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Commentary on "Early Lessons Learned from Building Local Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems in Texas"

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Research has highly documented poverty as a significant impact for children and their families. Families who are living in poverty have lower education levels, poorer health, and chronic or toxic stressors.¹ These negative affects impact the manner in which families care for and respond to their children compared to those who are not affected by poverty. This has a direct correlation and contributes to a child's success in school and life. By the time that children are three years of age, their brains have grown to 80% of that of an adult and 90% by age five.² The first five years of life are arguably the most important as these years set the foundation for learning and development throughout life.

Research also emphasizes the importance of early childhood comprehensive systems (ECCS) that are tailored to respond and meet the needs of the families living in low income communities and its impact on preparing children for success.³ Children who have positive early childhood experiences are set on a positive trajectory for learning and development.⁴ In order for this to occur, there has to be a coordination of early childhood programs and policies that would support children and families, particularly in the first five years of life.

Over the past two decades, there have been various statewide initiatives in Texas that have focused on this type of coordination. The Texas Head Start State Collaboration Office, funded through a continuous

federal grant first awarded in 1993, is mandated to facilitate collaboration and coordination among Head Start agencies and entities that carry out activities designed to benefit low income children and their families.⁵ In 2003, Raising Texas, an ECCS initiative, started work to promote an effective, comprehensive, and seamless system that serves and supports families in the areas of early care and learning, social-emotional development, parent education and family support, and access to medical homes.⁶ Most recently, the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 authorized the Governor of each state to establish and create a State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care, known in Texas as the Texas Early Learning Council; one responsibility of this council was to identify opportunities for, and barriers to, collaboration and coordination among federally-funded and state-funded child development, child care, and early childhood education programs and services, including collaboration and coordination among state agencies responsible for administering such programs.⁵ The Texas Early Learning Council established the Texas Campaign for School Readiness which utilized the ECCS model of using data to promote awareness and improve the services provided to children and families in four local communities in Texas. Successively, each of these initiatives has improved the state's capacity to build and promote ECCS.

Within each of these statewide initiatives, separate policies and different mission statements, objectives, and even funding streams have created separate silos. These separate silos can impede the access, quality, and return on investment for high quality early childhood education in local communities. An effective structure and process for coordination and collaboration would allow local communities the opportunity to leverage their common interests around young children and their families to formulate, implement, and improve state and local policy and practice.

In their article "Early Lessons Learned from Building Local Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems in Texas" Osborne and colleagues examine the early successes and lessons learned during the first year of implementing an ECCS in Texas, using data collected from the Texas Home Visiting Program (THVP).⁷ Their work reveals that the data gathered in year one would prematurely define which approaches or strategies lead to the success or failure of an ECCS.

In order to assist communities in developing their ECCS, the THVP participating communities were provided with specialized technical assistance from Transforming Early Childhood Community Systems (TECCS) to assist with coalition building and measuring local level information about child development outcomes. TECCS is an initiative that allows local communities to use the Early Development Instrument (EDI)

to assess school readiness at the community level, rather than individual children. Coalitions are expected use this community data to make decisions regarding the investment of resources for their communities. TECCS also provides guidance to local communities on how to recruit and engage coalition members; build effective coalition structures; establish build and maintain effective communication; and how to identify, collect, and present EDI data.

The development of these coalitions is very important and in this article, Osborne and colleagues have identified five domains of ECCS development that can contribute to successes or challenges for the ECCS:

1. Motivations
2. Infrastructure
3. Communication
4. Data Collection and Use
5. Recruitment and Marketing Strategies

Lessons learned from this early data collection from the THVP coalitions already provide insights for ECCS work in Texas in the future. Although each THVP coalition was made up of diverse, yet likeminded stakeholders (public, nonprofit, academic, and business) with a commitment to helping young children in their local communities, they were motivated by clearly articulated goals and priorities that were developed in their respective

communities. The infrastructure of the coalitions was established so that the person responsible for coalition building was different than that of the person responsible for the implementation of the THVP. There are two sets of data that the ECCS communities were responsible for gathering: the federally required benchmark data and the EDI data, in which both provide important information about the needs of the families and their communities. However, communities still need assistance with the using and sharing the EDI data to make decisions for their community, either due to the sample size being too small or difficulty with analyzing and drawing conclusions from the EDI data. This has caused some frustration in some coalitions with the stakeholders. Finally, the recruitment and marketing strategies communities need tools for these efforts at the onset. The period of time between the forming of the coalition and the actual availability of local level data has affected the ECCS coalition membership.

The work of the THVP communities has pushed our state forward in terms of building, and hopefully sustaining, an ECCS for Texas at the local level. Information learned from these local ECCS pioneers can have a significant impact on the development of ECCS in other local communities, or a statewide ECCS in the future.

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