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The Early Childhood DATA Collaborative

Linking Head Start Data with State Early Care and Education Coordinated Data Systems

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Executive summary

Overview

Head Start programs are a critical component of early care and education in our country. They serve more than one million young children and employ more than 230,000 staff members. When linked to other early care and education data systems, data collected by Head Start programs on their children, program services, and workforce can inform key decisions by state policymakers and guide efforts to improve early childhood program responsiveness and effectiveness. However, although Head Start data are a vital component for any comprehensive early childhood data system, only a handful of states are presently linking Head Start data with data from other early care and education programs.

A fully coordinated early childhood data system, inclusive of data from Head Start, state pre-k, child care, early childhood special education, and other publicly-funded early care and education (ECE) programs, provides a comprehensive picture of a state's early childhood systems. State policymakers gain a full picture of the status of young children and their progress over time, early childhood services, program quality, and the early childhood workforce. Armed with this knowledge, states can reap many benefits, such as enhancing access to high-quality programs for all children, improving program quality, building a more effective ECE workforce, and ultimately, improving child outcomes.

At present, there is no requirement for local Head Start programs to link or share their data with other state data systems. However, several states are making advances toward linking and/or sharing data across their state's K-12 data system or other services' data systems. In this process, states have encountered some challenges and have had to tackle issues related to data privacy and security, among others. To better understand some of the challenges, successes, and strategies behind this work, the Early Childhood Data Collaborative (ECDC) contacted and interviewed a sample of Head Start and state early childhood leaders in a dozen states.

Based on these interviews, this brief from the ECDC examines the actions some states have taken in linking Head Start data to other state systems. It describes the importance of including Head Start data in a coordinated early care and education data system, relays what we learned about current data linkage steps across states, and presents action steps for state and federal leaders. Specifically, this brief highlights the variety of approaches for incorporating Head Start data into state early childhood data systems and examines strategies for linking child-level data with K-12 and other key data systems, linking program-level and workforce data, including Head Start representatives in state data governance bodies, and ensuring transparent privacy protection and security practices and policies.

As we discover more about the development of the brain and how children learn, we know that that the early years are critical for future success. This means we need to take a closer look at how we currently equip our policymakers and educators with the information they might need to improve early education systems and individual care. Our intent with this brief is to share the experiences of states in order to help other states build and reap the benefits of coordinated early childhood data systems that are fully inclusive of Head Start data. It is important to note that the information included in this brief represents the ideas, concerns, and understanding of the respondents themselves in selected states.

Highlights of Findings

Through our interviews, we found that some state and local Head Start, early childhood, and public education leaders are using interconnected Head Start/state data systems in a variety of ways. In these states, Head Start teachers and managers are able to track the progress of their students into elementary school and beyond when Head Start programs link data with longitudinal education data systems. Adding data on Head Start program quality and staff members to state QRIS and Professional Registry systems allows state agency leaders and legislators to see where their state stands in terms of providing access to high-quality early childhood programs to communities and subgroups of children – and in terms of building a well-trained and effective early childhood workforce.

How are these states implementing an integrated system? States are linking a limited set of data elements from local Head Start programs to other early care and education data systems, based on written agreements that stipulate how the state will report and share Head Start data with different audiences. The most common efforts entail **(a)** linking Head Start child data with longitudinal education data systems, **(b)** inclusion of Head Start program quality data in state Quality Rating and Improvement Systems, and **(c)** inclusion of Head Start staff data in state Professional Registry initiatives.

Three key steps in building Head Start data partnerships were identified through our interviews: **(a)** assigning unique identification numbers to children, programs, and staff members or creating a process for matching records, **(b)** creating formal data-sharing agreements with Head Start programs, and **(c)** developing tools for sharing data from multiple software systems used to manage Head Start data in local agencies.

In sum, this brief points to the critical need to link Head Start data with other coordinated early care and education data systems and, based on interviews with state leaders, explores strategies for state and federal policymakers to use in developing a better-coordinated and comprehensive system to help inform key decisions related to early childhood program responsiveness and effectiveness.

Action steps for state leaders

The Early Childhood Data Collaborative (ECDC) encourages all states to build fully coordinated early childhood data systems, inclusive of data from Head Start, state pre-k, child care, early childhood special education, and other publicly-funded early care and education programs. When early childhood data systems are linked, early childhood leaders can answer key questions from policymakers on young children, program quality, and the early childhood workforce. The ECDC encourages state leaders to take the following steps to expand, deepen, and improve the quality and use of Head Start-state data system linkages:

1. Involve Head Start leaders as full partners in planning and developing the state's early childhood data system, and as members of state data governance bodies.
2. Address concerns about how Head Start data will be reported and used by developing data-sharing agreements that describe shared data elements, how data will be reported, who will have access to data, and how concerns will be addressed. Develop transparent privacy and security practices and policies to protect the confidentiality of data of individual Head Start children and families.
3. Encourage Head Start agencies to participate in state Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) by aligning data definitions and data elements and encouraging Head Start staff members to participate in state Professional Development Registries.
4. Support forums and collaborative mechanisms to engage Head Start leaders and practitioners with colleagues in other state and local early childhood and related services in studying and using data.

Action steps for federal leaders

Head Start's federal-to-local funding system means that Head Start data systems are shaped by federal policies and reporting requirements. Due to this strong tie, the ECDC urges the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services to support securely linking Head Start data with other state early childhood data systems through the following actions:

1. Encourage local Head Start programs to contribute to state data initiatives and highlight the benefits of linking Head Start data with other state databases.
2. Provide guidance to local Head Start programs on appropriate safeguards to ensure the confidentiality of data on individual children and families.
3. Engage Head Start state collaboration offices as they work with state early childhood data system planning and implementation efforts, and communicate with local Early Head Start and Head Start program leaders.
4. Develop a federal data linkage working group, including the Office of Special Education Programs and the Statewide Longitudinal Data System Program in the Department of Education, and the Offices of Child Care and Head Start in the Department of Health and Human Services. This group would help states address data security and privacy issues and identity federal and non-federal funding and technical assistance opportunities as they build more coordinated and streamlined data systems for all early care and education programs.

Introduction

The need for Head Start data in coordinated ECE data systems

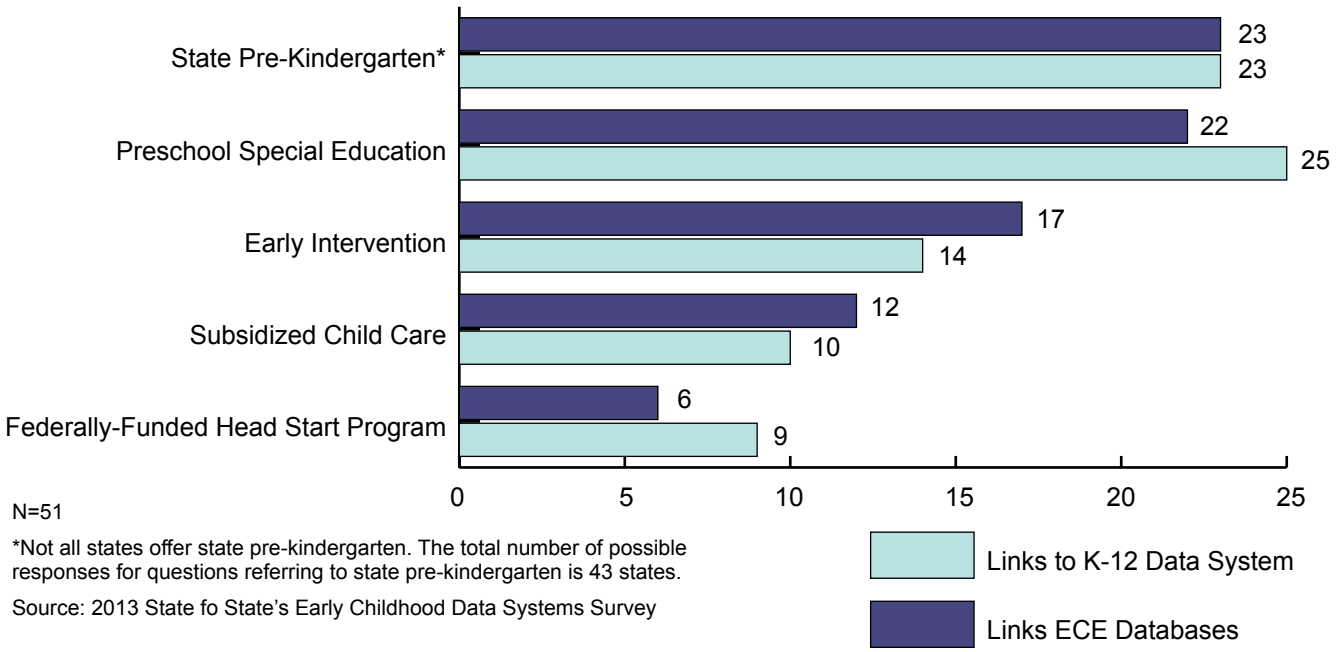
The Early Childhood Data Collaborative (ECDC) supports state policymakers' development and use of coordinated state early care and education (ECE) data systems to improve the quality of ECE programs and workforce, increase access to high-quality ECE programs, and ultimately improve child outcomes. A "coordinated data system" securely links data about children, the workforce, and programs across publicly-funded early childhood programs over time, as young children participate in early care and learning experiences such as Head Start and transition into kindergarten through third grade classrooms. Such a system can provide state leaders with a comprehensive picture of their early childhood systems and enable them to answer key policy questions about young children, programs and staff members, such as, "Are students who participate in pre-k programs better equipped for elementary school?" Empowered by this information, state leaders can make the most informed decisions about how to improve the learning and care of young children and their families.

States with a fully-coordinated state early childhood data system can reap many benefits, including the following:

- **Enhancing access to high-quality programs for all children.** Policymakers and advocates will have a detailed picture of the quality of early childhood programs across neighborhoods, communities, and regions of their state and be able to understand how well they are providing equal access to quality programs for subgroups of children, such as infants and toddlers, children of recent immigrant families or English language learners.
- **Improving program quality.** State and local program managers will receive timely, accurate and consistent feedback on the quality of all publicly-funded programs — and will be able to identify and adapt strategies from the highest-performing providers to improve all programs across the state.
- **Building a more effective ECE workforce.** Higher education institutions, state legislators, and other leaders will have information on the supply and demand for ECE staff members, a comprehensive picture of professional development opportunities and investments, and an understanding of how well these supports are working to attract, retain, and develop an ECE workforce that can prepare children for success in school.
- **Improving child outcomes.** ECE educators will draw on comprehensive, cumulative screening and assessment information about children's strengths, needs, and progress in all areas of child development and early learning. Kindergarten and primary grade teachers will also be able to access data on children's early learning experiences and outcomes, to inform their work with children and their parents.

Transforming data systems so that they are improvement-driven, coordinated, and longitudinal lays the groundwork for coordinated state ECE data systems. Although coordinated data systems can provide numerous benefits to children and families, few states have the capacity to connect information about young children across multiple early childhood programs, such as Head Start, early intervention, pre-k, and child care. In fact, based on ECDC's 2013 State of State's Early Childhood Data Systems Survey, only one state – Pennsylvania – can link child-level data across all ECE programs and with the state's K-12 data system. Moreover, as shown in Figure 1, while 26 states are linking some child-level data, most of these states link data from only a few of five major types of programs. In particular, data on children in federally-funded Head Start programs are the least likely to be connected with other state data systems.

Figure 1. Number of States Linking Data with at Least One Other ECE Database and with K-12 Data System



N=51

*Not all states offer state pre-kindergarten. The total number of possible responses for questions referring to state pre-kindergarten is 43 states.

Source: 2013 State fo State's Early Childhood Data Systems Survey

Serving more than one million young children and employing more than 230,000 staff members, Head Start plays a significant role in ECE services in states. The benefits of a coordinated ECE data system will not be fully realized unless state early childhood data systems are inclusive of data on federally-funded Head Start children, programs and staff members. Without Head Start data, state policy leaders lack an unduplicated count of how many children are participating in publicly-funded early childhood programs statewide and cannot pinpoint communities or subgroups of children that are underserved. Similarly, data on the quality of Head Start programs are vital to equipping states with the tools to measure progress toward improving the quality of all early learning programs and providing children with equal access to high-quality early learning programs. Additionally, data on the training and career development of Head Start teachers are crucial to efforts to build a more effective ECE workforce overall.

In addition to having benefits for overall policy- and decision-making at the state level, the inclusion of Head Start in comprehensive and connected state early childhood data systems can also benefit Head Start programs and the families and children they serve. For example, if data collection processes are coordinated and shared across local early education and other community service agencies, Head Start families could be spared the burden of providing the same information over and over again to establish their eligibility for varied early childhood, health, and family support services. Head Start teachers would know what services their children received as infants and toddlers and would be assured that kindergarten teachers, and children themselves, would benefit from data on teachers' observations, assessments, and interactions with children and their families.

Although Head Start programs are already collecting a significant amount of child-specific data (see Table 1 for an overview of data collected), several factors make securely linking Head Start data with data from

other early care and education programs a challenge. These include:

- Aggregated program-level Head Start data are reported from local grantee agencies to the federal Office of Head Start (housed in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families), rather than to the state agencies that receive data from all other ECE programs.
- Local Head Start programs use a variety of different software systems to collect, store, manage, and generate reports on individual children, families, program services and staff members. These disparate software systems make it difficult to link Head Start data with state data systems.
- Head Start data efforts are governed by federal reporting requirements and definitions, which may not be congruent with the definitions and indicators used in state-managed early childhood data systems.

At present, there is no requirement for local Head Start programs to link or share their data with other state data systems. However, several states are making advances toward linking and/or sharing data across their state's K-12 data system or other services' data systems. To better understand some of the challenges, successes, and strategies behind this work, ECDC contacted a sample of Head Start and state early childhood leaders in a dozen states.[1]

A look at Head Start numbers (2013-2014)

987,883 families

1,074,930 children enrolled

90.4% in center-based care

7.0% in home-based care

4.6% experiencing homelessness

2.1% in foster care

12.3% with an Individualized Education Program or Individualized Family Service Plan

Source: Office of Head Start - Services Snapshot NATIONAL ALL PROGRAMS (2013-2014), available at http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/data/psr

[1] Based on consultation with the National Head Start Association and other experts, ECDC contacted Head Start and state early childhood leaders in Arkansas, Alaska, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Utah, and Washington. These leaders responded to a series of questions about their process for including Head Start data in their state data systems. Their responses were summarized and returned to states for verification. It is important to note that the information included in this brief represents the ideas, concerns, and understanding of the respondents themselves in selected states. There are additional states with data systems inclusive of Head Start data which were not identified in this report.

Table 1: Head Start Program Information Report (PIR)

The PIR collects and reports aggregate information on an annual basis from all federally-funded Head Start and Early Head Start agencies, including the following:

- general program information (program type, agency type, record-keeping);
- enrollment and demographic characteristics (cumulative enrollment, age of children, transitions and turnover, race, ethnicity, home language, transportation services);
- program staff and qualifications (total staff and volunteers, education level/credentials, salary, race, ethnicity, language, turnover rates);
- health services (health insurance, medical home, immunizations, services to pregnant women, dental services);
- mental health services (hours a mental health professional spends on site, referrals, services);
- disabilities services (eligibility for special education or early intervention, diagnosed primary disability);
- education and development tools/approaches (screening and assessment tools, curricula, staff-child interaction observation tools); and
- family and community partnerships (family type, employment, receipt of public assistance, enrollment in training/school, education, services received, father involvement, homelessness services, foster care, collaboration agreements).

Source: 2013-2014 Head Start Program Information Report, available here: http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/data/pir

This brief highlights the variety of promising approaches for incorporating Head Start data into state early childhood data systems that emerged through those interviews. We examine strategies for linking child-level data with K-12 and other key data systems, linking program-level and workforce data, including Head Start representatives in state data governance bodies, and ensuring transparent privacy protection and security practices and policies, and give state examples of specific benefits achieved through linking Head Start data. Our intent is to help other states build coordinated early childhood data systems that are fully inclusive of Head Start data, in order to benefit Head Start programs, early childhood policy and program leaders, and our youngest children.

Linking child-level data with K-12 and other key data systems

One of ECDC's 10 fundamentals for a coordinated state ECE data system (see Figure 2) is a unique child identifier (UID). A UID is a non-duplicated number assigned to a child that follows him or her from program to program, making it possible to track the child's participation in multiple services over time. As discussed later in this brief, state policies need to ensure the UIDs are secure and protected, and that only certain stakeholders, like parents and teachers, have access to identifiable information. If the state assigns UIDs to children participating in Head Start, the state can track progress of each child over time, throughout the early childhood years, and across programs and sites within the state to improve the coordination and provision of services. Allowing information about a single child to be linked across various data systems alleviates redundant data entry on children participating in multiple ECE programs.

Nearly all of the states we spoke with reported that they were planning, piloting or implementing a system to assign a statewide UID to children served in Head Start programs. This process is done on a voluntary basis for Head Start programs that do not receive any state funding. Other states were using a matching process to reconcile records linked between Head Start and other state databases, based on a child's name, birth date, or other demographic information.

States shared several examples of how they are connecting their early care and education data with other systems. These include:

- **Georgia's** Bright from the Start: Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) is responsible for coordinating the state's early care and education data (including Head Start and Early Head Start data) and supervising the data-sharing process with GA Awards, the state's longitudinal data system. Using UIDs, data flows from Head Start and Early Head Start grantees to DECAL to GA Awards.

Figure 2: ECDC's 10 fundamentals of coordinated state ECE data systems

1. Transparent privacy protection and security practices and policies
2. Unique statewide child identifier
3. Child-level demographic and program participation information
4. Child-level data on development
5. Ability to link child-level data with K-12 and other key data systems
6. Unique program site identifier with the ability to link with children and the ECE workforce
7. Program-site data on structure, quality, and work environment
8. Unique ECE workforce identifier with ability to link with program sites and children
9. Individual ECE workforce demographics, including education and professional development information
10. State governance body to manage data collection and use

- **Delaware** will be assigning a unique ID through a master client index, managed by the Department of Education and the state's Early Childhood Integrated Data System (EDICS), Early Learning Insight (ELI). Delaware's intent is to expand the state's Statewide Longitudinal Data System for K-12 to include the birth-through-age-five early learning population. The state, in close collaboration with teachers, directors and principals, has developed the framework for the ELI data dashboards as a way for users to quickly access student information to inform instruction. Delaware launched the dashboards for the Delaware Early Learner Survey (Kindergarten Entry Assessment tool) in October 2014 and they are currently in use.

Interviewed states indicated that they were at different stages of linking child-level information from Head Start grantees to a state-level data system. The majority of states discussed processes for linking data on federally-funded Head Start children from at least some local Head Start programs with their state's Department of Education longitudinal data system.

- In addition to linking with K-12 systems, in **Pennsylvania,** Head Start data were linked with the Pennsylvania Enterprise for Linking Children Across Networks (PELICAN), an integrated early learning data system for the Departments of Education and Public Welfare.

- **Utah** is in the final beta-testing phase for its new Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) Data System, which will house data from the Department of Health's Child Health Advance Records Management (CHARM) system (e.g., immunization registry, birth records, home visiting, early intervention services), as well as early childhood services data, including data on some federally-funded Head Start children. The state invested considerable time into developing a data-sharing agreement that fully complied with FERPA and HIPAA requirements.[2]

- In **Colorado**, more than 98 percent of the state's Head Start programs serving preschool-age children are currently participating in its Results Matter online child assessment and observation records systems. The Results Matter program serves as Colorado's system for tracking developmental outcomes across early childhood programs. Using its Race to the Top/Early Learning Challenge grant, Colorado is expanding the number of children included in Results Matter to include Early Head Start and other early childhood programs. There are also plans to link these data with the state longitudinal data system.

Inclusion of program-level and workforce data in state data systems

Although child-level data are important to policymakers, data are also essential to answer questions about the quality of publicly-funded early childhood programs, the extent to which the mix of different programs is well-matched to the needs of families and children, and the characteristics and quality of early childhood teachers and other staff members. For example, data can help policymakers answer questions like, "How prepared is the birth-to-five early childhood workforce to provide effective education and care for all children?" Many states are answering such questions using state Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) and Professional

Linking Head Start data to improve instruction

Georgia is linking Head Start and public education data to enhance instruction in kindergarten classes. As Janice Haker, Georgia Head Start's Collaboration Director, notes, "We initiated a data-sharing effort to improve the transition of our students into public schools and to provide kindergarten teachers with information to help them make more informed decisions about instruction." Integrating Head Start and other early childhood data enables kindergarten teachers to plan curricula and learning activities based on the early childhood services a student has received and data on his or her individual strengths, deficiencies, and educational needs.

[2] FERPA (the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) and HIPAA (the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) are federal data privacy statutes applied to education and health data. State data-sharing agreements must be in compliance with these federal laws.

Voluntary state ECE data systems

What is QRIS?

State Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) initiatives provide a system for reporting on the quality of publicly-funded early care and education programs, based on criteria tied to specified sets of state-defined quality standards. The quality indicators typically evaluate staff qualifications, the physical learning environment, family engagement, and program management. Inclusion of Head Start programs in QRIS initiatives provides state leaders a more comprehensive picture of program quality as documented by common criteria and metrics. This information helps decision makers make better decisions about program improvement policies and strategies.

What is a Professional Registry System?

State Professional Registry Systems provide a centralized process for collecting demographic, education, certification, training, and employment information on early childhood staff. These data are used to verify staff qualifications and inform decisions related to state early childhood professional development systems. The inclusion of Head Start employees will address the need to develop systems to support the recruitment and training needs for staff across programs.

Although the data collected is valuable, it is important to note that both of these systems are voluntary in states and not all providers or professionals choose to participate.

Registry Systems. (See above box for definitions.) It is important that Head Start program-level data and workforce data are incorporated into these systems so that policy- and decision-makers can have a fuller understanding of ECE programs in their states.

Some of the states we interviewed provided examples of how they are incorporating data on Head Start program quality in their Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS), and on Head Start staff members in their Professional Registry Systems. For example, around 78 stand-alone locations of **Pennsylvania's** Head Start programs participate in Keystone STARS, the state's QRIS. To help Head Start programs participate in Keystone STARS, Pennsylvania offered a variety of strategies, including streamlining the process through the alignment of program standards, reducing the number of STARS standards required, developing a multi-location designation in recognition of Head Start's unique structure, and providing financial supports as incentives for participation.

Along with QRIS efforts, many states are developing Professional Development Registries to provide comprehensive data on the education, training, experience, and career development of early childhood teachers. As summarized in Table 1, local Head Start agencies also collect valuable data on their staff members. **Washington** includes Head Start staff in its professional development workforce database, Managed Education and Registry Information Tool (MERIT). These data are used to guide policy efforts to improve workforce quality and effectiveness. Head Start staff voluntarily use the system, which verifies their training and employment history, places them on a career lattice,[3] and provides incentives to support their continued professional development. Head Start directors and staff were convened to give input on the registry's functionality. As a result, MERIT incorporates job titles from Head Start's PIR reporting system. It also allows Head Start grantees to use MERIT to manage program and staff information at multiple sites. Information collected in MERIT can also link into the state's QRIS, Early Achievers data system.

[3] A career lattice provides for the multiple roles and settings within the early childhood profession (vertical strands), each allowing for steps of greater preparation tied to increased responsibility and compensation within that role/setting (horizontal levels), and allows for movement across roles (diagonals). NAEYC 2013.

Processes to support secure data linkages

One key step described by states linking Head Start data on children and families was to identify the data management software systems used by Head Start programs and determine how to export data into state data systems, a method that ensures Head Start agencies will not have to enter the same data multiple times into both the Head Start and state data systems. Such duplicative efforts can be time-consuming and lead to a greater chance of data entry error. **Pennsylvania** developed a mechanism to allow federal Head Start programs to upload data from several software systems into PELICAN's Early Learning Network on a voluntary basis. Similarly, **Georgia** is piloting a direct upload from ChildPlus, the data management system used by the largest number of Head Start grantees, to the DECAL system. The state also helped agencies that do not use ChildPlus develop feeds directly from their data systems into DECAL. If states are unable to develop linkage mechanisms between Head Start and state data systems, they typically ask Head Start agencies to export their data into a spreadsheet that can then be uploaded into the state's data system.

When working toward aligning data sets from different programs, it is critical that programs use the same definitions for the data they are collecting. Thus, a key issue regarding Head Start participation in QRIS efforts is the extent to which states' quality standards and assessments are aligned with Head Start Program Performance Standards and program monitoring efforts. For instance, in **Alaska**, Head Start grantees voluntarily agreed to use one measurement tool to capture dimensions of children's development reflective of the Alaska Early Learning Guidelines, the federal Head Start Child Development and Learning Outcomes Framework, and the Alaska Developmental Profile, to provide a snapshot of incoming kindergartens across their ECE programs. This is the same tool and process used by Alaska's state pre-k grant program as well. The tool is used to inform program, site, and classroom decision-making.

Linking Head Start data to examine longitudinal trends and outcomes

In **New Jersey**, cohorts of children participating in ECE programs have been tracked overtime. Studies of these cohorts have shown significant gains in literacy, language, math and science through fourth and fifth grade for children participating in preschool programs (including Head Start). This research was possible because the state longitudinal data system, which assigns unique student identifiers, has the capacity to connect participation in preschool programs with children's performance later in school. The most recent report can be found at: http://nieer.org/publications/latest-research/abbott-preschool-program-longitudinal-effects-study-fifth-grade-follow.

Including Head Start in state data governance bodies to manage data collection and use

A data governance body oversees data collection and use, as well as establishes the vision, goals, and strategic plan for building, linking, and using data to support continuous improvement. During ECDC interviews, Head Start representatives discussed the importance of addressing their unique challenges and concerns as they link their data into coordinated data systems. Specifically, those interviewed highlighted the need to share information about Head Start data policies, reporting requirements, software systems, and technology platforms with those planning or building the coordinated data systems. State and local head start directors' perspectives were critical to shaping priorities and policies for their state's overall early childhood data system efforts.

For example, in **Georgia**, conversations about linking early childhood data began in 2010, when Georgia's State Advisory Council identified building a unified data system as one of its top three priorities. Head Start representatives helped establish the goals of data-sharing efforts, identify who would benefit from the data, and establish buy-in from all stakeholders. The head start state collaboration director and the Georgia Head Start Association then worked closely with the Head Start agencies to broker specific arrangements for initial data-sharing efforts. Similarly, in **Arkansas**, Head Start leaders were brought

to the table early in the planning process for the state longitudinal data system to facilitate the full participation of Head Start programs.

States reported engaging state Head Start Association leaders, Head Start state collaboration office directors, and Head Start directors representing urban, rural, and American Indian/Alaskan Native communities in their data system planning efforts. Head Start leaders were involved in planning committees, needs assessment efforts, and focus groups to define the vision, goals, scope and priorities for state early childhood data linkage efforts. Head Start representatives were also included as members of data governance bodies to develop policy recommendations or make decisions on state early childhood data systems.

Addressing concerns related to how Head Start data are used

Another key issue reported by states was concern about how Head Start data would be reported and used once they are linked to other state data systems and made accessible to non-Head Start audiences. For example, due to eligibility requirements, Head Start programs serve a select population of children who are frequently less likely to be "school ready" than children in other ECE programs.[4] Comparing Head Start programs to other early learning programs without taking the population they serve into account could lead to false conclusions that disregard the progress of individual children. The use of Head Start data requires a complete understanding of the data, program requirements, and families served.

As one way to address this challenge, states described work or plans to develop data-sharing agreements between Head Start grantees and state agencies. For example, in **Georgia**, DECAL implemented data-sharing agreements with 100 percent of the Head Start grantees in the state, that involved sharing 17 data elements including demographic information and program site descriptions. This included the migrant/seasonal program. Similarly, **Missouri** had data-sharing agreements in place—for nine core data elements—with one-third of its Head Start grantees, to aggregate and link Head Start data for research purposes. A memorandum of understanding was established between Head Start grantees and the Department of Education, providing a detailed analysis plan to explain how the data would be used.

As noted earlier, a number of states have developed data-sharing agreements to clarify which specific Head Start data elements would be shared, and define forms and limitations on reporting data. For example, **Utah** created data-sharing agreements that limit reporting information to groups of children rather than providing access to records on individual children. This means that kindergarten teachers and teachers in higher grade levels are not able to view data collected from early childhood programs about individual students. The system is designed this way because state early childhood and public school leaders "are reluctant to assign children identification numbers that would allow students to be singled out."

Transparent privacy protection and security practices and policies

States expressed the need for transparent policies and practices that describe the security of the data and the privacy and confidentiality of personally identifiable information. Potential issues include: who has access to what data, especially identifiable data on individual children, families, or staff members; how the information is used and linked; the justification for the collection of specific data elements; and how long states retain the information.

The states we spoke with reported concerns about privacy challenges as an issue to address in linking Head Start data with other state data systems. In response, data-system governing bodies have developed policies to both ensure the security of data collected and create transparent processes for safeguarding the confidentiality of records on individual children. For example, to address concerns about data security, **Georgia** provided assurances to Head Start programs that data would not be

[4]Ryan, Rebecca M.; Fauth, Rebecca C.; Brooks-Gunn, Jeanne Spodek, Bernard (Ed); Saracho, Olivia N. (Ed), (2006). Handbook of research on the education of young children (2nd ed.). , (pp. 323-346). Mahwah, NJ, US: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, xvi, 600 pp.

shared without permission, would be used only for instructional purposes, and would not be used to compare local programs with each other. In addition, state leaders ensured that data security measures complied with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Finally, the state provided Head Start programs and parents the opportunity to participate voluntarily in the data-sharing process by signing data release forms that included the opportunity to opt out in the future.

Linking Head Start data to inform decision makers and the public

Pennsylvania's data system, PELICAN, supports program improvement efforts of state agency managers and reporting to legislators and the public to build support for expanded investment in early childhood programs. For example, the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) leaders can review aggregate child outcomes and program quality data at the state, county, and local program levels to guide professional development efforts inclusive of Head Start and other early childhood programs. In addition, by linking child outcomes and QRIS data, OCDEL can report to state policy leaders that:

The percentage of four-year olds with proficient academic and social skills more than tripled and there was a six-fold increase in the percentage of children with proficient mathematical skills after participating in Head Start State Supplemental Assistance Programs in 2012-13, based on an OCDEL-approved authentic assessment tool.[5]

[5]See http://www.ocdelresearch.org/default.aspx for additional reports from Pennsylvania's data system

Action steps for state and federal leaders

The ECDC encourages all states to build fully coordinated early childhood data systems, inclusive of data from Head Start, state pre-k, child care, early childhood special education, and all other publicly-funded early care and education programs. When early childhood data system leaders link data from these programs, they can answer key questions from policymakers on young children, program quality, and the early childhood workforce. This brief has highlighted successful efforts by states to expand and enhance their early childhood data systems by incorporating data on federally-funded Head Start and Early Head Start agencies. While the examples may fall short of the goal of linking all Head Start data with data from all state-managed early childhood programs, they provide valuable insights in how to overcome the very real technical, human, and policy barriers to Head Start data linkage efforts.

It takes extra time, effort and resources to engage the Head Start community in state early childhood data initiatives in an era when each segment of the early childhood community (including Head Start) is implementing multiple program-specific reform and improvement initiatives. However, the case for making this investment is strong. When Head Start and state data systems are linked, state policymakers gain a full picture of the status of young children, early childhood services, program quality, and the early childhood workforce. Head Start programs benefit too, when, for example, they can access data on children's progress in elementary and secondary education by linking their data with longitudinal education data systems. Having access to this data would enable them to measure the long-term impact of their work.

To conclude, we will highlight **key action steps for leaders of state early childhood data initiatives** to expand, deepen, and improve the quality and use of Head Start/state data system linkages:

- Involve Head Start leaders as full partners in planning and developing the state's early childhood data system and as members of state data governance bodies. This will ensure that Head Start perspectives on using data to improve early childhood program effectiveness and investments are included, and incorporate their voices and ideas in setting policy priorities for data use. In addition, Head Start leaders can provide details on the types of data they collect, their data management tools and technology platforms, and, in some instances, examples of local data-sharing or linkage efforts at the community or school district levels, ensuring that the data-system planning process adapts to the unique features of the Head Start data systems.
- Address Head Start concerns about reporting and using Head Start data by developing data-sharing agreements to define shared data elements, reporting procedures, access to the data, and procedures to address future concerns. Address concerns regarding safeguarding the confidentiality of data on individual Head Start children and families by developing transparent privacy and security practices and policies.
- Encourage the inclusion of Head Start agencies in state Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) by articulating how QRIS standards align with Head Start Program Performance Standards, and how QRIS assessment procedures align with Head Start program monitoring efforts. Encourage Head Start staff members to be included in state Professional Development Registries by aligning Professional Development Registry definitions and data elements with Head Start workforce data systems.
- Support forums and collaborative mechanisms that engage Head Start leaders and practitioners with colleagues in other states, and with local early childhood and related services, in studying and using data. Over the long run, coordinated data systems will demonstrate their worth by equipping early childhood and public policy leaders to use data to improve learning opportunities and outcomes for young children.

Finally, it is important to note that Head Start's federal-to-local funding system means that Head Start data systems are shaped by federal policies and reporting requirements. Several existing resources are available from the federal government, such as the Administration for Children and Families' Confidentiality Toolkit,[6] the Department of Education's SLDS Early Childhood Integrated Data System Toolkit,[7] the Office of Special Education Programs DaSY Center,[8] and the Common Education Data Standards project.[9] However, there is still much that can be done to support states as they work towards developing or expanding coordinated ECE data systems. Accordingly, **we urge the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services** to support linking Head Start data with other state early childhood data systems through the following actions:

- Encourage local Head Start programs to contribute to state data initiatives and highlight the benefits of linking Head Start data with other state databases.
- Provide guidance to local Head Start programs on appropriate safeguards to ensure the confidentiality of data on individual children and families.
- Support Head Start State Collaboration Offices in engaging in state early childhood data system planning and implementation efforts. They are key resources for communicating with local Early Head Start and Head Start program leaders.
- Develop a federal data linkage working group, including the Office of Special Education Programs and the Statewide Longitudinal Data System Program in the Department of Education, and the Offices of Child Care and Head Start in Department of Health and Human Services. This group would help states address data security and privacy issues and identity federal and non-federal funding and technical assistance opportunities as they build more coordinated and streamlined data systems for all early care and education programs.

We hope this brief will accelerate state efforts to involve Head Start leaders as full partners in their early childhood data initiatives, and to build linkages to incorporate Head Start data on children, program services, and the workforce. The Early Childhood Data Collaborative will continue to assist states and federal leadership as they work toward building coordinated, longitudinal ECE data systems and using these systems to inform early care and education policies to benefit our nation's children and families.

[6]Available here: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/acf_confidentiality_toolkit_final_08_12_2014.pdf
[7]Available here: https://slds.grads360.org/#program/ecids-toolkit
[8]Available here: http://dasycenter.org/index.html
[9]Available here: https://ceds.ed.gov/Default.aspx

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About ECDC

The Early Child Data Collaborative supports state policymakers' development and use of coordinated state early care and education (ECE) data systems to improve the quality of ECE programs and the workforce, increase access to high quality ECE programs, and ultimately improve children's outcomes.

ECDC partners with the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at UC Berkeley, Child Trends, Council of Chief State School Officers, Data Quality Campaign, National Conference of State Legislatures, National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Pew Home Visiting Campaign to inform the development of products and guide our strategic planning based on current trends in data systems development and policies. Child Trends serves as the hub for ECDC.