POLICY BRIEF

EDUCATION POLICY

Guinn CENTER

FROM CROWDED TO COORDINATED:

EXAMINING THE GOVERNANCE OF NEVADA'S EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM

By: Todd Butterworth and Dr. Anna Colquitt
Kenny Guinn Center for Policy Priorities

PUBLISHED MAY 2025

In October 2024, the Guinn Center published a report titled "FROM CROWDED TO COORDINATED: Examining the Governance of Nevada's Early Childhood System." The report suggests that Nevada reimagine how it cares for and prepares children in their early years, enabling them to grow into successful students and adults. It is a practical tool for use by the state's Early Childhood Systems (ECS) stakeholders in their day-to-day work as they consider how Nevada can efficiently allocate public resources and establish a governance structure that effectively serves families.

It is helpful to first understand what is meant by the term Early Childhood Systems. **They are a comprehensive set of systems that provide education, child care, physical and mental health care, child welfare, early intervention services, economic support, and any other programs that serve children up to eight years old and their families.**

THE CURRENT STATE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS

Nationally, early childhood services and programs have evolved in a siloed and fragmented manner. However, with better coordination, the nation's and the state's ECS could be more effective in providing comprehensive services. Highlighting Nevada's early childhood fragmentation, the Guinn Center report found the State has:

- **18 entities** focused solely on early childhood;
- **45 entities** serving both early childhood and other populations;
- Programs spanning **26 chapters of the *Nevada Revised Statutes***; and
- Funding allocated through **40 separate state budget accounts**.

Under these circumstances, systems coordination by state leaders is very difficult. One can imagine what it is like for the parents of young children trying to navigate such a system. Nevada is experiencing challenges in: (1) expanding access to early childhood services; (2) reducing child development and school readiness disparities; and (3) coordinating its fragmented system. The utilization of Nevada's key programs by eligible families is shockingly low, as seen in the graph below.

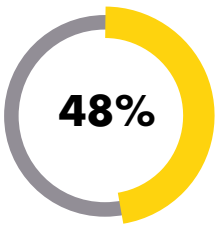
Despite its past struggles and the challenges ahead, Nevada has a talented and dedicated group leading its ECS in both the public and private sectors. With limited resources, they have accomplished much over the past several years. There are already high-quality elements in place, along with new resources in development. **Still, Nevada tends to rank in the bottom third of states in measures related to pre-K access, child health and economic well-being, and prenatal-to-3 services. Even where Nevada may be doing well programmatically, ECS programs are often not reaching their targeted populations.**

Pre-K
Among 4-year-olds, 15.8 percent of eligible kids are participating in either the Zoom, Title I, or NevadaReady programs.

Head Start
5.5 percent of eligible 4-year-olds are participating.

Child Care Subsidy
10.4 percent of eligible children are participating.

Home Visiting
0.8 percent of eligible children are participating in the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting programs.



WIC
48 percent of eligible children aged 5 and under are participating in the Women, Infants, and Children program.

THE RESEARCH

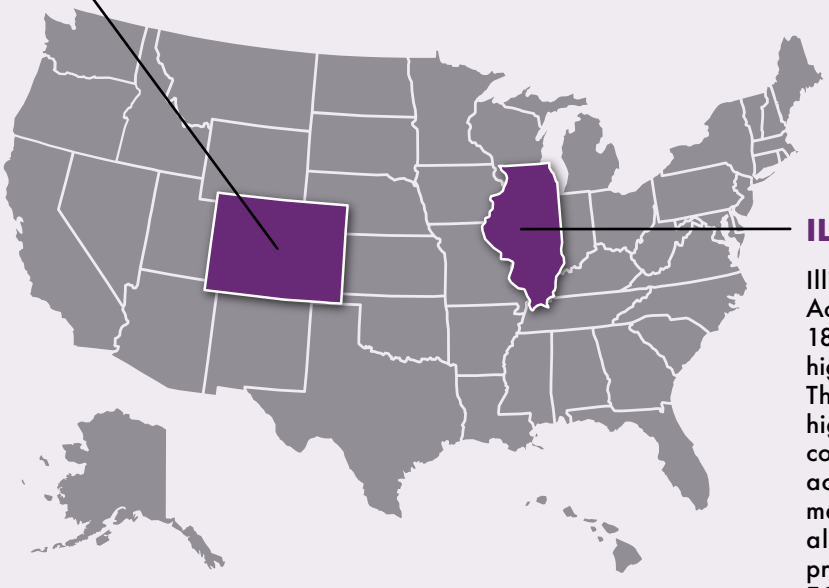
The Guinn Center's research shows state-level ECS governance should provide foundational supports and values—like standards alignment, a comprehensive data system, research support, and workforce development—but leave enough room for localities and providers to meet local needs.

Good governance aims to create an organizational structure on a macro level that enables efficient, effective, and collaborative work on the micro level, with individual families in the community. The Education Commission of the States identified three general structures for state governance.

These include creating new entities, consolidating existing ones, or adopting a coordinated approach requiring inter-agency collaboration. The diversity of governance structures across the country reflects the challenge of unifying all the disparate early childhood programs that often operate in isolation. There is no best approach, and the choices depend on the state and its circumstances. In designing governance, defining roles and authorities is vital. To help Nevada consider its options, the report contrasts Colorado's positive ECS governance experience and Vermont's struggles. The report also highlights successes in several other states, such as Illinois, which made large new investments in ECS.

COLORADO

The Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC), established in 2021 under HB21-1304, oversees a unified early childhood system, including a voluntary preschool program. Other legislation, HB22-1295, transferred programs from the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) and Colorado Department of Education (CDE) to CDEC in 2022. The CDEC coordinates with multiple state departments through memoranda of understanding and interagency agreements, and it collaborates with the CDE in special education transitions and CDHS in child welfare. Data sharing agreements with CDHS ensure privacy and security.



ILLINOIS

Illinois increased funding for its Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity program, resulting in an 18 percent increase in early educators who obtained higher education credentials through full scholarships. The consortium, involving 61 public and private higher education institutions, six state agencies, and community partners, aims to enhance early educator access to higher education, align the system, and meet ECE workforce demands. The Illinois Legislature allocated an additional $250 million for ECE programming and over $100 million to support current ECE teachers pursuing credentials, encouraging new providers in "preschool deserts" to apply for grants.

The subcategories of statewide ECS governance include:

Community Engagement, which seeks to create innovative and dynamic two-way communication and collaboration channels among all key stakeholders. Effective communication involves all stakeholders, is easy, and is bi-directional.

Data Management, for establishing and maintaining comprehensive, integrated, and secure data systems that support informed decision-making and continuous improvement. A system that is built simultaneously from the bottom up and top down has a higher chance of success in meeting the needs of all stakeholders. Maintaining high-quality ECS data is challenging but well worth the effort.

Financial Support, to ensure sustainable, adequate, and equitable funding. This includes diversifying revenue streams, optimizing resource allocation, and prioritizing strategic investments. Increased funding can expand services and be a lever for best practices and systems improvement.

Workforce Development, to attract and retain a highly qualified, well-equipped, and motivated labor force. This includes providing comprehensive professional development, competitive compensation, and supportive working conditions. Nevada can significantly strengthen its early care and education workforce by supporting professional development and ensuring all early childhood sectors are fully staffed.

THREE PHASES OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The Guinn Center's report includes numerous policy considerations with detailed insights and links to resources. To make this more digestible, the report divides its recommendations into categories as well as three phases, as follows:

PHASE I: Governance Structure Planning & Implementation

Interim ECS Office
- Create an office to plan and organize the future of Nevada's ECS by gathering stakeholders and using reports to guide decisions

Governance Tools
- Use planning reports, databases, and national recommendations to support governance planning

Restructuring
- Revamp the Nevada Early Childhood Advisory Council, explore changes in early intervention and special education governance, and engage stakeholders through strategic communication

PHASE II: Governance Practices

Funding Reform
- Reevaluate ECS funding pathways and consider cost-based funding models

Integrated Data System
- Build an integrated data system to support data-driven decisions, improve data quality, and phase in the new system

Access Improvements
- Develop a single point of entry, implement a No Wrong Door policy, and create a universal application system

Workforce Development
- Enhance ECS workforce through better compensation, training, and professionalization

Family Engagement
- Expand and improve family engagement using existing resources and best practices

PHASE III: Systems Improvement & Enhancement

Ongoing Improvement
- Continually refine ECS using best practices, funding reviews, strategic planning, and supportive policies

CONCLUSION

Nevada's early childhood systems have made tremendous progress over the past decade and have several high-quality elements already in place. These systems are also supported by passionate and capable stakeholders. However, the Guinn Center's research identifies deficiencies in the structure and governance of these complex and disparate systems. There is helpful research and experience from other jurisdictions to guide Nevada's progress forward. To this end, "FROM CROWDED TO COORDINATED: Examining the Governance of Nevada's Early Childhood System" is a tool for Nevada's ECS stakeholders to use in reimagining the way they care for and prepare children during their early years.

ABOUT THE GUINN CENTER

The Kenny Guinn Center for Policy Priorities is a nonprofit, nonpartisan policy research center addressing key challenges faced by policymakers and all Nevadans.

Our staff researchers, together with academic partners and independent experts across the state, tackle policy issues that range from taxation to water use, healthcare to education, and everything in between. We identify and analyze the complex problems we face as a state and inform decision-makers about actionable, data-driven, and effective policy solutions.

We invite you to join us in creating a brighter future for the Silver State by supporting our mission, signing up for our newsletter, or getting in contact.

© 2025 Guinn Center. All rights reserved.

Mailing Address:
1664 N. Virginia St.
M/S 0289
Reno, NV 89557

Physical Address:
190 E. Liberty St.
Reno, NV 89501

(775) 682-5083

info@guinncenter.org

guinncenter.org

OUR VISION

Identify and advance sound policies and actionable solutions that support a thriving and prosperous Nevada.

OUR MISSION

Advancing evidence-based policy solutions for Nevada through research, public engagement, and partnerships.