



Early Learning Community Cohort Participation Criteria (2026)

The Early Learning Communities Cohort is a **15-month learning, action-planning, and implementation opportunity** designed for communities that are already working across organizations, sectors, and systems to improve outcomes for young children and families.

WHO IS THIS OPPORTUNITY FOR?

The Early Learning Communities (ELC) Cohorts are designed for community stakeholders and local leaders committed to improving their communities and that are ready to strengthen how they support young children and families through deeper collaboration, shared decision-making, and meaningful parent leadership.

This opportunity is for cross-sector community teams—along with parent/caregiver leaders—who are committed to working together over a 15-month period to better understand local needs, align around shared priorities, and implement strategies that improve outcomes for young children and families. It is especially well-suited for communities interested in strengthening coordination across early childhood systems, centering family voice in decision-making, and building more connected and equitable local early childhood ecosystems.

Applications will be reviewed based on the criteria outlined in the “**How We Will Assess Applications**” section, with attention to how clearly applicants demonstrate these conditions in their responses.

Community Teams: Community teams are small cross-sector groups of local partners who are working together to strengthen local coordination with special attention to family and early childhood systems and services. Community teams will participate in the cohort to assess local needs, align priorities, build shared decision-making structures, and develop an actionable plan to improve outcomes for young children and families.

Recommended Team Composition: Strong community teams include a mix of cross-sector local partners who collectively reflect the early childhood ecosystem and/or stakeholders committed to advocating for improvements for families with young children.

This may include representatives from early care and education, child care, family support services, public health and maternal-child health, home visiting, early intervention, and mental health systems, along with local government or policy leaders, Tribal nations or Tribal-serving organizations (where applicable), and community-based organizations serving families.

Additional partners from other sectors are highly encouraged. This can include stakeholders from workforce development, housing, or business sector, transportation agencies, faith-based organizations, legal services and immigrant support organizations, art and culture institutions, parks, recreation, and environmental organizations, higher education institutions, financial institutions and economic mobility partners, public safety and community violence prevention organizations.

If your community partnership, collaborative, coalition, or local initiative is interested in learning more, please complete the interest form here:

<https://forms.gle/4NzU1WJiXPijksuN6>

COMMUNITY TEAM ELIGIBILITY AND PARTICIPATION EXPECTATIONS

Community teams should be existing or emerging cross-sector partnerships that are already working together (or have a clear foundation for collaboration) to strengthen outcomes for young children and families. This cohort is designed to deepen, not initiate, cross-sector coordination.

Participating teams should be ready to commit to a **15-month cohort experience** focused on shared planning, coordination, implementation of a local action plan, and partnership with parents/caregivers.

Community teams should:

- Be able to commit a consistent cross-sector team of at least three members to participate throughout the full cohort cycle (November 2026 through February 2028).

- Include **1–2 parent/caregiver leaders** as full and equal members of their cross-sector community team. Parent/caregiver leaders will have the opportunity to participate in a parallel **Parent Leadership & Advocacy Cohort** designed to strengthen their leadership, advocacy, and engagement in the Early Learning Community Cohort.
- Include **at least one organizational or system leader** who can support follow-through between cohort sessions and help advance local coordination efforts.
- **Actively participate in cohort activities**, including:
 - Required in-person convening(s) (one in early 2027)
 - Monthly virtual cohort sessions led by CSSP staff that include peer learning, shared problem-solving (November 2026 through February 2028)
 - Regular local team meetings between cohort sessions
 - Monthly office hours and coaching calls
- **Complete a baseline assessment** of the local early childhood ecosystem using CSSP tools.
- **Develop an action plan** throughout the cohort grounded in local data, family voice, and cross-sector input to prioritize measurable community goals and shared strategies that address gaps in early childhood services and supports.
- **Use implementation funding** to advance strategies aligned with the community action plan and participate in follow-up coaching and reflection activities designed to implementation, track progress, and document lessons learned.

CSSP will provide ongoing coaching and technical assistance throughout and following the cohort period to help communities translate planning into meaningful, measurable action and contribute learning back to the field.

Each participating community will be eligible to receive implementation funding (of up to \$15,000 per community) to carry out action-plan strategies. Parent leaders participating in the Parent Leadership & Advocacy Cohort will also be eligible for mini-grants (of up to \$3,000 per parent) to support parent-led community projects aligned with local priorities.

Communities selected to receive implementation funding must identify an eligible fiscal sponsor or lead organization capable of receiving and administering grant funds on behalf of the community team. Parent leaders seeking mini-grant funding may either work through the community team's fiscal sponsor/lead organization or identify another eligible fiscal sponsor to administer funds.

HOW WE WILL ASSESS APPLICATIONS

Applications will be reviewed using the criteria below. We encourage applicants to explicitly describe how their responses demonstrate these areas.

Strong applicants will demonstrate:

- An existing or emerging cross-sector partnership with evidence of collaboration or shared work to date
- Commitment to improving outcomes for young children and families, including pregnant/expecting families and communities that have experienced historical disinvestments
- Commitment to authentic power-sharing with families and community members as decision-makers, including readiness to strengthen or formalize parent leadership structures if not yet in place.
- Readiness to strengthen or build cross-sector coordination and shared governance structures
- Willingness to assess current systems honestly, including gaps in access, equity, and service coordination
- Openness to using both data and community feedback to guide decision-making and priority setting
- Willingness to reflect, adapt, and apply learning over time (including testing strategies using improvement cycles)
- Capacity and commitment to sustain active engagement over the full 15-month cohort and to support implementation beyond the cohort period

PARTICIPATION CRITERIA FOR PARENT/CAREGIVER LEADERS IN COMMUNITY TEAMS

As part of their cross-sector team, participating community teams must include **1–2 parent/caregiver leaders** as full and equal members. Parent/caregiver leaders will have the opportunity to participate in a parallel **Parent Leadership & Advocacy Cohort** designed to strengthen their leadership, advocacy, and engagement in the Early Learning Community Cohort.

The Parent Leadership & Advocacy Cohort is intended for parents and caregivers who are part of a participating community team and are interested in partnering with cross-sector collaborators to help shape priorities, planning, and actions that improve outcomes for young children and families.

Participants should be able to:

- Participate consistently over the full 15-month cohort, including:
 - Required in-person convening(s) (one in early 2027); CSSP will cover transportation costs and provide a childcare stipend to support participation
 - Monthly virtual Parent Leadership & Advocacy Cohort sessions that include peer learning, shared problem-solving, and reflection activities
 - Monthly Community Team meetings, plus regular local team meetings between sessions
 - Monthly office hours and coaching calls with CSSP
- Contribute insights to support the community team's baseline assessment of the local early childhood ecosystem.
- Support the development of the community team's action plan, grounded in local data, family voice, and cross-sector input to identify measurable goals and strategies that address gaps in early childhood services and supports.
- Be open to building leadership skills, participating in shared decision-making, and strengthening collaboration with cross-sector partners.
- (Optional) Develop and implement a parent-led community project, potentially aligned with the community team's action plan and eligible for mini-grant support, that highlights their leadership and builds on their interests and strengths to advance priorities for young children and families.

INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING?

If your community partnership, collaborative, coalition, or local initiative is interested in learning more, please complete the interest form here:

<https://forms.gle/4NzU1WJiXPijksuN6>

If you have questions, please contact us at ELC@cssp.org.