

Responding to COVID-19 and Building for the Future

June 2020

As of June 2020, it is far too early to know how state early childhood systems will be permanently changed by the COVID-19 crisis. In building and rebuilding their systems, states can benefit from good information about what local early childhood services are available—and about resources to help families access those services.

For early childhood education to succeed in the post-COVID-19 era states will need data systems that can meet the evolving needs of families, educators, and policymakers. State leaders will have primary responsibility for ensuring that those systems are able to answer key policy questions, with federal policymakers playing an essential supporting role. Importantly, many states have already been awarded federal funds through the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five

(PDG-B5) program; states may be able to use these funds to develop the capacity to meet their early childhood data needs. The federal government may also make continuing investments in state data capacity, helping states to respond to the crisis and continuing a successful bipartisan tradition.

COVID-19 has increased the need for better early childhood data, and states can address that issue in many ways, including through PDG-B5. State and federal policymakers can also improve their data systems by following key principles of development and taking specific action steps—enumerated in this brief—that will, in turn, improve child and family outcomes.

How COVID-19 Is Driving a Need for Better Data

The process of developing data systems should always start by asking why you need the data in the first place. During the COVID-19 crisis state and local early childhood leaders are focused on using data to address two very basic needs: (1) making sure that services are available where families need them and (2) making sure that families are able to access those services. These two issues have, of course, been fundamental to the early childhood field for many years, and COVID-19 has created a sense of urgency about addressing them.

Which Children Are Enrolled in Which Programs?

Early childhood programs are administered by a wide range of state agencies, meaning that in most states interagency data sharing is critical to understanding which children are receiving which services at any given time. Ideally, early childhood data will be part of a larger P–20W system that connects data from early childhood through K–12, higher education, and the workforce.

In the early childhood sector, states have struggled mightily to produce a distinct count of children enrolled in major programs. For three- and four-year-olds, the main early education and care programs are Head Start, child care, and state-funded preschool. Because Head Start is federally funded states have not generally been able to include Head Start data in their P–20W systems, and very few have even been able to connect child care and preschool data.

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States have analyzed what services are available in different geographic areas, with context provided by demographic data for each area. These analyses can be extremely

helpful—but they are typically based on year-end data and look retrospectively at which children received services. That data has significant value for long-term planning but is not useful for mobilizing resources in a crisis.

COVID-19 forced a different kind of conversation about available resources. Many child care centers shut down, but not all did—and some were pressed into service to provide child care for parents working on the front lines of fighting the crisis. Different states had different policies in these areas, but every community was forced to confront the fact that it didn't know what services were still available and how many families needed them. One leading expert on child care policy [identified](#) real-time supply and demand data as one of the most critical needs of the child care system.

Some communities attempted to put this information together on the fly, leveraging existing infrastructure where they could. One example was [King County, WA](#), which created an Emergency Child Care for Essential Workers program. Other communities have quickly started working on developing this kind of infrastructure.

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While COVID-19 emphasized the importance of data about which children are enrolled in which programs, it is important for policymakers to remember that this data is always useful for analyzing resource needs. The need may be felt most acutely in a crisis, but states and communities are always better off having data about child enrollment—which allows them to provide better and more efficient service to children and families.

How Are Families Enrolling in Programs?

Even when services are available, their fragmented nature can make them hard for families to access. Many communities have worked on “one-stop-shop” or “no-wrong-door” approaches. In a one-stop-shop approach, families have a single point of entry to access whatever services they need; with no wrong door, families can go to any provider and receive a referral for whatever services they need, even if that provider does not offer those services.

While setting up these approaches poses numerous practical and policy challenges—many related to funding incentives and a lack of local support capacity—COVID-19 may lead communities to think differently about their capacity and work together to create unified enrollment approaches. To do so, there are technology platforms that allow communities to provide online support for families looking to obtain services. In Tarrant County, TX—the state's third most populous county, with more than 2 million people—part of the COVID-19 response was rapidly establishing a [website](#) to help parents and guardians employed at an essential business find child care. After COVID-19, community leaders may want to work with families to identify how best to meet their needs in finding early childhood services. Where possible, they can engage local [resource and referral agencies](#), which are already working to help connect families to services.

Other Post-COVID-19 Needs

Ensuring that services are provided and helping families to access them are two of the most fundamental uses of data in early childhood. They need not be the only ones. In the wake of COVID-19, states and communities likely will rethink how their early childhood systems operate; [Virginia](#) is one example of a state that has already started that work. In addition to recommending policy changes to strengthen state early childhood systems, these task forces can identify key data needs highlighted by the state's COVID-19 response. If the state does not have a task force, its [federally required state advisory council on early education and care](#)—or another relevant advisory body—can provide that feedback.

How States Can Leverage Preschool Development Grants

PDG-B5 is a federal grant program administered by the Department of Health and Human Services through the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). The program provides states with support to build their early learning systems. In 2019, 46 states had one-year planning grants, which focused on the development of needs assessments and strategic plans. In 2020, [23 states were awarded three-year renewal grants](#), and six more states received one-year planning grants.

The elements of the [renewal grant application](#) in particular push states to think about how to strengthen their data infrastructure by asking states to detail how they will do the following:

- ▶ Continually update the state's needs assessment, which can identify data gaps and inform subsequent activities. Many state applications indicated a desire to use grant funds to integrate Head Start data into state systems.
- ▶ Provide parents with better information about existing programs.
- ▶ Improve collaboration among services.
- ▶ Improve quality—with bonus points for states that committed to coordinated applications, eligibility, and enrollment.

- ▶ Create an integrated data system. States were asked to discuss existing and planned linkages, data usage and literacy, governance structures, and the use of unique identifiers to create a distinct and unduplicated count of children served across programs. Requiring this narrative—and offering funding for states to address data issues—is an excellent way to help states build the infrastructure that will help them understand which children are in which programs.

States are still in the earliest stages of launching their work under PDG-B5 renewal grants. However, it's already clear that helping families access programs through [coordinated enrollment](#) may be an excellent use of PDG-B5 funds that is also responsive to the COVID-19 crisis. States will need to adhere to the plans they articulated in their applications—but they may be able to adapt those plans to the new environment. Federal and state flexibility will be needed to ensure that the PDG-B5 funds are used for maximum impact, which includes putting in place the data systems needed to ensure that all of the activities can be conducted successfully.

Key Principles for Data System Development

Whether or not states have PDG-B5 funds, they can follow some key principles in improving their data systems: Think systemically, engage the community, and prioritize speed.

Think Systemically

In the initial rush of COVID-19 response states and communities have rightly been focused on getting whatever information they can as quickly as possible. For the longer term, however, states and communities will be most successful if they put in place systems that are well thought out with all of the elements needed to serve the community—in regular times and in crises.

A recent Data Task Force of the Illinois P-20 Council made [recommendations in four areas](#):

- ▶ **Establish leadership.** The state should ensure that stakeholders are committed to a shared vision of data use.
- ▶ **Create governance and oversight.** The state should ensure that it has a governance structure capable of overseeing its data infrastructure effectively (the Data Quality Campaign has [identified some key principles for interagency data governance](#)).
- ▶ **Build capacity to support data use and management within and across agencies.** This area includes the staff and technical infrastructure needed to support data systems that are responsive to stakeholder needs.

► **Focus on providing data that is useful to end users and builds local capacity.** The power of data is in its usage, and meeting the needs of end users is fundamental to the success of the system.

Importantly, the early childhood data infrastructure should be connected to larger P–20W data systems. The Data Quality Campaign and Early Childhood Data Collaborative’s [Roadmap for Early Childhood and K–12 Data Linkages](#) offers more detailed guidance on how to build those linkages.

Engage the Community

Every guide to developing early childhood data systems includes a focus on [engaging stakeholders](#)—including [Head Start providers](#). Importantly, though, the 52 states and territories that had PDG-B5 planning grants have completed or are working on strategic plans and needs assessments. These documents represent valuable stakeholder engagement for a state’s early childhood data system, as they articulate the state’s primary desired outcomes in early childhood and its main approaches for getting there.

The best approach for states is likely to be building on the stakeholder engagement work already completed and bringing together a small leadership group to adapt the results of that stakeholder engagement for use in building out better data systems.

States with strategic plans and needs assessments should not re-create the wheel in stakeholder engagement—instead they should use these documents as the cornerstone of their data efforts. The state should also collect specific information about data needs highlighted by COVID-19. But many early childhood stakeholders likely have very limited capacity to engage in additional stakeholder engagement, especially given the impact of COVID-19 on budgets and operations. The best approach for states is likely to be building on the stakeholder engagement work already completed and bringing

together a small leadership group to adapt the results of that stakeholder engagement for use in building out better data systems.

Prioritize Speed

In an ideal world, states are in a virtuous cycle of data use. Leaders and stakeholders regularly identify key questions they want to answer. The state has the data needed to answer those questions—and the capacity to produce the answers in a fast and responsive way. Then leaders and stakeholders take the data and thoughtfully analyze it, leading to improved decisionmaking.

But many states are trapped in a vicious cycle that is just the reverse. Important data takes too long to produce, so by the time it comes it may no longer be useful. Then stakeholders ask for it less—which makes it less likely that the state will put capacity in place to produce and analyze data.

State data governance structures can be used to reorient state leaders to focus on producing data quickly in response to educator and policy leader demands. The state can provide preapproval for routine or anticipated projects and create streamlined approval processes for certain kinds of requests. Agencies will continue to control their data, and nothing will be released without their approval. Through the cloud, states can also create space for exploratory projects that allow agency partners and approved researchers to explore deidentified data, which helps data users to make better informed data requests.

Cloud technology—the use of network servers located offsite—that is already widely in use at the federal level and in industry allows states to link data more easily, reducing the amount of staff time needed to clean up data files. Maximizing states’ efficiency will require both new governance structures and a new approach to technology usage; doing one without the other will leave roadblocks in place to the rapid production of data. This combined approach is faster, less expensive, and flexible enough to allow the state to include additional partners—including Head Start providers. As part of its PDG-B5 planning grant, [Oklahoma developed a plan for just such a system](#), which it is now working to implement.

Next Steps for Federal and State Leaders

Previous federal investments in data infrastructure—including through the [Early Learning Challenge grants award in 2012 and 2013](#)—have been very impactful. The federal government can continue its valuable support in multiple ways:

- ▶ **Provide dedicated funding for early learning data systems.** The federal government will be pressured in the months ahead to support state governments whose budgets have been adversely affected by COVID-19 shutdowns. As part of that support the federal government could provide dedicated funding for early childhood data systems, either as a standalone or as part of a broader education data initiative. The PDG-B5 applications show that this issue is important to a diverse mix of states, making it an area ripe for federal support.
- ▶ **Allow flexibility in PDG-B5 implementation to account for changed conditions.** ACF has made numerous efforts to be flexible in implementing the PDG-B5 program. States that have committed to working on data systems through PDG-B5 may want to adjust their plans to account for newly identified needs, and ACF should work with states to help them maximize the impact of their grants.
- ▶ **Help Head Start to be a part of state early childhood data systems.** Under current law states that want to include Head Start data in their early childhood data systems must negotiate with each individual provider to obtain the data—an enormously time-consuming process. Many states and Head Start providers are interested in finding a better way, and at some point in the future there should be deeper conversation about a more comprehensive approach to strengthening those partnerships. For the moment, the best approach is likely to be targeted supports to states and Head Start programs that want to partner.

Improved early childhood data systems can also have a significant impact on how effectively states and communities serve children and families. In many places the development of these systems is already underway. States can take the following specific action steps:

- ▶ **Make data infrastructure a part of any conversation about the future of the early childhood system.**

Data infrastructure need not be the focus of these conversations, but it should be part of them. A recommendation from a blue-ribbon panel can be a helpful catalyst to deeper conversations.

- ▶ **Connect the work to broader education data initiatives.** Early childhood data governance and use should be part of the state's broader approach to education governance. Leaders from existing governance structures should be engaged to chart a course toward improved data production and use.
- ▶ **Have a focused work group paying attention to early childhood data issues.** An early childhood data work group can help identify research priorities, support the implementation of data initiatives, and provide a sounding board for policymakers. This group can be housed at the state's early education and care state advisory council, given that those councils are required by federal law to make recommendations for the development of unified data systems.
- ▶ **Support community-level data initiatives.** Community-level data use can be critical in the early childhood sector—including for identifying where services are needed and for helping families access those services. While state-level infrastructure is essential, it's also critical for states to help communities build their own data infrastructure. In many instances, the communities with the greatest needs for early childhood services will not have the resources and capacity to develop strong data infrastructure, so targeted state support can make a meaningful difference.
- ▶ **Leverage PDG-B5.** States can take advantage of the strategic planning and needs assessment work they have already done—and if they have renewal grants, they can use funds allocated for data systems development.

In designing data infrastructure each state should identify its own prioritized questions. Some questions for states to consider in their COVID-19 response include the following:

- ▶ How will the state prioritize which children and programs are funded? How many children is the state unable to fund?

- ▶ How do specific factors such as social distancing or work requirements, unemployment, provider openings/closures, etc. affect changes in provider capacity and demand?
- ▶ Where are there access gaps? What providers are currently offering services in areas that have or are at risk of having significant access gaps?
- ▶ What are classroom attendance rates, and what is the mix of subsidized and nonsubsidized children who are absent? Can the state track patterns of absenteeism that place programs at risk?
- ▶ Can the state forecast impacts on the level of quality that providers are able to deliver if funding and attention shift?

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