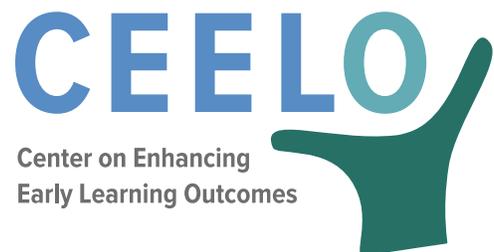


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Defining Highly Effective Offices of Early Learning in State Education Agencies and Early Learning Agencies

A CEELO Vision Paper

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The Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes' (CEELO) [mission](#) is to strengthen the capacity of State Education Agencies and state Early Learning Agencies to lead sustained improvements in early learning opportunities and outcomes. These agencies have authority to establish and implement policies, administer funding and provide oversight for programs serving young children, depending on the state agency structure. Regardless of governance structure, strong leaders, highly capable staff, and effective and efficient functions within state agencies are critical to achieving the goal of enhanced early learning outcomes.

There are generally three models of governance in early childhood: 1) coordinated governance across multiple state agencies; 2) consolidated functions within in one agency and a designated Office of Early Learning (OEL); and 3) creation of a new state agency focused on early childhood services.¹ The goal of these offices is to create greater policy coherence and more efficient delivery of services. For example, the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge states had a specific goal to strengthen the infrastructure for the early childhood systems, and the states receiving these grants had varying governance structures. There is some evidence that coordinated governance did help facilitate policy coherence and service integration in these states, however, since the funding was time-limited the long-term sustainability and impact is uncertain.²

The intention of this paper is to describe a vision for an effective OEL, regardless of the “governance” structure. We reviewed the literature on leadership and organizational effectiveness, interviewed early childhood state and national leaders, and drew on the more than 30 years of experience in the field of the authors. The paper is a first step toward a deeper understanding of what it takes to be a highly effective office of early learning in state government that improves outcomes for children. We do not address everything needed to improve outcomes but do offer this vision as an opportunity to engage and deepen the discussion.

What is an Office of Early Learning?

The term Office of Early Learning (OEL) is a generic term that describes state offices overseeing early childhood programs and services. Not all states have a single Office of Learning (see side bar), but many do. For the most part, the Office of Early Learning has authority to oversee programs, set or inform policy, establish guidance, issue and oversee grants, and provide oversight for programs and services that serve young children. In some instances, these offices are responsible for the administration of programs and services for young children.³ The primary function of most OEL's is

¹ Regenstein, E & Lipper, K. (2013). A Framework for Choosing a State-Level Early Childhood Governance System. Retrieved from <http://www.buildinitiative.org/WhatsNew/ViewArticle/tabid/96/ArticleId/628/A-Framework-for-Choosing-a-State-Level-Early-Childhood-Governance-System.aspx>

² Dichter, H. (2015). State System Building Through Governance. Retrieved from <http://www.buildinitiative.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/E-BookChapter1StateSystemsBuildingThroughGovernance.pdf>

³ Some Offices of Early Learning are responsible for programs and services for children from birth through age five or kindergarten entry. In other instances, these offices oversee programs that focus only on infants and toddlers. Still

related to the early learning programs it is charged with overseeing. For example, the function of an OEL charged solely with overseeing early childhood special education programs and services differs from an OEL that is responsible for overseeing all U.S. Department of Education-funded as well as state-funded early education programs and services.⁴

Why is State OEL Capacity Important?

Across the country, state agencies are responsible for managing more than \$20 billion in program funding for early childhood programs that fund services for children from birth through third grade.

The primary function of an OEL is to administer programs and funding that serve children from birth through third grade. Most of these programs are designed to address current inequities in access to high-quality education for all children, and to prevent or narrow achievement gaps. As noted in the CCSSO report, *Equity Starts Early*, chief state school officers are “redoubling their commitment to the early years as an essential mechanism for tackling inequity and underachievement.”⁵ The case is clear – to manage programs and achieve this aspirational goal, each state needs a highly effective OEL with strong leaders, highly capable staff, and effective and efficient functions.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A HIGH PERFORMING OFFICE OF EARLY LEARNING

This paper presents the characteristics of high performing OELs in three dimensions¹:

- **Organizational Capacity:** *What highly effective OELs look like*
- **Organizational Effectiveness and Efficiency:** *What highly effective OELs seek to achieve*
- **Leadership and Staff Capabilities:** *What leaders and staff members of highly effective OELs know and are able to do*

other states have Offices of Early Learning that oversee programs and services for children who are attending pre-K and early elementary grades.

⁴ See for more information, Early Care and Education: State and Territory Governance Structures. Retrieved from https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/state_territory_governance_structures_edited_1.pdf

⁵ Stark, R. (March 2016). *Equity Starts Early: How Chiefs Will Build High Quality Early Education*. Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers. Available at: <http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2016/EquityStartsEarly3242016.pdf>

Organizational Capacity: What Highly Effective OELs Looks Like

OELs with organizational capacity have sustained leadership driving a coherent early childhood vision and strategic plan, bolstered by a capable team, well-managed infrastructure and external momentum generated by cross-agency collaboration, external funding and advocacy partners, as well as gubernatorial and legislative backing and funding. High-performing OELs have the organizational capacity to maximize opportunities to advance their vision and, over time, to achieve tangible improvements in funding, program and workforce quality, equal access, reductions in the achievement gaps and improvements in outcomes for children.

- **Vision and Strategic Plan:** The OEL develops an ambitious, compelling vision for providing high-quality learning opportunities from early childhood to third grade for young children and their families. This vision contributes to the state's key overall priorities, such as ensuring equal educational opportunity, promoting economic development, strengthening families, or building stronger communities. The vision promotes a sense of coherence in the state's approach to managing multiple early childhood funding streams and connecting the work of early childhood programs to public schools. The vision is bolstered by a strategic plan including concrete benchmarks for the OEL as well as for state and local leaders, local schools and provider agencies, practitioners, and young children. This vision guides policy, procedures and overall work of the OEL.
- **Stakeholder Engagement and Strategic Communication:** The OEL works actively with and is responsive to the field, to policy leaders, and to partners. At the start, OEL staff engage the early childhood and public education communities in setting priorities, shaping state initiatives and providing feedback on implementation efforts. They continue this engagement to make mid-course corrections. The OEL also communicates and works closely with the governor's office, legislative leadership, state boards, media, and local government and boards of education.
- **Performance Management as well as Execution and Implementation of Policies, Programs and Initiatives:** The OEL implements effective performance management systems to support effective, accountable, cost-efficient programs and services for young children. OEL leaders foster effective staff teams and establish clear lines of reporting and ongoing progress monitoring. The OEL builds high-quality systems for fiscal management; intra- and inter-agency collaboration; and regulatory, monitoring, data and reporting systems. Highly effective OELs are

responsive to inquiries in a timely manner. The OEL has a clear, results-focused strategic plan to carry out its work. In turn, there is a clear delineation of functions that are carried out directly by OEL staff, intermediate units, higher education institutions, public and private partnerships, and private vendors. When external partners are chosen, the OEL manages performance through strong procurement and progress monitoring mechanisms. Through a lens of customer service, highly effective OELs reverse negative stereotypes of state bureaucracy because of their productivity, quality, speed, responsiveness and consistency.

- **Talent Management:** To be high-performing, the OEL must have sufficient numbers of qualified, skillful personnel to effectively manage multiple programs, internal systems, improvement initiatives, and collaborative relationships. The OEL has a plan for staff recruitment and development including career civil servants, political appointees, short-term assignees such as interns and fellows, and consultants. The OEL provides time and resources to ensure that leaders and staff engage in continuous learning in key performance areas such as emerging research, implementation science, systems thinking and change, communication, and results-based leadership. The culture and core values include high expectations for staff but also strong support for staff members. Decisions are driven by data but also informed by the judgment and perspectives of the team. As such, leaders and staff members are proud to work for the OEL because they believe in its mission.

Organizational Effectiveness: What Highly Effective OELs Seek to Achieve

To reach an ambitious vision for young children that drives toward outcomes, the OEL must align its many complex purposes and processes and direct them toward clear operational goals and objectives. These include incorporating research-based foundations of early learning, along with sound operations, systems implementation and performance management processes that drive toward evidence-based results.

- **Continuous Improvement in Program Quality, Teaching and Learning, and Child Outcomes.** Over time through ongoing data systems and periodic process and impact evaluations the OEL produces data and reports that document: a) progress in program, classroom, workforce quality; b) compliance with standards; and c) outcomes for children. OELs develop student and program standards and promulgate regulations and policy to support implementation of programs and services at the local level. OEL staff have a shared vision of the goals for children and programs they are responsible for and continually assess progress towards meeting these goals.
- **Unified Data System.** The OEL links data on young children, early childhood program and workforce quality, and funding across funding sources/state and federal agencies and across birth through third grade. Data is tied to geo-mapping to show availability of high-quality programs for children of different ages in neighborhoods and communities. K-3 teachers can access and use data on their children from early childhood programs and early childhood agencies can receive feedback on the progress of their children in K-3 and beyond.
- **Expertise on Curriculum, Pedagogy, Assessment, and Technology.** The OEL builds capacity of local early childhood agencies and elementary schools to help teachers improve their work with children. The OEL helps district, school and program administrators make informed decisions on curricula, assessment tools, materials and professional development. The OEL helps administrators evaluate whether these resources are aligned to state standards and have adequate evidence of effectiveness. In turn, OELs support adoption of evidence-based approaches that include curriculum to support cognitive, socio-emotional, physical and developmental outcomes for young children.
- **Family and Community Engagement.** The OEL develops and implements policy and guidance to engage families in children's learning and ensure effective transitions from early childhood programs into the primary years and beyond. The OEL directs resources to inclusively serve specific populations of families, including children experiencing homelessness, children with education special needs, children living in low-income families, and migrant children. A highly effective OEL ensures that family engagement policy is embedded in standards for programs, children's learning, and workforce preparation and improvement.

- **High Performing Early Childhood Workforce.** The OEL develops policy and guidance to support the recruitment, preparation, hiring, induction, and compensation of high-quality teachers and administrators. This includes ensuring working conditions that support effective practice as well as implementing fair and coherent evaluation systems for the EC workforce. OELs set the policy and allocate resources to implement professional learning for all staff, including, teachers, teacher assistants, administrators, family engagement staff, professional development providers, and higher education faculty.
- **Systems Alignment.** The OEL links programs so that access for families to services is simplified, administrative burdens on local agencies are minimized and children enjoy a smooth pathway of birth-through third grade teaching and learning.
- **Strategic Financing.** The OEL manages resources, including garnering new resources, to implement policy that supports quality standards and a quality workforce. States use financing strategies that ensure resources are adequate to: a) implement established indicators of high-quality early education services; b) efficiently manage multiple funding sources without undue barriers or administrative burden on local programs; c) provide all children and families with equitable access to high-quality programs; and d) ensure all administrators, teachers, and staff in all settings and across all sectors are paid salaries that are equitable with those who have similar levels of education and experience.
- **Innovation.** The OEL makes programs and teachers aware of new research, tools and resources including curricula, assessments, opportunities to use technology and professional development strategies. They sponsor local efforts to innovate to inclusively serve diverse groups of young learners. OELs work collaboratively to build a more concrete, detailed, shared vision of what excellence looks like in early childhood environments. They re-examine and re-tool state standards, assessment tools and accountability strategies on a regular basis.

Leadership and Staff Capabilities: What Leaders and Staff of Highly Effective OELs Know and Are Able to Do

The OEL relies upon sustained and recognized leadership, management and early childhood expertise. Staff are well-trained in early childhood education and demonstrate in-depth experience as teachers and administrators in the range of early learning settings, content, and programs. They know, are known by, and are respected by, their state's early childhood and public education communities. Highly effective OEL's have strong leadership and sufficient staffing to develop and implement policies and programs designed to improve outcomes for young children.

- **OEL leaders are adaptive and innovative.** OEL leaders demonstrate perseverance, fortitude, creativity and courage. They take a long-term and big picture perspective. They are creative and nimble in identifying and pursuing next steps. They are accepting of the reality of having to live with tension and have a tolerance for ambiguity. They understand the political, social and economic context of their states, as well as values regarding children and families, particularly in areas policymakers may be willing to invest.
- **OEL professionals are well-trained in research-based child development and early childhood pedagogy, curriculum, observation, and assessment.** They are fluent in early childhood policy and systems, funding mechanisms, program models, varied federal and state programs and services, and have strong relationships with leaders and staff across the early childhood system.
- **OEL professionals use effective management strategies.** OEL leaders and staff ensure the office complies with state and federal government regulations and requirements as appropriate to their assignments. They are able to work creatively and seek new tools and solutions when needed to get things done.
- **OEL leaders and professionals are excellent communicators.** They effectively present verbally and in writing and are adept at responding to questions. They communicate effectively with both high-level and mid-level state officials; employees and partner agencies; staff at all levels within state agencies; early childhood and public education communities; and leaders working in politics, policy, business, government and civic organizations as well as in the media.
- **OEL leaders and professionals are well-versed in [systems thinking](#) and analytical skills.** They recognize the importance of seeing and understanding the big picture, making meaningful connections within and across systems, surfacing and testing assumptions, observing how elements within a system change over time,

considering issues fully and resisting the temptation to jump to an easy conclusion, recognizing that a systems structure generates its results, and identifying the circular nature of complex causal relationships. Moreover, they regularly consider how mental models affect current and future reality, change perspective to increase their understanding, use their understanding of the system structure to leverage solutions to persistent challenges, possible unintended consequences of actions, the impact time delays will have on desired outcomes, and how to use data to inform policy.

- **OEL leaders and professionals view themselves as responsible for change and improvement.** They are self-aware, recognizing their roles, as well as strengths and weaknesses. They seek opportunities for personal learning and improvement and are able to address challenges with creative solutions.
- **OEL leaders are committed to equity.** They are committed to identifying disparities and addressing them because they know that race, class and culture impact outcomes and opportunities for children. They are aware that making progress in early education requires personal, active leadership.

About CEELO

One of 22 Comprehensive Centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) strengthens the capacity of State Education Agencies (SEAs) to lead sustained improvements in early learning opportunities and outcomes. CEELO works in partnership with SEAs, state and local early childhood leaders, and other federal and national technical assistance (TA) providers to promote innovation and accountability. For other *CEELO Policy Reports, Policy Briefs, and FastFacts*, go to <http://ceelo.org/ceelo-products>.

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