

Early Learning Communities Cohort (2026): Participation Criteria and Expectations

The Early Learning Communities (ELC) Cohort is a **15-month learning, action-planning, and implementation opportunity** designed for communities that are already working—or have a strong foundation for working—across organizations, sectors, and systems to improve outcomes for young children and families. Through the cohort, community teams will strengthen collaboration, assess local early childhood systems, develop shared action plans, and receive support to advance community-identified strategies.

The Early Learning Communities (ELC) Cohort will run from November 2026 through February 2028.

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WHO IS THIS OPPORTUNITY FOR?

The Early Learning Communities (ELC) Cohort is designed for **existing local community partnerships**—such as organizations working together, coalitions, collaboratives, networks, alliances, or other cross-sector groups serving a town, city, county, or multi-county region where partners are already collaborating (or have a strong foundation for collaboration) to improve outcomes for young children and families.

Throughout the cohort, we refer to these cross-sector partnerships as "**community teams.**" Community teams are composed of local stakeholders and leaders who are committed to strengthening how they support young children and families through deeper collaboration, shared decision-making, and meaningful parent leadership.

Each community team will identify a core group of at least three representatives who will consistently participate in the 15-month cohort. These representatives will serve as the primary participants in cohort activities, including attending virtual sessions, engaging in learning and planning activities, and bringing resources, tools, and insights back to the broader partnership. While these core community team members will participate directly in the cohort, they are encouraged to engage and collaborate with the broader network of partners involved in their local efforts.

Over the 15-month cohort, community teams will work together to better understand local needs, align around shared priorities, develop a shared community action plan, and implement strategies that improve outcomes for young children and families. The cohort is especially well-suited for community partnerships interested in strengthening coordination across early childhood systems, centering family voice in decision-making, and building more connected and equitable local early childhood ecosystems.

Selected communities will have the opportunity to receive implementation funding (up to \$15,000 per community) to support strategies identified through their community action plan. These funds are intended to help communities advance the priorities and implementation goals identified in their community action plan.

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 cross-sector groups of local partners who are working together to strengthen local coordination, with particular attention to early childhood systems, family supports, and services. Community teams may include existing coalitions, collaboratives, partnerships, or emerging groups of local partners who are committed to collaborating. Teams do not need to be a formal entity but should demonstrate a shared commitment to improving outcomes for young children and families through cross-sector collaboration.

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 advancing for improvements for families with young children. **The core group of representatives participating in the cohort should reflect this diversity of perspectives and include partners who can actively engage in the cohort experience and bring learnings back to the broader community team.**

Community teams are asked to include parent/caregiver leaders as members of their team, recognizing the importance of family voice and lived experience in shaping priorities, decisions, and strategies.

Community teams 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 sectors; 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 prepared to:

- Designate a **consistent team of 3-6 consistent representatives** who will participate in the ELC Cohort throughout the full 15-month cohort.
- Include **1–2 parent/caregiver leaders** as full and equal members of their community team. See the "Expectations for Parent Leaders as Members of Community Teams" section below for additional information.

Parent/caregiver leaders will also be invited to participate in the Parent Leadership & Advocacy Cohort, an **optional** learning experience focused on leadership development, advocacy, and peer learning with other parent leaders. Additional information about the Parent Leadership & Advocacy Cohort is provided below.

- **Identify an organization that can serve as the Community Team’s backbone organization and fiscal sponsor, if implementation funding is awarded.** The fiscal sponsor must be a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, municipal/government agency, or other eligible tax-exempt entity capable of receiving and administering funds on behalf of the Community Team.
- **Actively participate in cohort activities**, including:
 - Attend a required in-person convening 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**, if awarded, to advance strategies identified through the community action plan and participate in follow-up coaching, reflection, and learning activities designed to support implementation, track progress, and document lessons learned.

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

Implementation Funding and Fiscal Sponsorship

Each selected community team will have the opportunity to receive implementation funding (up to \$15,000 per community) to support strategies identified through their community action plan. Implementation funding is intended to help communities advance community-identified priorities and implementation goals—not to reimburse participation in the cohort or compensate team members for their time.

Communities selected to receive implementation funding must identify an eligible **backbone organization/fiscal sponsor** that can receive and administer funds on behalf of the community team. The fiscal sponsor must be a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, municipal/government agency, or other eligible tax-exempt entity.

Parent/caregiver leaders who participate in the optional **Parent Leadership & Advocacy Cohort** will have the opportunity to apply for **mini-grant funding (up to \$3,000 per parent-led project)** to support parent-led community projects aligned with local priorities. Mini-grants are separate from community implementation funding and are intended to support parent-led ideas, leadership development, and community engagement. Additional information about the Parent Leadership & Advocacy Cohort is provided below.

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 meaningful roles for parent/caregiver leaders in shaping priorities, making decisions, and advancing community strategies.
- 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

EXPECTATIONS FOR PARENT LEADERS AS MEMBERS OF COMMUNITY TEAMS

As part of their participation, participating community teams are expected to include **1–2 parent/caregiver leaders** as full and equal members of the team. Parent/caregiver leaders bring valuable lived experience, community knowledge, and family perspectives that help shape priorities, decisions, and strategies throughout the cohort.

Parent/caregiver leaders participating as members of community teams in the ELC Cohort should be prepared to:

- **Participate consistently in the ELC Cohort** alongside their community team throughout the 15-month cohort, **including monthly cohort sessions and team-based activities.**
- **Attend a required in-person convening in early 2027**, if available. CSSP will cover transportation and lodging costs and provide a childcare stipend to support participation.
- **Support the community team's baseline assessment** of the local early childhood ecosystem, including strengths, needs, and opportunities for improvement.
- **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 community partners.

Optional Parent Leadership & Advocacy Cohort Opportunity

Parent/caregiver leaders who participate as members of an ELC community team will also be invited to participate in the **Parent Leadership & Advocacy Cohort**, a parallel learning experience designed to strengthen parent leadership, advocacy skills, and peer connection. **Participation in this additional opportunity is optional.**

Parent/caregiver leaders who choose to participate in the Parent Leadership & Advocacy Cohort will receive a **\$750 participation stipend** to support their time and engagement in this additional learning opportunity. The stipend will be provided in two payments—one midway through the cohort and one upon completion. The Parent Leadership & Advocacy Cohort timeline is currently being developed and will take place during 2027, alongside the Early Learning Communities Cohort. Additional details about the cohort will be shared with participating parent leaders.

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.

Parent/caregiver leaders who choose to participate in the Parent Leadership & Advocacy Cohort will have opportunities to:

- Participate in additional peer learning, leadership development, and reflection activities with other parent leaders.
- Strengthen advocacy skills and explore strategies for influencing decisions and systems that impact children and families.
- Apply for mini-grant funding (up to \$3,000 per parent-led project) to support parent-led community projects aligned with local priorities. Mini-grants are separate from community implementation funding and are intended to support parent-led ideas, community engagement, and leadership development.
- Develop and implement a parent-led community project, potentially aligned with the community team's action plan, that builds on their interests and strengths and advances 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.