

Southcentral Foundation

AN ANALYSIS OF THE ALASKA EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE
SYSTEM

Prepared by Actionable Data Consulting

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BACKGROUND

In 2020, there were six reports released focusing on the health and well-being of Alaskan children. The first section of this document will combine the findings of these reports to assess the current state of the “system” that cares for children 0-8 years old (early childhood). The six reports are:

1. *The Alaska Early Childhood Environmental Scan (Scan)* This report identifies statewide needs that will enable stakeholders to better coordinate, align and integrate the services, supports, and resources needed to build a better early childhood system. The report looks at governance and leadership, funding, data systems, quality standards, family outreach and engagement, workforce and professional development, the status of young children, and provides regional profiles on the status of Alaska’s children (All Alaska Pediatric Partnership, 2020).
2. *A Needs Assessment of Alaska’s Mixed-Delivery System of Early Childhood Care and Education (Needs Assessment)*: This statewide need assessment was completed by the McDowell Group under contract by the Alaska Association of School Boards. It was funded by a Preschool Development Grant B-5 (PDG) from the federal Office of Child Care, Administration for Children and Families, awarded to the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) in partnership with the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS). The assessment provides data on the accessibility, affordability, and quality of early care and education, as well as a description of system funding, governance, workforce, transition supports, facilities, and the research and data system (McDowell Group, 2020).
3. *Early Childhood Alaska, A Strategic Direction, 2020-2025 (Strategic Plan)*: This is a strategic plan derived from the *Needs Assessment of Alaska’s Mixed-Delivery ECCE System*. The goal of the plan is to promote coordination and leadership by proposing a new governance structure that will include a process for establishing progress measures, responsibilities, and desired outcomes. The plan development was guided by the Alaska Early Childhood Joint Taskforce and workgroups, surveys and meetings with stakeholders (Alaska Early Childhood Joint Task Force, 2020).
4. *Pre-birth and Early Life Indicators of School Performance: (ALCANLink, 2020)* This is a project of the State of Alaska Maternal and Child Epidemiology Unit that analyzes data to explore associations between pre-birth factors from the Pregnancy Risk Factor Monitoring System (mothers of newborns), post-birth outcomes from the Childhood Understanding Behavior Survey (mothers of three-year-olds) and other Alaskan data such as from the Office of Children’s Services and the Department of Education and Early Development.
5. *Developmental Screening in Alaska, Status, Leadership, Data and Structure, Challenges and Opportunities*: This is a report that provides background on the current activities in Alaska related to developmental screening, addresses the topics of governance and the structure of an Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) online data system and discusses a statewide plan for developmental screening efforts (Help Me Grow, 2020).
6. *Alaska Children’s Budget (ACB)*: This document looks at the state budget, including federal, state, and other funds. It identifies the spending that supports children and families, comparing current spending with spending in 2011-2014.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM OF CARE

Figure 1 shows the structure of an ideal early childhood system. System leadership is driven to meet the needs of families through listening and partnering with them, and using findings from a statewide integrated data system. Policy makers and leadership work together to ensure that the “system” has the funding and policy to meet these needs. These forces shape the quality, access, and affordability of services, as well as the array of services in the system. The large categories of services include early childhood care and education (pre-school, kindergarten, and elementary school), special needs and early intervention, family support (home visiting programs, parenting support) - including concrete supports in times of need (Medicaid, food security programs, transportation) - and health and wellness care (physical and mental health, dental, substance use disorder treatment and other specialty care). This array of services is more effective with coordination between providers that includes providing referrals and ensuring smooth transitions between programs.

Figure 1. Diagram of Alaska Early Childhood Care System



FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND NEED

Family engagement is crucial to understand the needs and the ideal configuration of services in the early childhood system. The data on need in the Alaskan early childhood system may be somewhat out-of-date in the very year that recent reports are released. Caring for Alaskan children has gotten more complicated since the pandemic started, with the closure of some daycare and early learning facilities, schooling interrupted, parents who have lost their jobs, restricted access to specialty services, and a layer of stress that covers all of daily life for the family. The implications of living during the pandemic include increased maternal stress, economic stress that may affect seeking medical care, increases in basic needs such as food security, and increased risk for child abuse/neglect, and intimate partner violence in the home. Various population-based surveys, such as the Pregnancy Risk Factor Monitoring System (PRAMS), Childhood Understanding Behavior Survey (CUBS), National Child Health Survey (NCHS), and others, provide insight into the needs of Alaskan children. Additionally, some of the various governing bodies in this area solicit family input.

Population-level data reported in these documents collected prior to the pandemic showed some improvement in the economic security of families, the infant death rate, and the teen birthrate; however, there was no improvement or a worsening of prenatal substance use, the percent of children living in poverty, and child maltreatment and mortality. Alaska as whole continues to struggle with low levels of children being ready for kindergarten (34%), and attaining adequate 3rd grade reading (37%) and math (43%) proficiency level.

REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

The Strategic Plan recommends that the opinions and ideas of families drive the design of system policies and programming, that parents be full partners in the system as their child's most important teachers, and that early childhood programs meet the cultural and language needs of children and families. The Scan (Alaska Early Childhood Environmental Scan) suggests that valuing parents includes providing stipends to parents who participate in early childhood initiatives and offer childcare and transportation, and other strategies, for overcoming barriers to participation.

LEADERSHIP/GOVERNANCE

The reports examine leadership and data systems separately; however, these are intricately linked. Leadership only knows how to lead when they are using up-to-date accurate data on inputs and impact to understand the effectiveness of the system.

The Scan describes the current system as including the following coordinating and advisory bodies:

1. The Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council (AECCC), which provides leadership and direction for five federal grants:
 - a. Child Care and Development Block Grant
 - b. Head Start Collaboration Grant
 - c. Maternal Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program
 - d. Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) Grant
 - e. Preschool Development Grant
2. The Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education
3. The State Board of Education and Early Development
4. The Alaska Children's Trust
5. The Alaska Mental Health Board
6. The Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority
7. The Alaska Workforce Investment Board

The Scan identifies a lack of clear leadership and authority in the system, resulting in lack of unifying vision and lack of coordination to set priorities and accomplish them. The report states that the AECCC has no staff, no written mandate to produce report(s) or issue recommendations, no budget for member travel, no term limits, and the process for member nomination is not clear. Additionally, the report stated that, overall, there is a need for more local coordination with Tribal organizations who fund early childhood initiatives, as well as early childhood councils throughout state. Both the Scan and the Needs Assessment point to the importance of collaboration and coordination among early childhood programs as crucial to creating a successful system.

System data and research can inform policy and practice, monitor service provision, assess effectiveness and impact, and guide strategy and the structure of the system as a whole. The various reports used for this document, all released in 2020, are good examples of research not being coordinated. A unified governance structure would be able to encourage collaboration to create synergy and partnership and ultimately, more effective joint research projects/reports. Additionally, a single early childhood integrated data system would be a very powerful tool to be used in data and research reporting.

There have been several attempts to create a state-wide integrated data system. The Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) grant was tasked with building the infrastructure for the Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS) to collect, store, report, and analyze indicators for measuring state-level early childhood system data. This initiative lost its funding. Additionally, a data infrastructure initiative titled the Alaska Navigator Statewide Workforce and Education-related Statistics (ANSWERS) was created

and received federal funding starting in 2006; however, it was decommissioned in 2019 due to state budget cuts. Further, the Alaska Preschool Development Grant was going to explore the development of such a system. However, the funding for this project was not renewed in 2020. A statewide early childhood data system should have a way of identifying children across programs in order to monitor the delivery of services and their developmental progress and growth.

An integrated data project currently exists in the Department of Health and Human Services called the Alaska Longitudinal Child Abuse and Neglect Link (ALCANLink) project. Started in 2010, the project links the state's Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System data with the Office of Children's Services Data to shed light on the cumulative risk of child abuse and neglect in the state. A recent ALCANLink publication demonstrated the link between pre-birth and early life indicators of school performance reports. Data from this system revealed that 64% of all Alaskan children score below or far below proficient on the 3rd grade PEAKS reading assessment. Attaining this score was more likely if:

- The mother experienced preconception or prenatal homelessness (90%);
- The mother did not graduate from high school (86%)
- The mother smoked marijuana during pregnancy (81%)
- The children had experienced a first report to OCS (79%)

Another statewide data effort was described in the report, *Developmental Screening in Alaska: Status, Leadership, Data and Structure, Challenges and Opportunities*, commissioned by Help Me Grow. Use of the online developmental screening data system by all early childhood service providers who do developmental screening could help system leadership understand and improve the coverage of development screening and related programming in the state.

REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

The Strategic Plan, ACB Report and the Scan all recommend a centralized early childhood governance body be developed, funded, and charged with coordinating, planning for, monitoring and evaluating the Alaska early childhood system. Both the Scan and the Strategic Plan propose that champions are needed to build and maintain an integrated data system that is coordinated, centralized, accessible, and actionable.

The Strategic Plan proposes a process to create new governance needed to implement the strategic plan through the establishment of AECCC workgroups that align with the goals of the strategic plan. There would need to be revision and improvement of the current governance model, as well as designation of staffing and the leadership who would be responsible and accountable for overseeing strategic plan implementation. The improved governance model would be designed with consultant support using a consensus building process that includes families, communities and public/private partners. It would incorporate sustainable staffing and funding for performance management and evaluation. A goal would be to coordinate between sectors and settings to develop policies, standards, and regulations; establish and promote shared definitions for system-wide terms; develop and implement trauma-informed practices; improve the background check system and align quality standards.

FUNDING AND POLICY

The ACB report states that the Alaska Children’s Budget (for children of all ages) totals \$3.15 billion per year (FY 2020) and is 30% of the state’s total budget. It includes federal, state, and other funds.¹ The ACB analysis uses a broad brush to assess spending on children and families, including targeted funds for services and supporting infrastructure to programs for children younger than 18 years. These funds can be found in the capital (\$8.4 million) and operating budgets (\$3.14 billion). Comparing the FY2020 budget with the average spending in 2011-2014, the capital budget has decreased by 95%. Only \$8.4 million was spent on children out of \$1.28 billion. Ninety-five percent of the child-focused capital budget in FY2020 will be spent on infrastructure, primarily deferred maintenance for public schools and no funds will go towards durables (i.e. vehicles, computers, and technology) or access (i.e. ADA-compliant ramps) projects. During that same time period there was a decrease of 3% in the operating budget. The following bullets explain some of this change.

- While the portion of the operating budget that covers departmental operating costs has only changed slightly, the spending has shifted. In FY2020, spending is expected to change in the following manner:
 - 6.5% reduction in “real dollar” spending on education in FY2020
 - 21.4% less will be spent on economic wellbeing
 - 4.2% less will be spent on family and community
 - 8.8% more will be spent on health
- Unrestricted general funds in the operating budget have been reduced in FY2020 as follows:
 - 5.8% reduction in education
 - 27.6% reduction in health
 - 1.3% reduction in family and community
 - 38.2% reduction in economic well-being
- Overall, in FY2020 federal funding has increased from 2011-2014 by 12.6% as follows:
 - 11.5% reduction on spending on education
 - 11.6% reduction in economic well-being spending
 - 41.2% increase in spending on health
 - 13% increase in spending on family and community
- In the non-departmental portion of the operating budget, there was a 43.5% reduction from 2011-2014 resulting from the gubernatorial veto of funds for reimbursing existing school debt held by municipalities. In this area the following reductions were seen:
 - 39.1% in education
 - 99% in family and community spending

¹ The ACB included monies that support children, youth, and families. This includes all state and federal funds for services and infrastructure, including funds spent on families with children as a requirement of funding. This includes K-12 Foundation Program, Children’s Services Front Line Social Workers, Public Assistance-Childcare Benefits, Mt. Edgecumbe School, etc.

The Needs Assessment focuses on a smaller target of funding – the early care and education system, funded by a mix of federal, state, local and individual sources. The report estimates that this funding amounts to \$370M annually, including \$214M in household spending on childcare. Federal funds account for \$133M and state funds contribute \$22M. The report states that inadequate funding creates a barrier to providing the needed quality and quantity of early childhood services. For example, Head Start funding that does not keep up pace with inflation creates challenges with programs keeping up with performance standards. The following key needs and challenges related to funding were identified in the Needs Assessment:

1. Insufficient funding is a barrier to keeping up with performance standards
2. Alaska has a high cost of buying and renting facilities
3. Early childhood care and learning programs do not pay competitive wages, which often impedes recruitment and retainment of staff
4. Federal and state funding is inadequate and often not consistent and reliable
5. State Head Start providers have difficulty making their 25% match
6. Costs of running a Head Start in Alaska are higher than in other places in the United States (27% above average U.S. cities)

REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

The three reports focused on funding all stress that funding needs to be guided and aligned by system governance and leadership. Policy and funding should prioritize competing needs, measure and reward effectiveness, and focus on the importance of setting our children up for success at an early age.

The ACB Report makes the following recommendations regarding funding:

1. Look at the budget through a children’s focused lens
2. Focus on upstream policy choices like early childhood learning and education and reducing ACEs to produce downstream benefits
3. Maximize federal dollars to support children
4. Develop a statewide plan focused on child wellbeing and reversing a slide in KIDS Count metrics
5. Visualize what we want for our children and then develop the plan and the budget, rather than being restricted by starting with a view limited by funding

The Scan recommends:

1. Increase understanding of how programs at the local level are braiding and blending funding
2. Create an oversight body to prioritize among competing needs in the early childhood system
3. Coordinate messaging to policy makers and the public about the importance of early childhood
4. Examine how the state could use current funding streams differently
5. Fund workforce development to improve the quality and quantity of early childhood providers

The Needs Assessment recommends that funding for early childhood should be coordinated, based on current data, and support the goals of their proposed statewide plan. This objective includes:

1. Developing fiscal policy focused on a coordinated whole-child approach by mapping current financing to child and family needs and aligning policies across funding streams
2. Providing financial incentives for ongoing quality and system improvement
3. Identifying new and strategic ways to maximize funding by convening a statewide work group to explore and report on additional funding opportunities and models

ACCESS AND QUALITY

Access and quality are key characteristics of a system that are directly linked to its effectiveness. Alaska Early Childhood Access indicators from the reports include:

- 78% of mothers in Alaska have adequate prenatal care
- 53% of children ages 0-5 years and 46% aged 6-11 years receive care in a medical home
- 41% of children (9-35 months) receive a developmental screening
- Young children in Alaska have a lower rate of EPSDTP screening than the national average
- 90% of eligible children < 1 year old covered by Medicaid received a well-child check-up
- 28% of 6-9-year-olds received a well-child check-up
- 62% of children aged 6-9 years covered by Medicaid received dental services
- At a regional level, the high cost of preferred care was the most common barrier to having a child in childcare
- Childcare is more expensive in Alaska than nationally for all age groups except school-age children
- Alaskan children enroll in Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B (age 3-5) at a rate similar to children nationally

Having quality standards based on best practices for programs and providers, and a means to monitor them is critical for good outcomes. Strategic financing can also support quality outcomes. There are four main quality standards currently used throughout Alaska to differing degrees:

1. Learn and Grow (early childhood education programs quality standards) - in 2019, 42% of eligible programs in Alaska were enrolled in Learn and Grow.
2. Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic and Treatment Programs (EPSDTP) with criteria for children to receive early detection and care through regular well-child check-ups and specialty screenings.
3. Early Care Licensing - focused on quality in child care and preschool as defined by the Alaska Early Childhood Joint Task Force as a program licensed, certified, or approved and in good standing with their oversight agency. The Needs Assessment states that fewer than half of Alaska children in programs are in quality programs.
4. Early Learning Guidelines - these were developed by the Alaska Board of Education and Early Development in 2006. They assist with the development of curriculum and professional development, and they are aligned with the kindergarten entry assessment.

Additionally, specific programs like Head Start/Early Head Start and Alaska’s Early Intervention/Infant Learning Program have federal requirements that promote quality that is monitored and evaluated on an ongoing basis.

These standards are implemented to different extents throughout the state. In an ideal system, quality standards would be monitored by a statewide entity that could evaluate the level of use, the level of quality, and how different standards interact and may have conflicting effects on the system. The Scan points out that a key challenge to the successful use of quality standards in Alaska is that there is not a central body with the infrastructure and resources to monitor the impact of the standards. Currently, the AECCC oversees three priorities with quality standards; the state also invests in the development of quality standards, and some federally funded programs report on quality to their funders. There is no coordination between these efforts.

The Statewide Early Care and Learning Survey 2019 in Alaska showed that families can find care and early learning that meets two of three of the following characteristics: accessibility, affordability, and quality. Families reported that their ability to work was impacted by the cost of care/learning (72%), finding quality care (62%) and having access to care (51%). The importance of quality as the most important factor varied by urban (22%) versus rural (14%) residence.

REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

The Strategic Plan has accessibility, affordability, and quality objectives. The Access objective calls for increasing access to high quality, culturally responsive and affordable childhood education programs through increasing awareness of programs, offering programs technical assistance opportunities and addressing specific barriers. The Affordability objective is focused in decreasing the amount of income families spend on child care/early learning and adjusting child care assistance eligibility requirements. The Quality objective is focused on increasing the number of programs participating in the Learn and Grow quality initiative, increasing the capacity for quality for programs and teaching families how to assess the quality of child care programs.

SYSTEM COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION BETWEEN PROGRAMS

The “glue” within a system is the connection, collaboration, and coordination between service providers. Attention and nurturing of this part of the system is often overlooked, especially when there is no central leadership body. There is a lack of information collected to examine this part of the system. The only information available in the reports was in the Needs Assessment regarding transitions into kindergarten, which indicates that this process is done differently all over Alaska.

In Alaska, the kindergarten entrance assessment is required and districts must submit a developmental profile for each student entering kindergarten or first grade. There are no statutory guidelines on kindergarten transition practices. That being said, there are several communities who have transition initiatives that appear to be working well. A major barrier to having a smooth transition process is a high turnover of staff in early childhood programs, requiring the need for repeated staff trainings in this area.

Additionally, families who have had negative school experiences may be less apt to engage with teachers and schools to ensure a smooth transition. Also, lack of funding makes it difficult for teachers to work on transitions with children without the assistance of substitute staff to maintain their usual duties. Overall, a lack of transition policies and sharing of data also decreases institutional communication and hinders smooth transitions.

REPORT RECOMMENDATION

The Strategic Plan recommends establishing procedures and practices (with family input) for collaboration and communication between programs covering all domains, and providing information to parents about the importance of successful transitions and the procedures in their region.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

A foundational part of the Early Childhood System is the staff that serve in the system. There are shortages of trained staff throughout the entire system and a high degree of turnover in key areas. The challenges that create this situation are low wages and few opportunities for growth for early childhood education professionals, degree programs that are limited or not available in Alaska, and a lack of a coordinated approach to recruit and retain professionals. Key positions in this system include physicians, psychiatrists, physical therapists, speech-language pathologist, occupational therapists, as well as early childhood, kindergarten and elementary teachers. Also included are special education teachers, early childhood education administrators, and social workers. There are several initiatives in the state that focus on increasing the workforce, including those working in the early childhood system. These include: the Alaska Association for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Training Hub; Alaska Healthcare Workforce Initiative; Child Care Program Office Scholarships; Infant Learning Program Workforce Development Projects; System for Early Education Development (SEED) Wage Incentives; the Supporting Healthcare Access through Loan Repayment (SHARP) Program, and the WWAMI Medical Program.

REPORT RECOMMENDATION

The Strategic Plan recommends increasing cross sector recruitment and retention of a diverse group of early childhood professionals by increasing professional development opportunities, wages and compensation.

CONCLUSION

The data in these reports reveal that although funding has decreased over the last decade, there are many innovative early childhood efforts and initiatives ongoing in Alaska focused on serving our youngest residents and their families. These efforts could be supported and expanded if the system developed a single coordinating governance body that oversees the “system,” coordinates access, quality, and workforce development initiatives for all types of programs and services, and manages a statewide integrated data system with unique identifiers to monitor and evaluate system performance. This governance body will be in a position to convene staff from programs and services to discuss how to better coordinate transitions and referrals within and between system areas. Positive changes that will improve the system will be to have funding strategically aligned with system priorities and needs and system development guided by a partnership between the governance board, providers, and families.

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