

Summary of the BUILD Initiative brief “The Nuts and Bolts of Building Early Childhood Systems through State/Local Initiatives”

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(Summarized by Catherine McDowell)

Introduction

In the last decade, many states have begun to focus on building a statewide comprehensive early childhood system at the state and local level using community based collaboratives as the foundation for the local work. This early childhood systems work has been supported by North Carolina’s Smart Start’s National Technical Assistance Center (NTAC) and the BUILD Initiative.

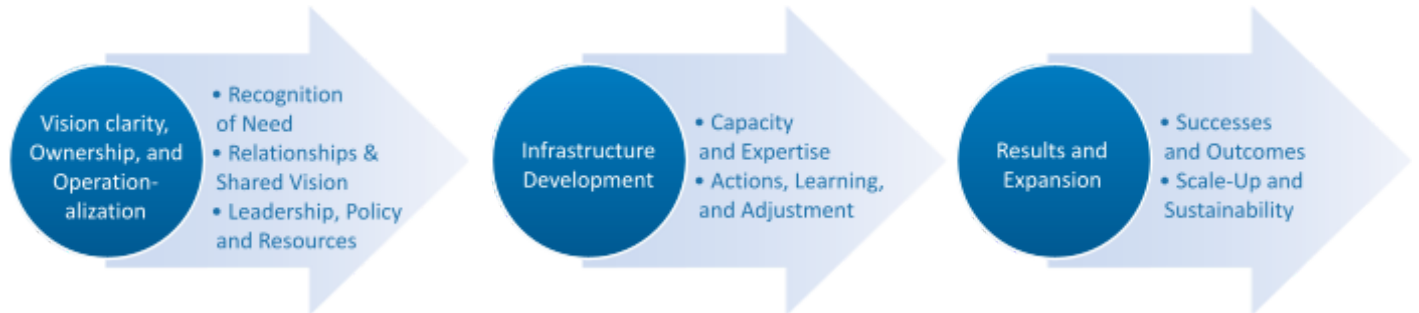
In 2006, BUILD launched the Building Connections Project, which funded six states to develop state/community early childhood partnerships. As part of that project BUILD created a theory of change and benchmarks for success (see below).

In 2013 BUILD launched a review of the strategies 12 states are using to promote the successful implementation of a comprehensive early childhood system based on state/local partnerships. The brief they published from this work highlights the lessons learned as these states developed successful statewide early childhood systems. The brief concludes that:

“The evidence bears out that greater success can be achieved through a state and community-based approach to early childhood systems building than in a state without a mechanism for effective two-way communication, local buy-in, and state supports for local partnerships.”

What follows is a summary of the key points the BUILD brief has gathered from the 12 states participating in this review. My hope is that the NH RECCs can use these tested strategies to strengthen the individual and collective capacity of the regional coalitions as they move towards a more defined partnership with the State.

Finally, the BUILD brief reminds us that **“This is not an effort that can be created and then implemented in the same way over and over. It must grow and evolve with state and community leaders learning from both the challenges and the successes”**



One aspect of the work on the Theory of Change was to delineate benchmarks of success that states can use to assess progress in various areas of work that are important for developing successful state/community-based collaboratives (see below). The articulation of these benchmarks has proven valuable in subsequent efforts to understand more about what it takes to develop and operate statewide systems-building efforts.

Benchmarks of Success for Developing Collaboratives

Component of the Development Process		Select Benchmarks of Success
Clarity and Ownership of Vision	1) Recognition of Need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buy-in from key stakeholders on the notion that making major progress on building early childhood systems requires state-local partnerships.
	2) Relationships and Shared Vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholders from different parts of the early childhood system at the state and local levels are involved. • Communities develop trust and relationships with state and vice versa.
	3) Leadership, Policy, and Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key state leaders champion collaborative development. • Policies clearly delineate state and community roles and responsibilities. • Funding exists for collaborative development and dedicated staffing.
Infrastructure Development	4) Capacity and Expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular communication mechanisms are in place. • Technical assistance is in place. • Communities have the capacity and skills to be early learning advocates.
	5) Actions, Learning, and Adjustment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities set priorities and begin implementing plans for building systems. • Authentic two-way communication is taking place. • Adjustments are made in response to learning.

Improving the System	6) System Successes and Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboratives show measurable impact on the early learning system.
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All **bolded statements** in this summary are direct quotes from “The Nuts and Bolts of Building Early Childhood Systems through State/Local Initiatives”. Everything else is a summary of “Nuts and Bolts” concepts in my own words.

Mission and Vision

“Creation of a statewide framework for the development of the early childhood system is essential”

A shared mission and vision statement for state and regional groups is a critical first step. Some components to consider:

- Age range-prenatal to age 6 or 8
- Embrace ALL children
- Emphasis on school readiness
- Commitment to a community based approach
- Focus on a comprehensive approach to creating and early childhood system

Elements for successful, effective community collaboratives

- Successful EC systems have State entities working with local *collaboratives*
- Success for collaboratives often depends on the leadership skills of the director or coordinator. **“It is essential that state resources be focused on building the leadership skills of staff members of local collaboratives.”**
- Local collaboratives have paid staff and receive both state and private funding. **“If the goal is to create early childhood systems on a statewide basis, resources designated to support staffing for regional collaboratives must be funded on a statewide basis.”**
- Collaboratives focus on the needs of families and children in their regions and look at overall systems, not individual programs. They assess the needs and gaps in services for their area and determine together how to meet those needs through better collaboration, blending of funding and finding new resources if necessary
- For positive change to occur, there must be local systems in place that understand and can respond to the diverse needs of families and children in their communities
- **“Flexibility and local decision making are important, but to create continuity and a sense of statewide initiative, all regional collaboratives should march towards similar visions, goals and objectives. Early in the process it is wise to put into place some structures and practices that promote alignment”.** Collaboratives should create broad areas of alignment such early learning, family support and health
- **“Develop a clear definition of a local collaborative’s roles and responsibilities early on”**
- Membership should be diverse, including Parent voice as well as business, faith community and healthcare providers
- **“Technical assistance to support true collaboration is essential.”. “Emphasize peer learning in all technical assistance opportunities”**
- Be patient, start where there is shared interest and commitment. Build on small wins, Celebrate and document successes
- Strong diverse and consistent leadership is critical. Everyone must take responsibility for the work. Sustainability requires ownership and a feeling of responsibility to the collaborative and its members

- Focus on equity and building relationships **“insure authentic involvement in the process”**
- **“Establish rules regarding conflicts of interest”**

There must be a connection between Local and State entities to create real systems change

- State and local Coalitions must establish at the beginning **“a common approach to and definition of system building/change and fully embed the mission/vision/goals developed at both the state and local level to guide the overall planning and decision making process”**
- Local collaboratives must be able to connect with a State level infrastructure that is also looking at systems change. **“State initiatives that have local collaboratives and no state level governance tend to be less effective and often not sustainable”**
- Both state and local communities must be involved in the work of systems change-States can provide the resources and support for key components and then allow communities to adapt that funding to their specific community needs-what works in one region may not work in another.
- Local control and decision making are essential. Decisions must be made at the local level with community leaders and families
- Communities also must be engaged in the decision making process at the state level. They must have a seat at the decision making table **“Do not hand regional coalitions a finished product from the State”**
- **“State level systems building efforts can only be sustained and expanded through local systems building efforts, local buy-in and local advocacy groups.”**

Elements for Successful State-level participation is EC systems change

- **“Build buy in for the local work at the state level across multiple departments and divisions... It is impossible to build the early childhood system or make needed changes without strong “horizontal” partnerships that encompass all state agencies and parallel the “vertical” partnerships between state agencies and local collaborations”**
- **“Developing two-way communication between the state and regional groups is essential”**
- The state should be able to provide both monitoring and technical assistance for the local collaboratives
- **“State level leaders need to understand the value and importance of a system that is not always top-down”**. The system must be both top-down and bottom up-need a balance
- Systems work is about looking at the whole system and how it works together-not about which programs to fund. Funding should support comprehensive early childhood work and not just one component of the system
- The State needs to have staff dedicated to supporting the regional coalitions
- Adequate funding must be available at the State and local level dedicated to systems building. Funding must be dedicated for the local collaboratives on a consistent basis
- **“Training and technical assistance should be built into the model from the very beginning with an approach that is about meeting local leaders where they are and helping them to be successful”**.
- **Ensure that there are adequate resources at the state level to provide technical assistance to the regional Coalitions and make certain that the technical assistance is consistent with the vision of the initiative”**
- **“States often use a “scatter shot” approach, with many different entities receiving funding at the local level. In BUILD’s review of States that have been most successful, we have found it more effective to**

bundle resources together at one table at the local level that is seen as the early childhood systems building/decision making table-a place where a variety of interests and perspectives across the region are represented”.

- Funding for systems building work should be flexible while still focused on the overall shared mission/vision/outcomes for the work of the EC system. **“ A cookie cutter approach at the state level-requiring every community to implement the same programs in the same ways-does not work.”**

Performance Measurement for the EC System

- Focus on how to measure performance early in the process. **“Having a clear set of desired outcomes at the start-outcomes that are part of a larger agreed upon goal-is key to achieving success”**
- Have realistic expectations about what data is possible to collect and make sure that data collection and performance measurement do not become overly burdensome for the local collaboratives

Advocacy/Messaging

- **“Advocacy is *essential* to advance and sustain a systems building policy agenda and to secure financial resources.**
- The State can play a leadership role in developing a common message, developing materials and coordinating dissemination
- Collaborative leaders should be the “go to” person for legislators in their districts for early childhood issues. They should meet with them regularly and create events and on-site visits for legislators to better see the work first hand and to meet families and children benefitting from the work. **“Keep all legislators educated and on board with local collaborative efforts”.**
- **The state/local early childhood initiative should have a strong statewide identity. There should be statewide branding and communication strategies so that everyone in the state understands the state’s early childhood brand and what it means.”**
- Engage business and civic leaders. **“These leaders should see how an investment in early childhood activities and services is an investment in the future of the community”**
- **Securing buy-in from the Governor and legislators is needed from the onset”.** Continuously share success stories and make sure the effort is seen as bi-partisan.