3.3 Policy Change

Level at which communities identify, advocate for, and achieve policy changes that improve conditions for young children and their families

Purpose

In a community that is committed to supporting young children and their families, policies will be in place that make it easier, not harder, for parents to raise children and for families to access the services they need. A well-functioning early childhood system can bring together stakeholders to identify and advocate for policies that improve conditions for young children and their families. While individual early childhood providers may have their own policy agendas, they may not be comprehensive or aligned with the agendas of other parts of the early childhood system. In the face of competing political and funding demands, collaborating to build a common policy agenda and advocacy alliance could improve influence, impact, and funding.

Definition

This preliminary measure has two components. First, communities conduct a self-assessment to understand the level at which they have the infrastructure in place to implement a common policy agenda. This tool is designed to prompt an informal assessment by early childhood stakeholders of how well various players are working together to identify, advocate for, and achieve policy changes that improve conditions for young children and their families. Second, based on the findings from the tool, communities decide whether they will engage in a collaborative process to identify, track, and report progress on selected policy areas.

Policy changes may take place at the level of agency and system-level policies and procedures; local policy; state legislative, administrative, or regulatory policy; or federal policy and regulations. Advocacy may be proactive (arguing for a new or changed policy to improve conditions) or reactive (opposing a proposed change or new policy that would be harmful to children and families).

Self-Assessment of Infrastructure to Support a Common Policy Agenda

As described in detail within the Tool or Survey section, the self-assessment tool asks a set of questions designed to determine the community's current level of policy advocacy and collaboration, from Level I (minimal attention to policy change across the early childhood system) to Level 4 (coordinated advocacy has led to policy change).

Common Policy Agenda Development

Communities that score a Level I or 2 may decide to take the next step of identifying common policies and targets. The process involves gathering stakeholders to identify common policy priorities, setting targets, and tracking progress. Individual states or communities will have different priorities, values, and strategies for how to best support young children and their families. The menu below of pro-child/pro-family policies, programs, or investments, which is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, provides examples of policy initiatives that some systems have chosen to pursue:

Policies aimed at helping families with young children succeed in the workforce

▸ Easing of "benefits cliffs" so that families don't lose subsidies and other benefits with a minor or seasonal increase in income

▸ Paid family leave policies

▸ Universal Transitional-K or Pre-K[8]

▸ Requirements or incentives for family friendly workplace policies (e.g., lactation rooms, onsite childcare, flexible hours)

▸ Increased supply and affordability of infant/toddler care and afterschool care through a variety of policy levers

Policies aimed at improving the quality of services used by young children and their families

▸ Increased reimbursement rates for organizations providing ECE services

▸ Wage increases for ECE staff and/or wage equity for ECE staff compared to K-12 educators

▸ Requirements or incentives for ECE providers to participate in Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS)

▸ Baby-Friendly Hospital designation

▸ Incentivize and reduce barriers to secure, privacy-compliant data sharing across public and private agencies

Policies aimed at making communities more supportive of the needs of young children and their families

▸ New parks, mobile parks (truck with play equipment), and/or recreation programs with stimulating activities for young children

▸ Public information campaigns on child-friendly issues, such as child abuse prevention, positive parenting practices, the value of well-child checks/developmental screenings, and the overall importance of early childhood in human development

▸ Establishment of playgroups to help families connect with each other

▸ Library or community center programming for young children

▸ Respite care for caregivers of young children

Implementation

Tool or Survey

Communities are invited to use the tool at the end of this section to assess their current level of early childhood policy advocacy alignment. Steps are provided for communities scoring at 1 or 2 to collectively develop a common policy agenda.

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[8] Transitional Kindergarten is a way to provide a bridge between preschool and kindergarten in states where children must be age five by the start of kindergarten, or early September. It offers enrollment in an age-appropriate, modified kindergarten setting for four-year-olds who will turn five by December.

Summary of Steps

1. **Set Intention:** Decide whether the goal is to assess your community's level of working together on common policy priorities, to identify a common agenda and track progress, or both.

2. **Stakeholder engagement:** Reach out to stakeholders likely to have common policy priorities and set a time to review the process tool. See Stakeholder section below.

3. **Assess level of collaboration:** Using the process tool, ask and collaboratively answer the questions posed and determine a level rating based on those responses.

4. **Policy selection:** For communities scoring at a Level I or 2, use consensus methods to select policies or programs that are appropriate for your community to advocate for and track. Selection criteria to consider:

   a. Achievement of the policy or program would have substantial positive impact on young children and their families.

   b. The policy or program is ambitious but realistically achievable for the community or state, considering resources and political climate.

   c. There is substantial energy around the policy or program. For example:

      i. Community or state agencies are already actively considering the policy or program (e.g., bills or ordinances are in front of, or being drafted for, elected bodies)

      ii. Community or state agencies and advocates are actively promoting the policy or program.

   d. Selection for tracking would build awareness and potentially motivate city, school, or state actors to take specific actions to achieve the policy or program. It may also sharpen the focus of system stakeholders on actions necessary to promote the policy or program.

   e. There is an existing statewide early childhood policy agenda that includes this policy and we want to align with that common agenda.

5. **Set targets:** Determine baselines and set targets for each of the selected policies or programs. In setting targets, communities should ensure the target is:

   a. clear (e.g., we will know when it has been achieved.)

   b. measurable (e.g., we can gather the information needed to determine the baseline, milestones, and achievement.)

   c. achievable (e.g., we feel the target is achievable.)

   d. time-bound (e.g., we want to accomplish this by a particular year.)

6. **Plan:** How will the various stakeholders work toward achievement of the identified targets? Use the action planning template to identify steps.

7. **Monitor:** Track progress on targets and action items.

Stakeholders

Select system stakeholders likely to have similar policy priorities. Also consider engaging with partners not traditionally considered part of the early childhood system, such as business organizations, faith-based organizations, or universities. While not traditionally considered part of the early childhood system, these and other partners may be motivated to affect policy that is friendly to working families, or they may already be providing services or supports for their employees with young children, such as onsite child care, child care subsidies, or other family-friendly benefits. This external engagement may be for particular issues within the policy agenda or part of an action plan to build alliances.

Data Sources

▸ Newly developed survey or existing political poll that includes questions about voters' support for early childhood investments of interest.

▸ Community assessment of state or local existing early childhood policies and investments, as well as assessment of early childhood policies and investments that are lacking. Assess at outset of analysis to obtain a baseline and assess at specified intervals to determine whether there has been change over time.

Limitations

This measure is preliminary and has not been pilot tested.

Some public early childhood agencies are restricted from lobbying for particular bills, and limited in the amount or type of advocacy they can participate in. For private non-profits, these limits are not as restrictive as many assume. It is important to understand what those limits are for your organization and other partners in your coalition and to find appropriate ways to support policies that will advance the organization's mission.

Tracking performance on legislation or funding can be challenging. Information may be difficult to obtain, particularly investments in early childhood by organizations outside the stakeholder group. Legislation may be unwieldy, such that it may address certain targets but not others or is partially related to the community's identified policy goals, but not completely. As such, this measure should be viewed as a tool for fostering community conversations about the early childhood investments you would like to see and enabling broad tracking of progress to that end.

Resources

▸ [Vermont Early Childhood Advocacy Alliance](#)

▸ [National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds: 2018 Public Policy Agenda](#)

▸ [First 5 Network Strategy](#)

▸ [Link to First 5 Legislative Priorities 2017-2024](#)

3.3 Policy Change: Rating Tool

Participating stakeholders collaboratively respond to the following prompts:

1. **Policy focus:** To what extent do individual agencies and stakeholders within the early childhood system have a policy focus? This could mean that agencies and organizations have: developed a policy agenda; dedicated staff and board member time and other resources to policy advocacy; intentionally built relationships with policymakers; or participated in policy-focused groups at the community, state, or federal level.

2. **Shared policy agenda:** To what extent do agencies and organizations across the early childhood system have a shared policy agenda? This could mean that multiple organizations have aligned their individual policy agendas toward shared goals or focus areas; or that multiple organizations have signed on to the same policy agenda.

3. **Joint advocacy:** To what extent do agencies and organizations across the early childhood system and the community work together to advocate for or against specific policy changes? This could mean: coordinating letter-writing campaigns, legislative outreach, or direct actions; mobilizing community members to vote, march, or testify on a particular issue; signing on to each other's efforts; or jointly reaching out to community members and decision makers.

4. **Evidence of impact:** To what extent have agencies and organizations within the early childhood system had success in achieving policy wins? This could include getting an issue discussed in legislative committee; introduction of legislation; passage of positive policies or changes to administrative rules and regulations; or stopping a proposed change that would have caused harm to children and families.

After considering the domains above, communities can evaluate the current performance of their early childhood system on this measure. Levels are defined as follows:

Level 1—There is minimal attention to policy change across the early childhood system.

Level 2—Stakeholders have begun to identify a common policy agenda; initial advocacy efforts may be underway, but may not be very coordinated.

Level 3—A policy agenda has been identified and there is robust advocacy activity coordinated across multiple stakeholders in the early childhood system and the community.

Level 4—Coordinated advocacy efforts by stakeholders in the early childhood system have resulted in desired policy changes or other effects.