



ACCELERATING ACTION AND GAINING TRACTION IN EC SYSTEMS BUILDING INITIATIVES:

States and Communities Working Together: Partnerships for Impact

Case Studies from the ECCS Impact CoIIN, 2021

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The Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network (ECCS CoIIN) was a five year effort (August 1, 2016 through July 31, 2021) to strengthen systems to improve population level early childhood developmental health and family well-being in 28 communities across 12 states. The aspirational aim of this program was to increase age-appropriate developmental skills among three-year-old children and reduce developmental disparities. The goals that were prioritized in order to move towards the aspirational aim included:

- ▶ Create a Common Agenda/Shared Vision and Strategies
- ▶ Develop Shared Data Systems
- ▶ Promote Aligned and Mutually Reinforcing Activities
- ▶ Provide Backbone Support and Mechanisms for Continuous Communication Between State and Community
- ▶ Disseminate EC Development/Systems Information
- ▶ Integrate Early Developmental Promotion, Screening, Referral, Linkage, and Developmental Processes across and within sectors and communities
- ▶ Build Care Coordination Capacity
- ▶ Support Continuous Learning and Improvement Efforts
- ▶ Develop and Maintain Partnerships and Networks
- ▶ Family Leadership
- ▶ Build Public Will
- ▶ Advance Policies and Mobilize Funding to Sustain System Improvements

The Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network (ECCS CoIIN) was a nationwide initiative to improve outcomes in population-based children's developmental health and family well-being, funded by the Health Resources & Services Administration's (HRSA) Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB).



Overview of ECCS CoIIN

An expanding body of scientific evidence points to the critical importance of early childhood experiences (prenatal through age three) in setting the foundations for lifelong health and well-being. At the same time, there is a growing awareness that an increasing proportion of young children and families are falling behind: that inequities related to race, place, and income for the youngest children and their families are all too common and too often translate into lifelong disadvantages in health, education, economic success, and general well-being. As a result, in communities and states across the country, there is a growing movement to develop coordinated, effective, and high-quality systems to support all parents and give all young children an optimal start. ECCS CoIIN is one of these systems-building initiatives.

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Introduction

An expanding body of scientific evidence points to the critical importance of early childhood (prenatal through age three) experiences in setting the foundations for lifelong health and well-being. At the same time, there is a growing awareness that an increasing proportion of young children and families are falling behind: that inequities related to race, place and income for the youngest children and their families are all too common and too often translate into lifelong disadvantages in health, education, economic success, and general well-being. As a result, in communities and states across the country, there is a growing movement to develop coordinated, effective, and high-quality systems to support all parents and give all young children an optimal start. ECCS CoIIN is one of these systems building initiatives.

ECCS CoIIN States, had a secondary aim to utilize a collective impact approach to achieve impact in early childhood systems at the state, county, and community levels through common aims, shared metrics, coordinated strategies, continuous communication, and a backbone organization at both the state and community levels.

The systems that serve children and families at all levels tend to be complicated to navigate; therefore, coordination is needed to reduce duplication of effort, enhance continuity of care, track outcomes across systems, and maximize fiscal and staff resources. **The ongoing development of a strong state and local connection is key to the continuous improvement of the early childhood system.** Building on evidence that demonstrates improving an early childhood system cannot be accomplished without local community involvement, HRSA recommended that ECCS CoIIN States provide resources and supports to local communities to focus on building, innovating, sustaining and operationalizing community capacity to improve systems around children's developmental health and family well-being. ECCS CoIIN States recognized that local communities have the context expertise, community involvement is at the heart of this work, and wanted to involve those impacted the most in the development, implementation, and decision-making. This commitment to work together resulted in successful strategies and partnerships that improved the developmental health of young children.

What Accelerated Action and Gained Traction?

All ECCS CoIIN States were required to partner with at least one and up to five local community/county to implement activities and strategies with the goal of improving developmental health among children birth to age three. In addition to the usual role of providing administrative oversight and ensuring contract compliance and monitoring, the ECCS CoIIN States served as a backbone organization to support the local backbone organizations through the provision of resources, including training and funding for the ECCS local coordinator, providing funding for local activities/strategies, and ensuring two-way communication and learning. ECCS CoIIN States ensured community participation in state-level decision-making processes by involving local coordinators in State Advisory Council meetings and/or ensuring community level reports of activities were included in the meeting. In addition, ECCS CoIIN State coordinators and project directors provided support and technical assistance to local level coordinators and collaborative bodies to foster true partnership and collaboration. By providing this support, the ECCS CoIIN States built trust amongst local leaders and state leaders and created stronger partnerships between the leaders at the two levels. This brief provides an overview of the successes of three local communities from two states (Chelsea, Massachusetts; and Morehouse and Vermillion Parishes in Louisiana), which demonstrated how strong state support and partnership can accelerate successful system building activities. Key accelerators identified through these examples include:

- Intentional creation (by ECCS CoIIN State) of a common approach, vision, mission, and goals to system-building at **both** the state **and** local community to guide overall planning and decision-making processes.
- Coordination of effective strategies **between** local community **and** the state..
- Recognition of **the importance of** local level leadership **and support for** building the leadership skills in local directors and coordinators.
- Inclusion of families at **both** state **and** local levels to better support the diverse needs of the community.



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Massachusetts

The Massachusetts Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Impact Project (MECCS Impact), selected Chelsea and Springfield as the local community partners for the ECCS CoIIN efforts. MECCS selected these communities based on the level of need related to two-generation risk factors, high community needs and disparities, readiness to engage in collective impact, and the strong commitment of the backbone organization that serves as a hub for young children and families and engages core partners and stakeholders. This brief focuses on the community of Chelsea, MA. MECCS Impact described Chelsea, as the smallest city in Massachusetts by total land area, but the second most densely populated. Chelsea has higher proportions of children aged under five years old, racial/ethnic minorities, single-parent households, and families who speak a language other than English at home than statewide averages. Chelsea is one of three cities in the state to have a majority Hispanic population, and has experienced high levels of poverty, violence, teen births, low birth weight births and other child outcomes as compared to the state.

Two local community organizations provided local backbone support for the Chelsea Early Childhood Network (CENC): Healthy Chelsea and Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) Center for Community Health Improvement (CCHI). By providing space for the MECCS local staff in the health care center, the CENC was given access to institutional resources as well as strong connections to pediatric health care providers.

Louisiana

The Louisiana Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Impact State Team selected the Morehouse and Vermillion parishes based on need and readiness. Both parishes had strong partner organizations, previous grant efforts such as Project LAUNCH (Linking Actions for Unmet Needs in Children's Health) and the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program, and strong success implementing evidence-based practices and supports to families. Both are rural parishes with over 30% of children under age five living in poverty, high percentages of children who do not demonstrate school readiness at kindergarten entry, and inadequate services to meet the needs of early learners. Many services are concentrated in regional hubs in neighboring parishes, making transportation very difficult in these largely impoverished areas.

The backbone organization supporting the Louisiana ECCS efforts in Morehouse Parish is the Children's Coalition of Northeast Louisiana (CCNELA). CCNELA is the hub for early care and education enrollment, child welfare family resources, and parent support programs for northeast Louisiana. CCNELA works closely with the childcare centers, schools and Head Start agencies to coordinate enrollment and assessment of both PK-3 and teachers as part of a state-wide data collection system. CCNELA is the Child Care Resource and Referral agency and the Family Resource Center for its region and works with the local court system, law enforcement and works with the Nurse-Family Partnerships and Parents as Teachers in the school-based Teen Parenting program.

Building on prior early childhood efforts, the backbone organization supporting ECCS efforts in Vermilion Parish is the Office of Public Health (OPH) Region 4. Louisiana ECCS is led locally by the OPH Regional Administrator, a pediatrician, who oversees clinical services including immunizations, reproductive health, the Women Infants and Children (WIC) program in the area, in addition to serving as the champion for early childhood. Previously through LA LAUNCH, Louisiana piloted innovative mental health consultation across child-serving settings and worked to convene community partners to improve the systems of care for young children and families and ECCS continued building important components of the early childhood infrastructure.



Intentional Creation (by ECCS CoIIN States) of a Common Approach, Vision, Mission and Goals to System-Building at Both the State and Local Level to Guide Overall Planning and Decision-Making Processes

In Massachusetts, the ECCS CoIIN State lead, MECCS, supported the Chelsea ECCS team with establishing the Chelsea Early Childhood Network (CECN), which is comprised of more than 50 cross-systems partners, and includes representatives from: pediatrics, family engagement leaders, higher education, child welfare, children's librarians, home visiting, early education and care, parenting support, Early Intervention, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and mental health services.

The CECN is situated within Healthy Chelsea, and part of the community's broader public health planning efforts. The CECN developed Healthy Chelsea's Early Childhood Initiative based on developmental science literature that states what happens in early childhood sets the stage for a person's health throughout their life. The initiative brought together multiple community stakeholders to promote positive and culturally informed early childhood experiences. The vision of the initiative was that all children deserve the opportunity to develop important foundational skills between birth through the first five years of life and was aligned with the state vision. The CECN implemented several efforts to promote continuous communication such as bimonthly meetings, a quarterly newsletter, and a community level early childhood strategic plan. The strategic plan featured activities that were aligned with the larger statewide initiative. Core domains of this work plan included, early childhood messaging, integration of early childhood services, coalition building, innovations/quality improvement, and aligned and streamlined information sharing.

MECCS supported the CECN by regularly attending CECN meetings, which provided an opportunity for community input on activities and plans and also, ensured the community voice was heard. Additional support provided included: establishing a bi-directional communication strategy of holding regular meetings/calls; opportunities to present updates on local level activities and progress at state level ECCS meetings; providing feedback on documents created for families and community partners; and assisting with establishment of strategic partnerships with community, state and national representatives, including participating in bi-monthly technical assistance coaching calls with the ECCS CoIIN Coordinating Center faculty and staff.

The Louisiana ECCS CoIIN State team focused on building capacity for solution-driven collaboration through the creation of cross-level learning collaboratives within the state; expanded the work of the Young Child Wellness Council (YCWC) at the state level; and established or enhanced the YCWC within the local communities. The primary role of the local YCWCs was to identify areas for collective improvement and drive community-level systems change. The YCWCs brought together stakeholders from across the early childhood system and utilized a collective impact framework to develop a plan to sustain continuous communication and backbone organization functions beyond the project period. By building on the YCWC, the State and local parishes were able to establish a strong foundation of continuous communication, develop meaningful shared problem solving and solution-driven decision making, strong collaboration, cross-level learning, shared aims, and measurement, and mutually reinforcing activities within and across multiple levels of the early childhood system. The parallel process of growing the YCWC at both the state and local level ensured cross-sector collaboration, ongoing implementation, and coordinated evaluation to assess efficiency of processes. The focus on continuous quality improvement across all activities provided opportunities for each level to benefit from knowledge gained from or improvements in the others.



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Effective Strategies Coordinated Between Local Community and the State

With the support of the MECCS, Healthy Chelsea, and MGH CCHI, the CECN had many successes. For example, MECCS facilitated connections, communication, and provided technical assistance and guidance for implementation of The Basics¹, an early childhood messaging strategy. The CECN identified the need to spread specific early childhood messaging in Chelsea and their activities focused on identifying and promoting a common framework for engaging families in conversations about early childhood development. The Basics framework provides evidence-based caregiving principles across the five developmental domains as well as strategies for practicing these principles. The CECN used The Basics within its fatherhood initiative, to expand its reach to fathers and male caregivers. CECN members hosted fatherhood events across the city using different elements of The Basics. One event was focused on social-emotional health with local father leaders in a Chelsea restaurant that incorporated The Basics into their kids' placemats. The event featured three activity stations for fathers and children to engage in book-based, feelings activities. Each activity station was facilitated by a father volunteer who received a stipend.

The CECN also developed an electronic early childhood resource guide. The guide is reviewed regularly by contributing agencies and is maintained by Healthy Chelsea's staff. The resource guide can be found on the Healthy Chelsea [website](#). As one way to disseminate the resource information to the community, Chelsea held a resource fair.

The connection of the initiative to MGH CCHI allowed the CECN team to be able to secure health center participation in a pilot of the [Integrated Referral and Intake System \(IRIS\) platform](#). IRIS includes pediatrics as well as several community health programs that serve young children. IRIS is a web-based communication tool and referral network. It provides a coordinated system to make and track referrals across network partners and will be used as the referral tool to support pregnant and parenting families impacted by stressors. Sixteen partners signed on to participate in the pilot. These partners include Head Start, parenting education and support programs, home visiting, Part C early intervention, young parent programs, programs that support child-welfare involved families, community health center pediatrics and community health workers, and Chelsea's Coordinated Family and Community Engagement grantee. The CECN will use the metrics associated with IRIS to measure progress in systems collaboration and integration in Chelsea. Metrics will include an illustration of how the partners are connected and engaging with each other as well as tracking the status of referrals made across all partnering organizations.

¹ <https://boston.thebasics.org>



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With financial, administrative, and technical support from the LA ECCS CoIN State team and their backbone organizations, both parishes in Louisiana partnered with area small businesses to support their fatherhood campaign and provided training on Safe, Secured and Loved (SSL) curriculum. The LA ECCS CoIN State team served as a convener for cross-community planning and sharing of activities and successes. For example, the State ECCS lead ensured training of the new Vermillion parish ECCS Coordinator and sharing of knowledge between Vermillion parish and Morehouse parish ECCS teams. The ECCS CoIN State team also facilitated and guided the spread and implementation of the Vroom materials, a strategy developed under a previous early childhood grant opportunity, in both ECCS CoIN community parishes. Because of this specific support, both parishes enhanced their early childhood messaging strategy by using the Vroom platform to support universal developmental promotion and address social determinants of health. Vroom is a science-driven app that provides science-based tips and tools to inspire families to turn shared, everyday moments into brain building moments. Through the [Vroom](#) Surround Strategy, the team's reach to families increased seven-fold during the grant period and sessions doubled on the Vroom app. Strategies used for dissemination of Vroom include tip cards mailed with birth certificates, Vroom flyers and information shared by the team's parent advocate. The parishes utilized innovative ways to meet families' needs through [Vroom](#) by text and Vroom print cards for families who do not have access to internet or mobile data. Partners included Wal-Mart, Health Unit, libraries, hospitals, health care providers, childcare, Head Start, Maternal Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) and Early Intervention programs, the Mayor's office, apartment complexes, and churches. Each parish had individual successes with support from the state as well including:

- ▶ In alignment with the state's vision to use the Ages & Stages Questionnaire (ASQ), the Vermillion Parish School Board (VPSB) Referral Clinic implemented ASQ and tracked developmental delays and services that three-year-old children received. Protocols were developed to identify children who needed developmental monitoring versus a full evaluation. Data analysis showed that approximately 50% of the children screened had a developmental concern requiring further follow-up or a full developmental evaluation and referral for services.
- ▶ In Morehouse, a strong coalition of partners was formed to create a cross-sector approach to systems building, developmental health and promotion, and early literacy. Partners and parents have played a key role in sharing the same message across agencies, ensuring referrals and follow up, and improving access to local supports and resources. Kid's 1st Morehouse, the local YCWC, increased their social media strategies and presence to engage young families with early childhood development.
- ▶ The Morehouse ECCS team in partnership with the ECCS CoIN State team facilitated implementation of the Comprehensive Health and Decision Information System (CHADIS) system with the Morehouse Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC). The Morehouse ECCS team also assisted in choosing a Social Determinants of Health screening tool, provided training on the Ages & Stages Questionnaires®, Third Edition (ASQ®-3) and the Ages & Stages Questionnaires®: Social-Emotional, Second Edition (ASQ®:SE-2) for use at targeted well visits, and introduced the "Reach Out and Read" program.
- ▶ The Morehouse ECCS team also implemented grassroots outreach to early childcare providers who offer both formal and informal family childcare, including ASQ 3 screening and assisted with data sharing efforts with Head Start.
- ▶ The Morehouse ECCS team also launched an Early Literacy effort that resulted in 12 community partners implementing "Little Free Library or Literacy Corner", located parish-wide, and more than 3,000 books placed in children's hands. They applied for and were awarded a grant through First Books, administered by Children's Coalition, which provides 3,000 books in multiple locations of Morehouse parish, including the Little Free Libraries.
- ▶ Finally, the Morehouse ECCS team partnered with Morehouse Parish Health Unit to create a "development corner" area that is frequently utilized by parents and children attending WIC clinics. This development corner is a safe space for children to play and engage with developmentally appropriate materials and signage on the walls explains the developmental benefits of each kind of play. These areas also contain free accessible information about developmental milestones, Vroom app, and developmental screening.



Recognition of the Importance of Local Level Leadership and Support for Building Those Skills in Local Directors and Coordinators

There is often an established person within a community who is leading system building activities with or without formal designation or supports. ECCS CoIIN States recognized and supported this role by identifying this type of individual, providing them concrete support such as financial resources or expertise in skills such as consensus building or facilitation, and supplying guidance to align local vision and mission with state vision and mission, all of which led to acceleration of the implementation of successful strategies and achievement of community objectives.

Staffing challenges are the most challenging when this key local leader transitions. In Vermillion Parish, the local ECCS CoIIN Coordinator, a core part of the community and a respected leader, passed away unexpectedly. Luckily, a strong foundation was laid, and they had the buy in of community partners to keep the work going. The new coordinator came in with a great knowledge of the partners and community which helped through the transition, but it delayed progress as the community mourned the loss of their local leader and a replacement was found.

Partnerships Across the States, Community Organizations and Families to Better Support the Diverse Needs of the Community

Authentic engagement is important to ensure the voice of families and community providers is included when developing activities, strategies, and solutions. Families of young children provide their lived experience to help understand how they experience the system. Ensuring the voice of families is included from the beginning of the project helps maximize and align systems for child well-being. Including the family voices and lived experiences, along with community agencies and organizational knowledge and resources, allows for the creation of innovative solutions and problem-solving. Several strategies have been identified across the ECCS CoIIN States that promoted stronger family engagement within the communities to ensure families and providers who spend every day with young children are the strongest voices. State leaders should:

- ▶ Ensure the community and family voice is included in all phases of the project including in the development, implementation and evaluation of strategies, activities, and services.
- ▶ Offer monetary compensation to recognize time, energy, and ideas contributed.
- ▶ Hold meetings at times that allow families and providers to participate - online meetings eliminate the commute time and childcare issues.
- ▶ Offer interpretation services and print/ digital resources in multiple languages as needed.
- ▶ Allow multiple ways to contribute (e.g. feedback opportunities outside of a formal meeting, focus groups to discuss, surveys or assessments to provide written feedback.)
- ▶ Build a cadre of parents and support communication mechanisms to encourage peer to peer sharing and support.

In MA, MECCS supported CECN in prioritizing family partnership and engagement. Among the many challenges for parents to become involved was a lack of childcare. To address this barrier, CECN partners developed the idea for "mobile childcare". CECN contacted early educators licensed by the MA Department of Early Education and Care about developing a partnership to offer childcare at events for families with young children across the city. CECN network partners developed a fund to collaboratively support this service. Although the project was paused due to the COVID-19 crisis it will be re-started once in-person gatherings are allowed and deemed safe.

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Conclusion

States and communities must be intentional as described in this brief in order to develop systems to meet the needs of young children and their families. Recognizing the parallel process needed at both the state and local level to implement systems building activities will ensure cross-sector collaboration, ongoing co-design and implementation, and a more comprehensive evaluation to assess efficiency of processes, continuous quality improvement. Identifying opportunities for both levels to benefit from knowledge gained, innovations tested, and improvements identified in the others will result in a more effective and coordinated system to promote developmental health and well-being.

This case study is one of six developed through the ECCS CoIN initiative. This series of six Case Studies identify key accelerators of early childhood system building, highlighting what was learned from the ECCS CoIN Initiative and share bright spots of states and communities. All six Case Studies can be found at <https://www.nichq.org/project/early-childhood-comprehensive-systems-collaborative-improvement-and-innovation-network-eccs>

