

# Executive Summary - Strengthening Early Childhood Governance in NH

## Introduction

We know that providing safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for children in the early years is critical to their healthy development and future well-being – as these are the conditions that literally build the architecture of children’s brains. Unfortunately, the way our state early childhood programs are presently organized hinders that vision, as early childhood programs are currently fragmented across numerous governmental divisions within two departments (the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Department of Education (DOE)). Despite these programs doing their best to provide for child and family needs, the fragmentation prevents much needed coordination among them, and creates unnecessary hurdles for families to navigate, making it difficult for them and their children to get the supports they need. This is true at the state administrative level where this report was focused but changes must include all levels of the system, including the programs level, which was beyond the scope of this report. Fragmentation must be corrected if we wish to ensure that all of our children are able to get what they need to succeed and, ultimately, to contribute to New Hampshire’s future prosperity.

## Guiding Principles and Models for Governance

Governance plays a key role in achieving this vision, which is why Spark NH invited leaders in the early childhood system to join an Early Childhood Governance Task Force to create recommendations to improve early childhood governance. The Task Force identified three models that could help shift New Hampshire away from its current fragmented model of service delivery toward a structure that could better serve our children and families. The three models are:

- *Coordination* of services across DHHS and DOE
- *Consolidation* within the DHHS and DOE
- *Creation* of a new single government entity for all early childhood services

In order for these interventions to be effective, each model must incorporate the following guiding principles for improvement in early childhood governance: they must make the importance of early childhood visible, provide leadership, proactively problem solve and find resources, prioritize quality and equity, respond to the needs of stakeholders, serve all children and families, collect and report data, and provide ongoing accountability and measurement.

### ***Coordination***

This first model would keep the programs and services in both DHHS and DOE intact, while employing a coordination mechanism across and within each of the units and programs in both agencies to ensure better service delivery. The first step is an Executive Order to establish expectations and intended outcomes of the coordination process. Support from the legislature, either by creation of an oversight committee or by adding oversight to an existing committee, as well as ongoing support from the governor’s office is necessary for success. The coordination process takes place both across and within these agencies, thus intra-agency and inter-agency teams consisting

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of key deputies, managers, and other relevant staff would be formed to identify key priorities and outcomes, as well as identify benchmarks and timelines for progress.

This approach requires strong and ongoing buy-in from staff of both agencies to be successful, as well as clear and effective leadership to ensure staff have sufficient capacity to prioritize this approach. An Executive Order, Memoranda of Understanding and Memoranda of Agreement and infrastructure changes would help to support this. State employees must have the resources to prioritize this work. Further, the role of Spark NH in supporting state coordination efforts and system accountability should be strengthened to ensure sustainability and accountability.

### ***Consolidation***

This model streamlines services for children and families by creating new early childhood divisions within both DHHS and DOE, housing the authority and accountability for all children's programs under one entity within each organization, with ongoing coordination between the two newly created divisions. A Memorandum of Agreement would be drafted and signed to have both agencies collaborate on an analysis of how their programs can work together, their strengths and weaknesses to identify gaps in services, and to determine if further restructuring is necessary. Further, analyses to determine what barriers families face and to identify efficiencies in administration are necessary to ensure a smooth transition.

For this approach to be effectively implemented, sufficient resources are necessary to ensure that administrators within both agencies are fully equipped to prioritize this process. Consolidated offices need to be given sufficient authority to enable significant reorganization of staff and service delivery, as well as allow for coordination that spans beyond early childhood.

### ***Creation of a New Government Entity***

This approach would create a new executive branch agency where all early childhood programs are housed, a NH Department of Early Childhood, for example. This new agency would have its own budget and commissioner, ensuring a unified early childhood vision, which would show New Hampshire's commitment to its children and families and result in the best outcomes. However, this approach requires building public will and legislative as well as gubernatorial approval to establish the new entity and thus should only be considered after at least one of the previous two models are tested, as coordination and consolidation will help determine which programs and services might best be housed within this new agency.

## **Conclusions and Next Steps**

The current approach to childhood governance in New Hampshire is not serving our children and families in the most efficient and effective way possible. In order to ensure the state's future is in good hands, Spark NH Governance Task Force recommends the following:

1. New Hampshire DHHS and DOE should collaborate with the Governor's office to conduct additional analysis on coordination and consolidation

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- approaches and provide a final report on which solution to advance by January 2019. Recommendations for solutions would come thereafter.
2. The new government entity approach should be placed in reserve until New Hampshire implements governance changes in line with coordination and/or consolidation approaches.
  3. Reassess the role of Spark NH and its connection to early childhood governance coordination, regardless of executive branch action, so it can continue to improve the system for young children and families.
  4. Further work should be done to ensure coordination extends to every level of the system. To this end, government should plan with existing collaboratives such as public health networks, early childhood regional initiatives, and other existing infrastructure.