



STATE-LOCAL COLLABORATION AND SUPPORT FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD HEALTH EQUITY INITIATIVES

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Early Childhood Health Equity Landscape Project



OVERVIEW

This brief presents key themes on state-local collaborations in cross-sector early childhood health equity initiative (ECHE) work, derived from the perspectives of state-local ECHE collaborations. Part of a larger project entitled the **Early Childhood Health Equity Landscape Project (ECHE)**, this series of briefs aims to highlight promising strategies to address key issues such as sustainability, data use, state and local collaboration, and operationalizing health equity within the context of cross-sector early childhood health equity initiatives. This brief highlights takeaways from the four conversations, including supports for state-local collaborations and impact on ECHE initiative work, provides suggestions for strengthening state-local collaborations, and recommends further reading on early childhood state-local collaborations.



Early Childhood Health Equity Landscape Project

Early Childhood Health Equity (ECHE) work seeks to strengthen early childhood systems to support healthy child development and reduce health inequities and disparities that can have a lifelong impact.

In an effort to understand how ECHE work is carried out at the local, state, and national levels, the **ECHE Landscape Project**, a joint venture of the National Institute for Children's Health Quality (NICHQ) and Child Trends and funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, gathered and analyzed information on cross-sector initiatives promoting early childhood health equity through the **ECHE Landscape Survey**.

To provide context to the ECHE Survey, the ECHE Landscape Project team has also held conversations with ECHE initiatives to inform a series of spotlight briefs on the topics of health equity, measuring and reporting progress and impact, sustainability, cross-sector partnerships, and state-local collaborations. The information from the landscape survey and series of spotlight briefs is intended to support innovation across sectors to advance health equity for young children.



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INTRODUCTION

State-local collaborations link state governments with local-level early childhood work in order to increase coordination and improve outcomes for children and families.¹ These links seek to make connections between families, programs, early childhood sectors, and state early childhood governance structures.² The benefits of early childhood state-local collaborations are outlined in *The Nuts and Bolts of Building Early Childhood Systems through State/Local Initiatives*, a report that highlights outcomes associated with state-local teamwork, such as increased resources for early childhood work, improved access to services, increased community and family engagement with early childhood issues, and improved outcomes for children and families. Much early childhood health equity (ECHE) work falls under the umbrella of early childhood systems-building, with initiatives (i.e., a set of activities with coordinated implementation of programming and services) working across sectors (i.e., groups of organizations that address a specific need or provide a specific kind of service) and levels of government to support equitable, positive outcomes for all families.

As part of the Early Childhood Health Equity Landscape project, this brief seeks to add to the ECHE and state-local collaboration knowledge base, elevate voices from the ECHE field, and tell the stories of collaborations between states and local organizations from the perspectives of four geographically diverse ECHE initiatives. These snapshots are intended to:

- ▶ Explore differing approaches to ECHE work and augment the information included in the ECHE landscape project
- ▶ Contribute to the knowledge base on state-local collaborations by examining these collaborations' efforts to address ECHE
- ▶ Provide a resource to state and local leaders interested in supporting or expanding ECHE work through state-local collaborations



“Health equity means that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible. This requires removing obstacles to health such as poverty, discrimination, and their consequences, including powerlessness and lack of access to good jobs with fair pay, quality education and housing, safe environments, and health care.”

– Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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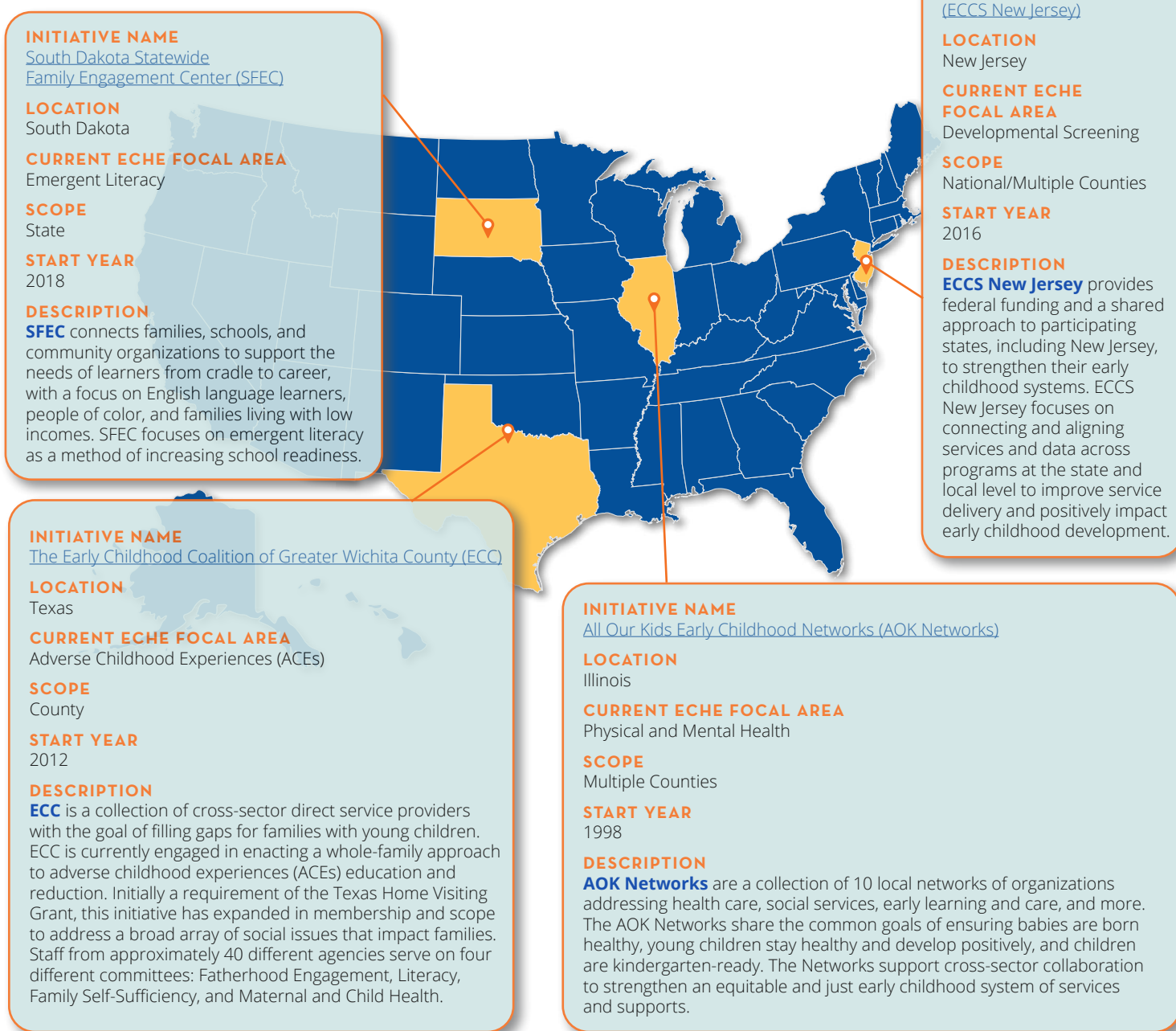


Methodology

The ECHE Landscape Project team engaged in conversations with the state and local partners of four ECHE initiatives. These initiatives were identified from the pool of respondents to the ECHE Landscape Survey who identified themselves as having a state-local collaboration. The selected initiatives represent different geographic regions, ECHE topics, scope, initiative lead, and years of operation.

Initiatives Interviewed

Figure 1. Initiative Overviews



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KEY THEMES ON STATE-LOCAL COLLABORATIONS

The ECHE Landscape Project Team identified five key themes from the conversations with the four ECHE initiatives. These five themes fall into two categories: 1) elements important to supporting state-local collaborations in ECHE initiative work, and 2) ways in which state-local collaborations can strengthen ECHE initiative work. While these themes highlight perspectives supported by the state-local collaboration conversations, they represent individual accounts of state-local collaborations and have not been evaluated for efficacy. Also, these conversations took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although this brief does not focus on the pandemic, this context may have influenced the way the interviewed state-local partnerships thought about their work. For more information on how ECHE initiatives responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, please see the related brief “Cross-Sector Support for Health Equity in Early Childhood During the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

Structure, Communication, and Relationship-building Support State-Local Collaborations

State-Local Collaborations Can Be Structured in Multiple Ways

State-local collaborations may be structured differently due to variations in factors like history, political environment, and leadership.² Conversations with the four initiatives revealed that these collaborations differ in terms of how they began, sources of funding, scope of the collaboration, and state supports offered for the ECHE work (as described ahead). The structure of the relationship between the state and local partners varied as well, with the state taking on more of a leadership role in some collaborations. For example, in the **AOK Network** and **ECCS New Jersey** initiatives, state partners established a formal set of guidelines for the local ECHE work. The state can also take on more of a partnership role, as in the **South Dakota SFEC** initiative, where state employees from multiple sectors served on the advisory council alongside members from non-governmental organizations. Differences in ECHE state-local collaborations may reflect differences in expectations tied to funding – for example, the ECCS New Jersey initiative was responsible for meeting federal guidelines. Differences in ECHE focal area also reflect regional differences: Initiatives prioritize an ECHE topic most relevant to the local community, with initiatives that span multiple communities potentially addressing multiple ECHE focal areas.

“We really believe in digging in and really engaging and understanding our partners. It’s not like a ‘one and done’ kind of thing. We want to get our partners to really understand what the issues are, what our strengths are as a community.”

– Ana Maria Accove,
State Administrator
for the All Our Kids Early
Childhood Networks,
Illinois Department
of Human Services

“You’re so involved with so many different entities across the state. I think that’s one actual advantage because your connections become a little bit more personal to be able to connect all the dots so that it’s one consistent thing across the state. So with literacy or family engagement or cradle to career, all of that is so interconnected with the things I collaborate with, or the things the Department of Education might collaborate with... it all comes back to that, one big circle of collaboration.”

– Jodi Berscheid,
Head Start Collaboration Director,
South Dakota Department of Education

Communication and Relationship-Building Can be Critical for Establishing and Maintaining State-Local Collaborations

The initiatives interviewed shared that communication with state partners, state policymakers, and other initiatives across sectors can strengthen and expand a local initiative’s ability to positively impact a community. **Poor communication with the state can be a barrier to effective state-local collaboration work by limiting initiative capability to respond quickly and effectively to local needs.**

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In addition to communication, advocacy with state policymakers can increase awareness of the ECHE issues the initiative is addressing and can influence future policy and state support. For example, the **AOK Network's** state coordinator engaged in an ongoing campaign with state employees to explain the necessity of a systems-building approach to early childhood issues and the importance of collaboration with local initiatives. The AOK Networks' partners additionally highlighted the importance of having at least one dedicated state-level staff person to continuously advocate for the local initiative with state-level partners.

The initiatives also highlighted communication across sectors, noting the importance of addressing ECHE issues with a coordinated and unified approach. The initiatives interviewed underscored the need for inclusion when recruiting local partners and mentioned the importance of providing a seat at the table for any organization interested in supporting the work. For example, **ECC** engaged a diverse team of community members, state employees, professionals, parents, and up to 40 partner organizations. These partners included educators, child care providers, physical and mental health practitioners, as well as representatives from a food bank, children's home, and the juvenile probation department. The following illustrates examples of the partnerships identified by the initiatives.

Figure 2. Examples of partners working with ECHE initiatives



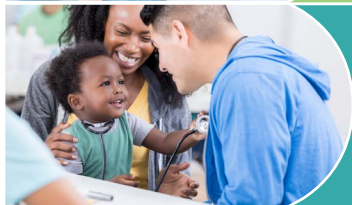
FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Example: State Department of Social Services, local housing authority



NONPROFITS

Example: Child abuse prevention organization, child and family service organization



HEALTHCARE ORGANIZATIONS

Example: Community health care center, regional hospital



EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

Example: Public school district, state university



OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

Example: Local food bank

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State-Local Collaborations Can Strengthen ECHE Initiative Impact

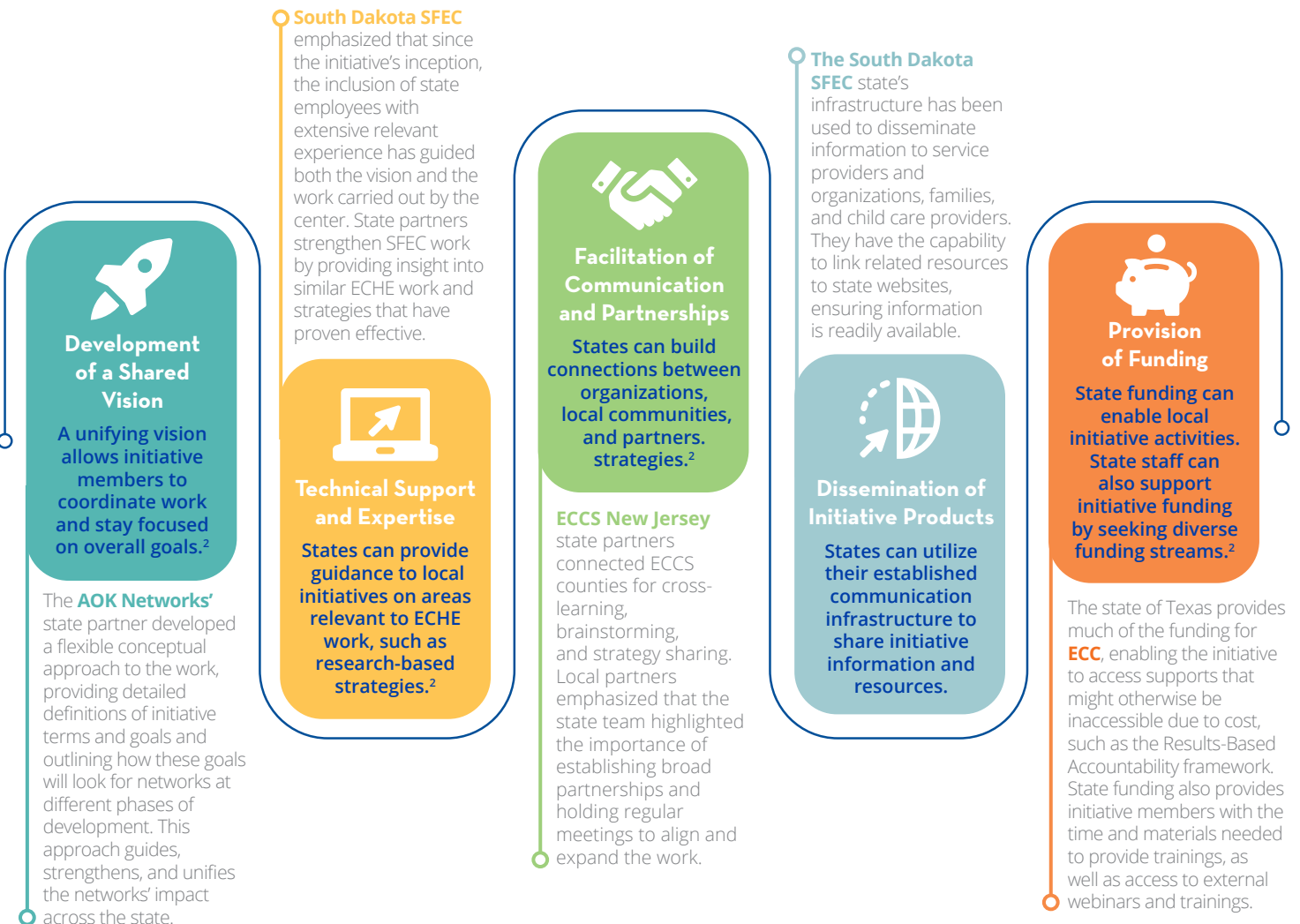
Collaborations Can Support Initiative Impact at the Local Level

The initiatives interviewed felt state-local collaborations had a strong influence on an initiative's ability to make a positive impact in a community. The ECHE Landscape Project Team identified five ways in which states supported local ECHE work and identified examples from the initiatives interviewed. These supports are consistent with findings in the early childhood governance literature, which notes that one of the goals of state-local partnerships can be to ultimately build state capacity to positively impact child and family outcomes.²

“All of the work that we’ve done around adverse childhood experiences... literally we could not have done it. We couldn’t have done it without [the state’s] financial support, we couldn’t have done it without their emotional support, and their exposure and their trainings. I think that’s been a real win.”

– Carol Marlar,
Executive Director North Texas Area United Way

Figure 3. State ECHE Initiative Supports with Examples of Impact on Local Initiative Work



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State-Local Collaborations Allow States to be Responsive to Local Needs

State-local collaborations allow families and community leaders to advise policymakers on best ways to approach early childhood issues at the local level.² Feedback from families and local organizations can inform development of policies that support families and young children.¹ **The four initiatives interviewed discussed the importance of allowing local leaders to tailor initiative work to meet community needs and mentioned the importance of including the voices of local organizations and families and assessing community needs to inform system development.**

For example, **ECC** discussed how state funding enables local leaders to assess and respond to the needs of their community through activities like administering a measure of child development in kindergarten classrooms county-wide. The local **AOK Networks'** shared conceptual approach emphasized the importance of tailoring their work to meet the needs of each participating county, noting that a single approach will not be able to effectively respond to the needs of individual counties.

State-Local Collaborations Support Sustainability Through Systems-Building, Continuity of Vision and Staffing, and Multiple Sources of Funding

The successful impact of local partnerships results from sustained work over time.¹ The initiatives highlighted multiple ways in which state-local collaborations can support sustained ECHE work beyond the lifespan of the initiative. For example, **ECCS New Jersey** discussed how they institutionalize their ECCS goals by embedding best practices in Child Care Resource and Referral agencies. At the state level, the **AOK Networks** coordinator discussed making collaboration with local organizations an expectation for state-level staff by ensuring state administrators have a financial incentive to participate with local initiatives.

“We need to continue funding the communities that we have because we have learned a lot from these communities. There have been a lot of other initiatives that have come [about] because of what the AOK Networks have done. Our experience has helped build other things.”

– Ana Maria Accove, State Administrator for the All Our Kids Early Childhood Networks, Illinois Department of Human Services

A shared vision or conceptual approach can assist sustainability by providing a consistent framework guiding multi-year work regardless of staff or partner turnover. Similarly, a dedicated state staff person can also protect the continuity of state-local collaboration work against staff turnover at the state level.

Sustainability is also possible through allowing multiple sources of funding. The **AOK Networks** highlighted that their state coordinator sought multiple funding streams that could allow ECHE work to continue even if a single funding stream is lost. The AOK Networks local partner also discussed the importance of allowing sites to seek funding from multiple sources and noted that individual sites can seek supplementary funding from grants or local organizations.

SPOTLIGHT ON ECCS NEW JERSEY

Responding to local needs through partnership with local organizations

ECCS New Jersey state and local representatives discussed how state-local collaborations' response to local needs is strengthened through the development of equal and responsive partnerships with local participating organizations. Through these relationships, states can empower local leaders to further ECHE work within their communities and trust that local leaders are carrying that work forward.

Local partners echoed the importance of establishing equal and responsive partnerships, noting that while participating ECCS counties share a vision, that vision is not mandated by the state. Instead, responsibility for the initiative vision and work is shared between state and local partners. Feedback is provided bi-directionally, with both the state and the local level being accountable to one another. Local partners also highlighted the work New Jersey has done establishing partnerships not only within ECCS, but in early childhood overall. In particular, local partners highlighted the work the state had done to increase family engagement and include the voices of community families.

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GUIDANCE FOR STATE-LOCAL COLLABORATIONS

The selected initiatives were uniformly positive and supportive of state-local collaborations as a way to strengthen initiatives and positively impact family and child outcomes. The state-local initiative partners also identified advice for initiatives or state agencies who may want to create or strengthen collaboration between state and local partners.

- ▶ Start small: begin with a single team and expand.
- ▶ Leverage the expertise at the state level to strengthen local work.
- ▶ Listen to and value the input from local partners.
- ▶ Monitor progress and be willing to innovate if an approach does not seem to be effective.
- ▶ Convene state and local administrators to communicate the importance of and possibilities associated with state-local collaborations.
- ▶ Align work at the state and local levels by:
 - Considering how initiative work can improve the early childhood system as a whole
 - Keeping state and local partners and grantees engaged
 - Strengthening communication across work that has previously been siloed



SUMMARY

Collaborations between local initiatives and state partners can help build connections across sectors, initiatives, and communities to enhance and align ECH work. The four snapshot initiatives differed in structure and scope of their partnerships – however, all emphasized the role of communication and relationship-building in forming and maintaining state-local collaborations. The featured initiatives also discussed ways in which state-local collaboration strengthened initiative impact. Local initiatives allowed states to respond to local needs, and states provided a variety of supports in addition to funding for local initiative work. State-local collaborations can also support initiative sustainability. The initiatives were uniformly positive in their portrayal of these collaborations, finding their partnerships to be beneficial for furthering ECH work at the state and local levels.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

On the national stage, states have been working to strengthen early childhood through state-local collaborations for more than 20 years,¹ and the research base on their impact and efficacy continues to grow. The **BUILD Initiative** has worked with states to strengthen early childhood systems-building through establishing and strengthening state-local collaborations. The BUILD Initiative has also worked to document state approaches to early childhood state-local collaborations, with their 2014 report *The Nuts and Bolts of Building Early Childhood Systems through State/Local Initiatives* informing many of the resources cited in this brief. These reports can provide additional information and resources on the approaches to and benefits of state-local collaboration.

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