

CHANGE FRAMEWORK BRIEF SERIES

Multi-Sector & Multi-Partner Collaboration in Systems Change for the ECE Workforce

Aims

Primary
drivers

Secondary
drivers

The Change Framework brief series takes a closer look at drivers of the National ECE Workforce Center's Systems Change Framework to present strategies for state and local ECE leaders to improve their ECE workforce systems. This brief series provides more details about specific primary drivers, including why they are important, what it looks like when they are being leveraged effectively for systems change, strategies for strengthening them, and examples from states and communities to illustrate the driver in practice. Leaders can use recommendations from this brief separately or in combination with the overall framework. Check out the other briefs in the series at our [website](#).

Top-Line Takeaways

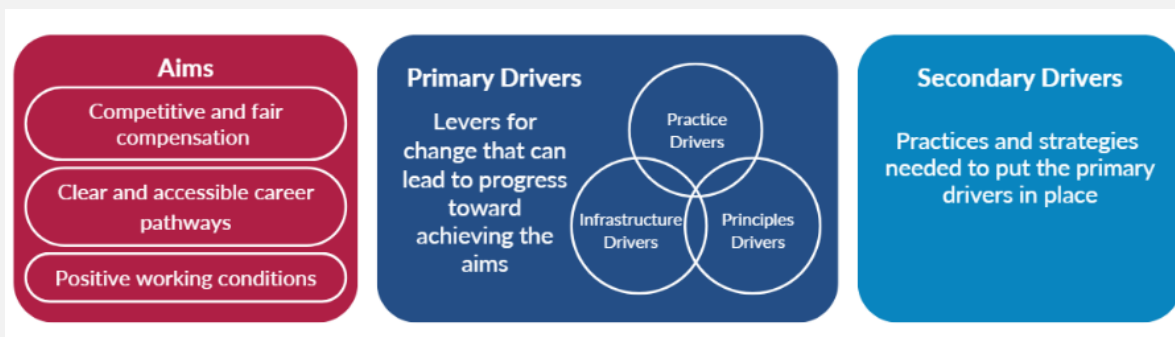
Complex and persistent challenges facing the early care and education (ECE) workforce—such as achieving competitive and fair compensation, establishing clear and accessible career pathways, and strengthening positive working conditions—cannot be solved by a single agency, sector, or program alone. Multi-sector and multi-partner collaboration is a primary driver in the National ECE Workforce Center's ECE Workforce Systems Change Framework. By aligning the expertise, influence, and resources of diverse stakeholders, states and communities are better able to design and sustain solutions that meet the needs of the workforce.

In this brief, we describe:

- The importance of multi-sector and multi-partner collaborations for sustainable systems change for the ECE workforce
- Strategies that systems leaders can use to establish, strengthen, and capitalize on cross-sector partnerships in support of ECE systems change efforts
- Examples that demonstrate how intentional structures, inclusive participation, and dedicated supports make collaboration effective in practice

ECE Workforce Systems Change Framework Overview

Figure 1. Systems Change Framework

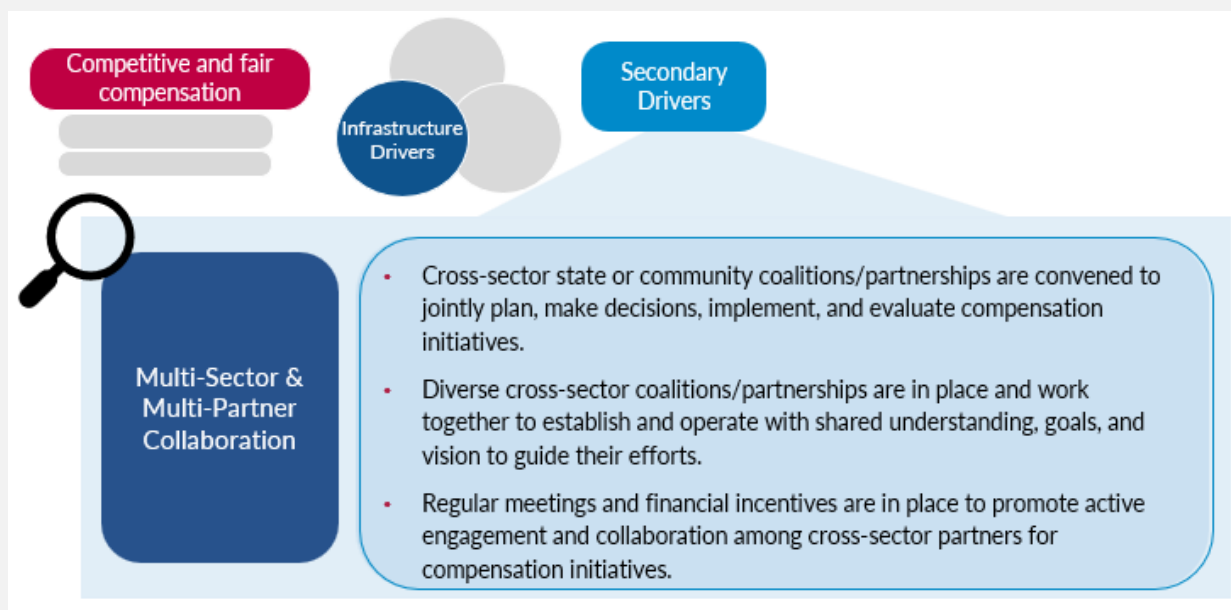


The ECE workforce experiences complex and persistent challenges in compensation, career pathways, and workplace conditions that require a systems change approach to produce impactful and sustainable solutions. Drawing on research and policy evidence from the ECE field and other disciplines, the National ECE Workforce Center (the Center) created the ECE Workforce Systems Change Framework (“Change Framework”) to help state and community leaders approach these workforce issues with a strategy that recognizes and addresses the interconnected parts of the Early Childhood system. The Change Framework identifies a set of nine primary drivers that, according to available evidence, play a key role in meaningful and sustainable systems change.

Multi-Sector & Multi-Partner Collaboration in the Systems Change Framework

In the Center’s Systems Change Framework, Multi-Sector & Multi-Partner Collaboration is an Infrastructure Driver—one of the foundational elements needed to create the conditions for change. Within Multi-Sector & Multi-Partner Collaboration, three secondary drivers outline practices and strategies to establish and sustain effective collaboration in service of systems change:

Figure 2. Secondary drivers that support multi-sector and multi-partner collaborations



For more information, please see the [Introduction to the ECE Workforce Systems Change Framework](#).

Examples From the Field

■ New Mexico

As part of recent efforts to develop a unified wage scale and career lattice for the early childhood workforce, including of early care and education, home visiting, and early intervention, New Mexico placed intentional focus on building and leveraging multi-sector and multi-partner collaboration.

Early in the process, state systems leaders recognized that some roles directly affected by the wage scale had been left out of conversations, while other partners were advancing separate efforts not coordinated with the state department.

To create a more representative and collaborative approach, systems leaders worked with the state's multi-sector early childhood advisory council to establish a task force charged with informing the design of a new wage scale. Consistent with the structure of the advisory council, the task force goal was to provide recommendations to the state agency. The twenty-four member task force included representation from center-based child care, family child care, infant-toddler programs, Pre-K, Head Start, home visiting, advocacy groups, institutions of higher education, and workforce support partners.

Task force members committed to meeting twice monthly for six months, with all meetings held virtually to enable participation from across geographic regions of the state. The state also provided financial support through stipends to direct service providers and others whose time was not otherwise compensated. This structure promoted accessibility, meaningful engagement, and shared leadership, strengthening trust across sectors and laying the groundwork for compensation reform.

As one state representative shared about the process, "It also shows the agency is backing up what we were established to do... We're doing it collaboratively, with intention, following a framework. I think that's given a lot of credibility to the work."^a

Strategies for Promoting Multi-Sector & Multi-Partner Collaboration

The ECE workforce system is shaped by multiple agencies, organizations, and stakeholders. Compensation structures depend on labor market dynamics, government funding streams, and employer practices. Career pathways require alignment between higher education institutions, licensing agencies, and professional development systems. Workplace conditions are influenced by local policies, program-level decisions, and broader community resources.¹ Because these elements are interdependent, no single entity has the authority or capacity to address them alone. Collaboration is a necessity to drive systems change.

Collaboration works best when leaders are intentional about who is at the table, how they work together, and how participation is supported. Effective systems change depends on engaging the broad group of partners whose collective expertise, influence, and resources shape the ECE system. Potential partners include state and local agencies, ECE programs, professional associations, workforce council and labor groups, professional development organizations, institutions of higher education, community-based groups, and advocacy organizations. Successful partnerships include organizations and individuals who are able to identify and invite new voices, consult external partners, and gather data and stories to inform their responses and actions. In this section, we describe the practices and strategies (secondary drivers) for

^a This example comes from findings and interviews conducted by the National ECE Workforce Center team as a part of our Action Research Partnership with New Mexico.

establishing and utilizing multi-sector and multi-partner collaboration, ensuring sectors and partners are aligned to support targeted outcomes and goals.

1 Cross-sector state or community coalitions/partnerships convene to jointly plan, make decisions, implement, and evaluate initiatives in support of the identified aim.

Coalitions and partnerships are strengthened when they leverage and coordinate with existing structures to advance shared goals. For example, many states have established early childhood advisory councils or P-20 councils that can serve as a foundation for collaboration. Building on these existing bodies reduces duplication of effort while reinforcing alignment across systems.^{1,2} A central aspect of this approach is the creation of intentional feedback loops that enable reciprocal learning between state and local leaders.^{3,4} For instance, when state leaders attend local network meetings and local representatives participate in state-level planning, they can jointly identify priorities, align resources, and discuss solutions that are responsive to both statewide goals and community needs. These reciprocal exchanges strengthen coherence across systems and increase the effectiveness of collective action.⁵

Examples From the Field

Louisiana

In Louisiana, to create a unified system of education from birth to grade 12, state leaders mandated the [Early Childhood Ancillary Certificate \(ECAC\)](#) for all child care lead teachers. To support educators' efforts to obtain this credential, the Louisiana Department of Education partnered with a broad set of collaborators, including Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agencies, technical colleges, universities, school districts, and non-profit organizations. Together they created a comprehensive system to support teachers and continue to monitor the functioning of the ECAC programs through quarterly calls to ensure regular opportunities to hear challenges and improve services.

2 Diverse cross-sector coalitions/partnerships work together to establish and operate with shared understanding, goals, and vision to guide their efforts.

Coalitions and partnerships are more effective when they establish clear structures for collaboration and communication. This often includes holding regular meetings, maintaining shared communication channels, and using shared platforms—such as websites or online dashboards—to exchange information openly. To ensure representative participation, many coalitions adopt meeting protocols that accommodate educators' schedules across roles, offering virtual options and providing agendas in advance. Collaborative decision-making is also essential, with intentional practices to ensure that perspectives from across the early childhood workforce are represented, including family child care, center-based, and school district-operated programs, as well as providers serving infants and toddlers, preschool, and Pre-K children, and those in both profit and non-profit settings.

Coalitions can organize workgroups or change teams to advance specific initiatives, such as compensation reform or articulation agreements. A “change team” is a small cross-role, cross-sector group that leads the

change effort, bringing together individuals who represent the multiple perspectives, experiences, and roles impacted by the initiative.⁶ For instance, when expanding CDA credential pathways, a change team may include high schools or district administrators; when strengthening workforce well-being efforts, a change team may include leaders from the business or health sector. The change team works closely to set priorities, test strategies, and adjust approaches; while regularly connecting with the stakeholders they represent to gather input and feedback.⁶ As a support, these teams can consult external organizations to facilitate meetings, provide neutral guidance for complex discussions, support strategic planning, and offer specialized expertise. These practices ensure coalitions remain adaptive and well-positioned to advance shared goals.

Examples From the Field



Wisconsin

Through Wisconsin's Innovative Communities initiative, multi-sector, multi-partner teams are working together to identify and address challenges facing families seeking child care. Through regular conversations and engagement with the broader community, these partnerships have identified unique local needs and workforce priorities to address child care shortages. See the [Innovative Communities Around Wisconsin](#) page for more details including videos describing the local initiatives.

3 Regular meetings and financial incentives promote active engagement and collaboration among cross-sector partners for initiatives in support of the identified aim.

Sustaining collaboration requires dedicated resources and incentives that allow a variety of partners to engage fully and meaningfully. This includes identifying funding sources to support participation from early educators, professional associations, parents, community groups, and other critical stakeholders. Coalitions can provide stipends for participation and logistical supports, such as substitute coverage, to enable educators to meaningfully engage and contribute to policy design, implementation, and continuous improvement.^{7,8} Institutions of higher education and professional development partners can also be supported through targeted funding that aligns programming with workforce needs.^{9,10} For example, resources may be directed toward enhancing faculty expertise aligned with workforce needs, expanding articulation pathways, or tailoring supports for nontraditional learners. These investments help ensure that all partners have the capacity to participate and that collaboration advances progress toward shared goals.

Examples From the Field



New Jersey

The state of New Jersey increased investments in higher education to expand the capacity of higher education programs and ECE faculty to participate in workforce initiatives. These investments allowed faculty to [engage in multi-sector collaboration](#) and take action toward identified goals like developing a credentialing program. Although faculty have some time allotted for university service, initiatives such as these often require additional resources to get the level of dedicated time needed to build effective and robust strategies.

Guide for Taking Action

Complex ECE workforce challenges cannot be solved by a single agency, sector, or program. Multi-sector and multi-partner collaboration is a necessary condition for sustainable systems change. By leveraging the expertise, influence, and resources of diverse stakeholders, state and local systems leaders are better equipped to drive and maintain systems change. To strengthen Multi-Sector & Multi-Partner Collaboration, leaders should:

1 Map existing community structures and partnerships supporting the ECE system.

- Which coalitions, councils, networks, or advisory bodies already exist in your state or community?
- Whose perspectives are missing (e.g., family child care, center-based, school district-operated programs; infant-toddler and PreK; profit and nonprofit settings)?
- How can you intentionally engage partners with power to influence funding, policy, or practice changes?
- How can meetings, protocols, and decision-making processes be structured to support participation across roles and career stages?

2 Form targeted workgroups or task forces for focused action.

- Which workgroups, task forces, or change teams are needed to advance specific initiatives?
- Who should be included to bring varied perspectives and relevant expertise? Are additional partners (e.g., business leaders, workforce boards, higher education consortia) needed to fill gaps?
- What structures or processes will help these groups translate discussions into concrete action steps and track progress toward goals?
- How will these groups maintain connection with the broader coalition as well as the stakeholders they represent to ensure alignment with shared goals and input throughout the change process?

3 Provide resources and incentives.

- What financial and logistical supports are available to enable participation and meaningful engagement with early educators, parents, community groups, and other stakeholders?
- How can institutions of higher education or professional development partners be supported to align programming with workforce needs?

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The National Early Care and Education (ECE) Workforce Center is a joint research and technical assistance center that equips state and local leaders to drive change in ECE workforce policy. To learn more about the center, please visit our website <https://www.nationaleceworkforcecenter.org/>.

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