

Iowa Is Integrating Data to Understand Child Care Supply and Demand



Expanding access to high-quality, affordable early childhood services is key to states' efforts to support families' well-being, ensure that children are ready to succeed in school, and sustain a strong economy. Decisionmakers—from governors and agency heads to providers and families—want to understand the supply of and demand for these services in their community, but states' data infrastructure is not designed to meet their needs. Because early childhood data is typically housed in different, disconnected state and local systems, securely connecting data across systems is necessary for state leaders seeking to provide useful information about the fragmented landscape of early childhood services.

States are now working to enhance their early childhood data ecosystems to better meet people's information needs. The state of Iowa and its Iowa Child Care Connect (C3) system are setting the pace. Launched in 2024 and governed by leaders from numerous state offices and agencies, C3 integrates disparate early childhood data and updates it in near real-time to help families, providers, policymakers, and the public better understand child care supply and demand.

Improving Child Care in Iowa Through and Beyond the Pandemic

Like many others navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, Iowa leaders recognized the urgent need to improve child care in their state—and the role of data in doing so. The pandemic exacerbated long-standing challenges for the child care industry. Already stretched and chronically underresourced, providers struggled to keep their doors open and retain staff, while policymakers often lacked the accurate and timely information necessary to allocate scarce resources effectively. Continued demand from families seeking—but finding it increasingly difficult to access—high-quality, affordable services magnified all these challenges.

In response to a 2020 recommendation from the Iowa Governor's Economic Recovery Advisory Board, Governor Kim Reynolds created the [Iowa Governor's Child Care Task Force](#) in spring 2021 to develop recommendations for systemic improvement. The Child Care Task Force included members from Iowa businesses, nonprofit and community organizations, child care providers, and local government who convened over the course of that year. They made a final set of 15 recommendations to the governor focused

broadly on raising child care quality for families and supporting businesses, providers, and the early childhood workforce.

Notably, the Child Care Task Force [recommended](#) that Iowa “develop a central online hub for parents to quickly and easily find information regarding child care facilities, openings, and enrollment.” Online hubs—also known as centralized enrollment or family portals—rely on the



secure backend integration of early childhood data sourced from different data systems. State data leaders across the country are designing these types of public data tools as they aim to address common and persistent

information gaps for families seeking child care or other early childhood services in what can be a confusing marketplace and for policymakers wanting a more real-time view of supply and demand.

Iowa C3

Not all states integrate data efficiently, which hinders their ability to share useful information with communities and, ultimately, serve children and families. Fortunately, with its strong leadership and existing early childhood data ecosystem, Iowa stood poised to make the Child Care Task Force's online hub recommendation a reality.

Enter [Iowa C3](#)—an integrated data system that securely connects early childhood data to create better child care supply and demand information for Iowans. Housed at Iowa State University (ISU), C3 sources aggregate data from child care providers, state agency systems, and other supporting systems; integrates the data in near real-time; and uses the resulting information to populate a set of three public-facing data tools:

- [Child Care Search](#) enables families to find nearby child care providers with vacancies and filter those providers by quality, age group served, hours, and other characteristics.
- Two dashboards aggregate data across Iowa and regionally—as well as by program type, quality rating, age group served, and more—to inform decisionmaking by state and local leaders in near real-time:
 - The [Vacancy Dashboard](#) focuses on child care vacancies; and
 - The [Supply and Demand Dashboard](#) provides a detailed look at child care demand and supply.

The idea for C3 emerged from discussions about the Child Care Task Force recommendations among state leadership and an ISU-based team that maintains the state's early childhood integrated data system (ECIDS), which is called Iowa's Integrated Data System for Decision Making (I2D2). Longer-term partners from the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and I2D2 discussed the state's need—made urgent by the challenges of the pandemic—for more real-time data revealing where child care is available and sought. Given its existing role, the I2D2 team seemed like a natural fit to lead the work from ISU. However, though I2D2 enjoys a strong reputation in the state and nationally and the ECIDS rests on foundational data sharing agreements and strong relationships, it was never intended to provide real-time data. Iowa required something new.

Seeking additional capacity and expertise, the ISU team partnered with a private vendor to bring C3 to life. States commonly contract with vendors to execute technical projects like C3, and choosing the right vendor can be integral to success. In this case, the vendor brought a well-earned reputation in modern data architecture and experience with child care data in other states. Its expertise complemented the ongoing C3 strategic planning process led by the I2D2 team alongside HHS and other cross-agency partners. Guided by the C3 strategic plan and its established governance structure, the vendor built C3 with the intent to eventually hand primary management over to the I2D2 team and play a more supporting role over time. With C3 having launched, that transition of management is now in progress.

Easing Access, Reducing Burdens, and Informing Policymaking

The C3 system serves as an exemplar for the field. Through its frontend data tools and backend infrastructure, C3 can help:

- **Make accessing services easier for families** by directing them to available child care and other early childhood services in their area. C3's Child Care Search tool uses a robust mapping function that enables busy families to find and filter different services near home or work.

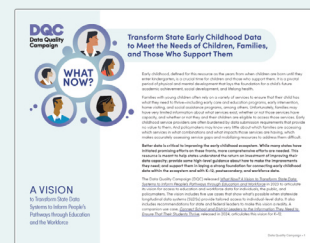
- **Reduce burdens on providers** by offering them actionable information that places their programs in context alongside peers across Iowa. Near real-time vacancy data sits at the heart of C3, and its collection and reporting have been facilitated by Iowa's subsidizing the Child Care Management System and business supports for providers.

- **Integrate data across services to inform policymaking.** Exemplified by I2D2 and now C3, Iowa's early childhood data ecosystem is a national leader. The state's efforts to integrate disparate data have

created more comprehensive, accurate, and timely views of child care supply and demand in communities statewide, helping connect lowans with the information they need.

A Vision to Transform State Early Childhood Data

The Data Quality Campaign (DQC) released three early childhood data use cases in fall 2024. Identified as high priorities for the field by advisors from 19 national early childhood advocacy, policy, and research organizations, the use cases show what is possible when states improve their early childhood data ecosystems to better meet people's information needs. They are part of DQC's broader vision for data access, which lays out a roadmap for leaders to improve data access and quality and deliver value to their people. **The C3 system addresses all three of DQC's early childhood use cases.**



Lessons From Iowa's Approach

Iowa's process to build C3 offers several lessons for other states considering early childhood integrated data projects. These lessons are relevant from project planning through implementation.

- **Take time at the start to envision how a data system or tool will be used.** C3's cross-agency partners acted intentionally to establish aligned governance and produce three initial C3 data tools that would address lowans' child care information needs. They started with people's questions, took care to understand those questions, and prioritized them at every stage of work. Only then would the resulting system and its tools be capable of providing answers that are useful.
- **Center data privacy.** States must keep safeguarding data—of children, families, providers, and communities—at the core of their early childhood data work. From the beginning, the C3 partners have protected privacy through modern technology and data governance, emphasizing timely and purposeful data collection while minimizing backend data access. These protections enable C3 to deliver securely better information and value to the lowans represented in the data.
- **Consider the role of public–private partnerships.** While building data systems and tools in house is often a successful approach, state agencies can struggle to find staff with the necessary technical capacity and expertise, particularly in the early childhood space. Engaging private vendors can be helpful for closing such gaps and executing integrated data projects like C3, which has rested on a sustained partnership between a vendor and a state university.

Such partnerships can help implement the project on time and on budget while growing and maintaining state expertise. Speed matters for these projects, and forming public–private partnerships may better equip states to deliver the early wins that are pivotal for increasing buy-in and trust.

- **Anticipate and adapt to address legal hurdles.** Delayed execution of data governance or data sharing agreements—perhaps due to limited agency buy-in or inexperienced legal capacity—can prove fatal to nascent integrated data projects. In Iowa, I2D2 and its existing agreements and relationships served as a solid starting point, freeing C3's cross-agency partners to focus on engaging communities and meeting their needs for the new system. States should take advantage of existing legal infrastructure where possible and be forward thinking in adapting agreement language or growing new relationships to keep projects moving.
- **Grow champions and consider legislation to encourage sustainability.** Strong leaders and partnerships will continue to be critical to the success of C3. Over time, Iowa has benefited greatly from having champions in and out of government that understand the value of data and integrating it for better decisionmaking. States need champions to lead and sustain integrated data projects, and they should be strategic in identifying and empowering leaders who can set and execute a vision and deliver value. Further, states should codify data systems and data governance in legislation to encourage even greater sustainability for the work.