKidSA Coalition vision statement: Growing happy, healthy, ready children

A note about the ReadyKidSA Scorecard:

This Scorecard represents the work in progress of the ReadyKidSA coalition in applying Results-Based Accountability for vulnerable populations and diverse populations. Because it is a work in progress, the language, metrics, thinking and progress relative to data collection and presentation are dynamic and subject to change. The information on this Scorecard should therefore be viewed in the spirit of a community striving together towards continuous improvement on behalf of children and families.

### Happy Children

- **Indicator 1.1:** % of confirmed victims of child abuse or neglect per 1,000 children
  - 2016: 9.8
  - 2015: 9.0
- **Indicator 1.2:** % of children 0 to 17 experiencing food insecurity
  - 2016: 11.8%
  - 2015: 10.8%

### Healthy Children

- **Indicator 2.1:** % of children 0 to 17 without health insurance coverage
  - 2016: 7.3%
  - 2015: 8.2%
- **Indicator 2.2:** % of prenatals receiving late or no prenatal care
  - 2015: 43.3%
  - 2014: 48.3%
- **Indicator 2.3:** % of Kindergarteners assessed as “Vulnerable” in the emotional maturity (EQ) domain
  - 2017: 9.4%
  - 2016: 10.3%

### Ready Children

- **Indicator 3.1:** % of Kindergarteners assessed as “Very Ready” in Four or More EQ Domains
  - 2017: 23.0%
  - 2016: 27.0%
- **Indicator 3.2:** % of licensed child care capacity with an accreditation
  - 2015: 31.9%
  - 2014: 39.0%
- **Indicator 3.3:** % of 3 and 4 year olds enrolled in school
  - 2018: 54.2%
  - 2017: 58.1%