



# **Wisconsin's Early Childhood Environmental Scan: An Analysis of the Current Early Childhood Infrastructure**

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With the participation and expertise of many early childhood partners**

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## **Background:**

The objective of the federal Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems' (ECCS) planning grant is to develop recommendations for cross-system collaborative programming for children birth through age five. The ECCS planning grant is directed by a coordinator and guided by a multi-disciplinary, cross-agency planning team. ECCS' challenge is to develop a universally accessible network of comprehensive and integrated services to support young children and their families by establishing lifelong foundations for personal well-being, school success, and societal harmony. Results of the planning effort need to provide recommendations for a comprehensive early childhood system addressing the following five component areas:

- Family support
- Parent education
- Access to health and medical home
- Early care and education
- Mental health and social and emotional development.

The ECCS planning grant requires an environmental scan of the early childhood system. This analysis is part of the environmental scan focusing specifically on the current infrastructure.

According to Merriam-Webster, infrastructure is “the underlying foundation or basic framework (as of a system or organization).” A system is “a regularly interacting or interdependent group of items forming a unified whole.” In this context, infrastructure refers to the underlying foundation or skeleton or programs and services available to all people, disciplines, and systems touching the lives of children birth through age five. The infrastructure is to provide a vehicle to achieve the optimal development of children.

With leadership from the various state departments and early childhood associations, an infrastructure supporting early childhood has evolved through the Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners (WECCP). This report describes the WECCP's current role in Wisconsin's early childhood infrastructure and provides a summary of comments from an array of early childhood stakeholders on how the WECCP infrastructure could better support a comprehensive early childhood system. This analysis of the infrastructure will assist in determining next steps in supporting all Wisconsin children's optimal development.

## **The Current Infrastructure**

### ***Governing and Funding Infrastructure: State Departments***

Three state departments lead the governance infrastructure for early childhood programming in Wisconsin: Department of Health and Family Service, Department of Public Instruction, and Department of Workforce Development (DHFS, DPI and DWD). Within each department, various divisions administer the different early childhood programs. Within each department and/or division, there are a variety of regional infrastructures including state or county based and CESA based structures. (Attachment A) These state departments oversee and fund early childhood programs and services through an array of federal and state programs. More detail can be found on the federal funding at

<http://www.collaboratingpartners.com/docs/WECCPReport.pdf>.

### ***Collaborative Infrastructure: The Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners***

The Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners (WECCP) is a collaboration of state and local, public and private groups and individuals who have been working together since 1993. WECCP efforts focus on giving all Wisconsin children and families access to a blended and comprehensive delivery system for high quality early childhood care and education. WECCP was created to address the often fragmented manner in which services and supports touching the lives of young children and their families are provided. Services supporting young children and families are administered from different state entities and supported with an array of funding streams resulting in confusing and, at times, conflicting eligibility and service delivery procedures. Specific services include Head Start, four and five year old kindergarten, child care, Birth to Three, early childhood special education, Even Start, Family Resource Center programs, early childhood mental health, children with special health care needs regional centers, and medical care. WECCP was originally created to help reduce these silos with emphasis on state department and state association networking related to early childhood care and education.

Participants of WECCP were concerned because there was no unified system or social commitment to children's early development. Public funding supporting development seemed to begin for all children at the age of six. Brain research indicates that 90% of the brain is developed at the age of three. Society was missing opportunities to promote healthy development particularly since development is interrelated and builds on past progress. WECCP formed to address concerns such as the duplication of services, gap in services, and quality of services. Because various administrating agencies and funding streams support early childhood services, assistance often was fragmented. At times children are shuffled between programs and need to fit into categories or labeled to get help needed. Finally, getting what is needed can be challenging at an affordable cost. Participants of WECCP joined together to work towards a blended system of high quality comprehensive early childhood care and education.

Over the last dozen years WECCP has evolved. Representatives from DHFS, DPI and DWD as well as various early childhood associations joined together to form WECCP in an effort to better work together to support young children and families. The three major state departments all have policy making authority for various early childhood services and programs. An early childhood infrastructure has evolved in Wisconsin to facilitate a high quality and comprehensive delivery system. The infrastructure has state, regional and local components. These components are described next.

The three state departments provide various levels of support for WECCP. Organizational funding and specific staff allocation are from DPI and DWD-Wisconsin Head Start State Collaboration Project. Funding to implement specific WECCP efforts include other divisions of DWD and DHFS through a “braided funding” mechanism. The braided funding mechanism supports the Community Collaboration Coaches and Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards activities. To varying levels, these departments work through their regional and/or local infrastructures to support the operation of WECCP.

### ***Collaborative Infrastructure: State Action Team of WECCP***

Public and private organizations make up the State Action Team. DHFS, DPI and DWD have a number participants representing areas of early childhood including child care certification, licensing and policy; public/maternal health, four and five year old kindergarten; homeless children, Head Start, Birth to Three and Early Childhood Special Education, and Child Care Information Center. Children’s Trust Fund participates on the Action Team and represents family support and education. Parent’s Plus of Wisconsin also represents parents. Private non-profits representing child care include the Child Care Resource and Referral Network and Child Care Improvement Project. State level associations include the WI Early Childhood Association, WI Education Association Council, and Wisconsin Head Start Association. Professional development is represented by both the Registry and the Waisman Center. Social and emotional development is represented by the WI Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Association. WI Council on Children and Families represents broad based child related advocacy and policy issues.

The State Action Team provides leadership by the creation of guiding principles, goals, and objectives and work plan, development of informational materials, communication strategies, as well as attaining federal grants and blending funding streams to support early childhood development. State level efforts work to create business partnerships and increase funding for local communities. Professional development activities focus on creating articulation between and among training programs and providing teachers training opportunities allowing diverse and inclusive programs. Collaborative planning among public and private entities is a major endeavor of the state team to assist in blending quality services. A web site and list serve provides the ability to share information to a wide audience. To facilitate communication and coordination of services, Regional Network Liaison Teams and Networks were created. The Liaison teams are an offshoot of the State Action Team and assist with addressing the challenges within the early childhood system. Quarterly video conferences support the networks as a forum for communication, training, and technical assistance. Small regional mini-grants help the regional Liaison Teams in implementation of regional priorities.

### ***Collaborative Infrastructure: Early Childhood Regional Network with Regional Liaison Teams of WECCP***

Within Wisconsin there are six Early Childhood Regional Networks with each having an Early Childhood Liaison Teams comprised of representatives from early childhood fields. Five of the regions correspond to the DHFS regions, while Milwaukee represents the sixth region. Regional representatives include an early childhood CESA program support teacher, a DHFS regional child care licensing staff member, a Head Start director, a child care resource and referral staff member, a Birth to Three provider, a Children’s Trust Fund Family Resource Center staff member, a Division of Public Health Regional Office nurse consultant, as well as liaisons to local councils. The regional representatives are expected to forward the information to their own individual program networks. For example, the Head Start Director shares plans for a regional

WMELS training with all the Head Start agencies within the region. Information shared includes new funding opportunities, upcoming training and changes in specific program requirements. Members of the regional team provide the linkage to the local level network of the infrastructure. Regional liaison teams are just beginning to develop and utilize regional work plans as a mechanism to coordinate and implement efforts.

The Early Childhood Network Teams provide participants an opportunity to network and share information. In recent years, a collaboration coach supported through blended funding at the state level coordinates the Regional Team's activities. Often team meetings have a training component. The participants provide support for communities working to blend programs and/or funding streams. Relationships among the different system and disciplines represented allow for cross program and cross department efforts at the state and local level. The team structure also facilitates communication between local, regional, and the state levels. Quarterly video conferences between the regional teams and State Action Team help coordinate efforts.

### ***Collaborative Infrastructure: Community Early Childhood Coordinating Councils***

In some local communities, Early Childhood Coordinating Councils have formed. Councils have been created for a variety of reasons. Some of the Councils have formed under the requirements of a state program (i.e. family preservation and Birth to 3 early intervention services) or they may have been created by insightful communities seeking to better collaborate for young children and families. Some Regional Network Teams have assisted local communities to develop Councils to foster blended early learning programs. Some communities have been successful in pooling dollars to create family resource centers. Regular communication among local program staff has resulted in community wide early identification processes. Some of the Councils have engaged local businesses promoting family friendly work policies and supporting employee child care needs. Members from local councils participate in the Regional Team Meetings and serve as another communication vehicle.

## **Methodology of the Early Childhood Infrastructure Analysis**

This analysis draws upon feedback from a number of sources. It is important to note that each feedback item listed is simply the perception of one or any number of early childhood stakeholders in which opinions were solicited. Perceptions of the early childhood infrastructure vary depending upon where you are within the structure, e.g., state, local or community level. Comments also tended to vary based upon the length of time involved with WECCP. Input was collected from the following sources:

- Ongoing dialogue with the WECCP Action Team
- Facilitated discussions with each of the Regional Teams
- Regular discussions by video conference with Regional Team members
- Organizational development discussions led by the WI Head Start State Collaboration Officet
- An environmental scan involving parents and local leaders

The purpose of these dialogues is to help determine next steps in supporting all Wisconsin children's healthy development. Finally, these dialogues will help Collaborating Partners continue to improve ways state, regional, and local efforts can best work together to improve services to children and families.

The questions that guided the discussion are listed below:

- 1) What are the primary current functions of your regional team?
- 2) Looking at the ECCS Diagram that portrays a future early childhood comprehensive system, How can your regional team help to move the early childhood system planning efforts forward?
- 3) Are there ways the coaches' role can support development of the comprehensive system?
- 4) Are there additional regional or local components that might be needed to build the early childhood comprehensive system in the future?
- 5) What are some ideas for better communication among local, regional, state level early childhood efforts?

## **Recommendation to Strengthen the Infrastructure**

Overall, all individuals expressed an appreciation for the Collaborating Partners efforts in bringing different aspects of the early childhood system to the table. There are numerous suggestions on how the state can strengthen the infrastructure. All teams agree that the coaches are vital to the success of the regional networks. Three years ago, the role of Community Collaboration Coaches was created through a national grant to promote community approaches to four-year-old kindergarten. This project and role became part of the basis for the WECCP “braided funding” mechanism as various partners contributed to the funds supporting the coaches. The coaches have been successful in bringing in new individuals from component areas. Coaches have also helped to provide focus to the Regional Team meetings. Communication between the state level and regional level has improved with the addition of coaches. Teams noted, however, that the coaches are not provided adequate hours to do all that is necessary to sustain and nurture the ongoing development of the Regional Teams.

Recommendations fall into three major categories:

- State leadership and direction
- Coaches’ role
- Communication

### ***State Leadership and Direction***

- Ensure the state departments and involved child associations are aware of the infrastructure and are committed to participate by dedication of state time and provision of funding as appropriate.
- Ensure the purpose of WECCP at state level is communicated and roles and responsibilities of all committees, teams, and members is delineate and understood
- Communicate direction to regions, e.g., shared mission among regions
  - Each region with individual specific goals OR
  - Each region with specific state directed goals
  - *Note: Opinions varied with this point with some individuals wanting state direction while others want flexibility*
- Clearly define decision making process
- Include information and resources for participants working with children ages 0–3
- Clarify purpose for coming together at all levels
  - State level
  - Regional level
  - Local level
- Get high level visible support and buy-in from across state departments
- Develop outcomes reflecting mission and vision
  - *Note: WECCP does have a work plan based upon the vision of WECCP*
- Develop concrete corresponding actions leading to solutions to the expressed challenges
- Increase representation among under-represented component areas
- Recruit higher education and business representation
- Develop incentives and support for collaboration
- Develop marketing messages for collaboration
- Encourage cross-department and cross-program efforts at regional and local levels
- Increase blending of department funds for shared outcomes
- Provide support for those working to blend programs and/or funding streams
- Promote networking and sharing around early childhood partnerships

- Provide mechanisms for “collaborator collaboration”
- Include collaboration in higher education curriculum
- Determine optimal leadership structure and designate specific leadership duties to identified state department staff to coordinate and support WECCP activities such as:
  - Administrative and Logistic details
  - Coach activities
  - Communication among those involved
  - Training and technical assistance
  - Facilitating all sub-groups of WECCP
- Provide money to Regional Teams in more timely fashion
- Provide funds for both state priorities and individual region priorities
- Clarify/revisit infrastructure with horizontal and vertical connections
- Build on *current* infrastructure versus create *new* regional structure that represents all areas of the state
- Create cabinet level position representing early childhood and families
- Include business and economic partners in *new* infrastructure
- Explore ways to address the size of the regions

### ***Coaches Role***

- Build the role of coaches, provide funding for increased hours
  - Include coaches on State Action Team
- Foster Regional Team member participation and nurture group cohesiveness
- Support development and sustenance of local councils
- Serve as liaison among local councils, Regional Network Liaison Team and State Action Team
- Serve as communication conduit between local communities
- Recruit representation from all component areas
  - Include business and higher education representatives
  - Develop and foster relationships with people in the various component areas
- Coordinate technical assistance for identified needs
  - Provide technical assistance and support to local efforts, e.g., councils

### ***Communication***

Communication is a vital component among all levels of the early childhood arena and a great deal of feedback was received from participating venues. Even with advances in technology, ensuring that individuals have equal access to needed information can be a challenge. On the other hand, some individuals feel overloaded by information. It was reported that it is often difficult to determine who needs what information. Valuable information is shared at the Regional Team meetings yet it is unclear if the component area representative shares the information with colleagues in the region. Communication processes do currently exist and include a web site, a list serve and quarterly video conferences. Specific suggestions related to communication include:

- Develop or improve formal communication processes:
  - Among the six regions
  - Among component areas within region
  - Between state, regional, and local efforts
  - Between Regional Team Members and their represented constituent group

- Among state level action team members
- Build an agreed upon common language among all component areas in the early childhood field
  - Shared versus separate principles among component areas
- Communicate common mission of WECCP to all involved
  - Ensure all parents and early childhood workers understand the purpose of WECCP and where they fit into the structure
- Develop consistent and coordinated advocacy messages

### **Benefits of the Regional Teams**

All teams support the ECCS objective. All teams acknowledge the current “siloed” status of services and supports for young children and their families and agree that it is in the best interest of everyone involved that the identified component areas work in a more unified manner.

Communication is a primary function of all of the Regional Teams, and all team members are able to learn from each other’s experiences. Information is shared among members on such topics as training opportunities and technical support, new staff, and resources. Valuable information is often disseminated between the local and county levels as well as between systems such as public health and education. The benefits of participating in the Regional Teams include professional support, camaraderie, and collaboration.

### **Challenges with the Regional Liaison Teams**

Some of the teams struggle to identify the regional mission and vision, and often refer to the overall purpose of WECCP. Certain teams want a more defined purpose reflecting regional strengths and needs. Several teams want a clearer purpose for WECCP and more direction from the state level. Some team members struggle to justify attending regional meetings to supervisors at their respective jobs. While some Regional Teams regularly have agendas for meetings, others do not. A challenge among many teams was to get the same people to attend the team meetings. Most teams struggle with the size of the regions. Another identified challenge is facilitating quick and efficient communication as well as applying a formalized communication process to reach all early childhood stakeholders in the region.

### **How Regional Teams can strengthen the Infrastructure**

A number of suggestions were provided on ways the Regional Teams could support a more comprehensive system.

- Generate and communicate definitions of team purpose with defined goals and action steps
- Increase representation among all component areas
  - Work with State Action Team and improve outreach efforts to under-represented areas – health, mental health, and parent education
  - Involve local early childhood representatives
  - Increase representation of minorities and males
  - Get buy-in and representation from business community
  - Update contact information regularly and share with all members
  - Increase shared understanding and role of all component areas and programs within component areas
- Facilitate consistent participation and commitment from identified members

- Produce and maintain clear agendas and minutes with defined steps and actions needed at each meeting
  - Schedule regular meetings—at least quarterly

**Conclusion:**

It is clear that individuals working in the early childhood field are passionate about supporting young children and their families in establishing lifelong foundations for personal well-being, school success, and societal harmony. Those involved in the early childhood world express appreciation and admiration for the work WECCP does in providing structure and promoting collaborative relationships. Over the last several years WECCP has evolved and continues to promote the blending of the state’s separate early childhood education and care systems.

As a result of Wisconsin receiving funding for ECCS planning and implementation, WECCP has embraced new partners including public health, mental health, and family support. It is not clear if new partners are always oriented to the vision and mission of WECCP and if these new partners clearly see their role and responsibility within the network. With the addition of new stakeholders and participants, it is time to reevaluate the WECCP structure and communication support system. Below are potential areas of discussion to help determine next steps in improving support to young children and families.

- Communicate the vision and mission to all individuals involved in early childhood fields
  - Ensure a balance representation of stakeholders in all component areas
  - Reevaluate and articulate the role, membership and responsibilities of:
    - The State Action Team
    - Regional Network Liaison Teams
    - Regional Networks
    - Regional Coaches
    - Local Councils
- Further define action steps to work towards the vision
  - Delineate roles and responsibilities of participants
- Enhance communication processes to make them effective for the wide range of levels and personnel involved.
- Identify an overall full-time person or designate specific duties to identified state department staff to coordinate and support WECCP activities

WECCP has done an admirable job of bringing early childhood stakeholders to the table. In a sense, WECCP is hindered by its success in that over the years, many new people have joined in the effort to improve services and supports to young children and families. It is important to ensure all participants understand the purpose of coming together and the role each plays in providing comprehensive services. The WECCP will need to weigh the various suggestions received, determine next steps and continue to demonstrate leadership in improving the system for infants, young children and families.

## Appendix A: Early Childhood State-Regional Infrastructure



AOA

ED

DPI

DHFS

DWD

**Agencies, Organizations, & Associations**

- Child Care Improvement Project
- Child Care Information Center
- Child Care Resource & Referral Network
- Children's Trust Fund
- WI Head Start Association
- Parents Plus
- Registry
- WI Council on Children & Families
- WI Early Childhood Association
- WI Education Association Council
- WI Infant Mental Health Association

**Higher Education**

- Public/Private 4-Year Colleges
- Technical College System
- University System
- UW Extension
- UW System
- Waisman Center

**Public Instruction**

- Early Childhood Special Education (Part B)
- Kindergarten / 4K
- Head Start State Supplement
- McKinney Vento Homeless Program
- CESA's
- Schools (Public)

**Health & Family Services**

- Birth to 3 (Part C)
- Child Care Licensing
- Children with Special Health Care Needs Regional Centers
- Children's Trust Fund
- Public Health Educator
- Public Health Depts.
- WIC Nutrition Program

**Workforce Development**

- Child Care Subsidy/Quality
- WI Head Start State Collaboration Office

**Early Childhood Regional Network Liaison Team**

Collaboration Coach	CESA / Early Childhood Program Support Teacher/School Designee	DHFS Child Care Licensing	Head Start Director Designee	CCR&R Designee	Birth to 3 Program Designee	Family Resource Centers Designee	Division of Public Health Regional Office Nurse Consultant (or other)	Mental Health Initiative Designee	Liaison's to Local Councils	Others identified for planning team or meetings
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Directors

Community Leaders

Providers

**CHILDREN & FAMILIES**