

Early Childhood Alaska: A Strategic Direction for 2020-2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION:

Early Childhood Alaska: A Strategic Direction for 2020-2025 outlines a series of bold actions and improvements to benefit young children and their families across the state by 2025 and establishes a Ten-Year North Star Vision for Alaska’s early childhood system. This plan intends to provide children and families in all Alaska communities with equitable access to resources, quality affordable care and education, and every opportunity for them to succeed. While considering Alaska’s fiscal challenges, the plan also recognizes the importance of elevating the early childhood system as a strategy to move the state toward economic stability.

This executive summary is organized according to the PDG B-5 Strategic Plan Review and Needs Assessment Alignment table. Also, at the end of this executive summary there is the list of the “must haves” outlined in the PDG B-5 Strategic Plan Guidance document, which are referenced using numbered citations throughout this document.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND INVOLVEMENT (1):

The strategic planning process identified and engaged with a full range of stakeholders across Alaska, and a detailed recap of this process is reflected in the **Strategic Planning Process Report and Appendices**. This important process provided the foundation for conversations with Alaskans about the early childhood system in the state. All stakeholder organizations, participant agencies, and individuals are identified and their roles as collaborators are acknowledged in the strategic planning documents.

During 2019 and 2020, face-to-face and virtual meetings were held with parents, families, community members, and people working in the early childhood system. Over 300 Alaskans responded to an online survey and there were 288 participants who signed in to statewide in-person or virtual stakeholder meetings. A few individuals participated in more than one meeting and some participated in both the survey and a meeting. The exact number of participants is unknown, yet the total number of people who provided input is conservatively estimated to be at least 500. The information gathered through this process was reviewed and considered in developing the strategic plan goals, objectives, strategies and actions.

The development of the strategic plan framework, the associated stakeholder engagement activities, and creation of the final plan brought together a diverse group of collaborators and contributors. The networks and relationships that were created through the stakeholder engagement process will allow for continued communication and cooperation. Throughout the strategic plan there are several on-going opportunities for input and engagement by stakeholders as the plan is implemented.

THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS:

- ***Needs Assessment Findings:***

The development of the strategic plan for early childhood in Alaska began in 2019 with an analysis of the current landscape of the state’s early childhood mixed-delivery system presented in **A Needs Assessment of Alaska’s Mixed-Delivery System of Early Childhood Care and Education**. The assessment compiled and analyzed data describing where Alaska’s children live, what their lives are like, and what their families,

caregivers, and educators need. The report also analyzed the status of the system including governance, funding, facilities, data and research; the status of the early childhood workforce; and the possibilities for alignment and collaboration throughout the system. The needs assessment provided a foundation for an early plan framework, and its findings and data are referenced throughout the strategic plan document.

- *Identify Goal Areas:*

After considering these findings and identifying the most important gaps and domains, three main goal areas were developed. These goals aim to support safe and stable families; maximize the availability and improve the quality of early childhood education options; and streamline administrative infrastructure, while improving funding efficiencies.

- *Stakeholder Engagement Process:*

Following the analysis of the needs assessment, a comprehensive stakeholder engagement effort was launched in communities across Alaska and included many participants from remote rural and underserved areas. This process is detailed in the **Strategic Planning Process Report and Appendices**.

- *Alaska Early Childhood Joint Task Force (JTF) Meetings, Surveys, and Work groups*

The JTF has an eight-member Leadership Team, which in turn engaged with and guided a full 40+ member JTF, formed to align work on the early childhood needs assessment and strategic plan. This work was coordinated among three grants: the initial Preschool Development Grant B-5 received by the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) and jointly managed by DEED and the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS); an Impact Project grant from the State Capacity Building Center to align early care and education systems with programs and services, led by the DHSS Child Care Program Office; and an Indigenous Project LAUNCH grant to prepare Alaska Native children 0-8 with skills to succeed in school, led by Southcentral Foundation, a health and wellness organization serving the Alaska Native population in Southcentral Alaska. The JTF and Leadership Team provided important guidance on plan content and process throughout the strategic planning effort. This included face-to-face meetings on plan framework, content, feedback on process, workgroup participation, editing and ongoing support.

- *Alignment with Existing Statewide Plans:*

This document also builds upon existing plans for Alaska that address education, early childhood, mental health, trauma, homelessness, family services, and workforce development. The intent of this plan is to coordinate with and support these efforts as a means to advance the early childhood system in Alaska. Below is an overview of these plans, as well as the corresponding goal numbers with which they align:

ALIGNMENT - EXISTING STATEWIDE PLANS	GOAL
Alaska’s Education Challenge - State of Alaska Department of Education and Early Development	2
Investing in Prevention: Working Together in Early Childhood for Healthy Alaskan Children, Families, and Communities - Interagency Prevention Workgroup	1
2020-2024 Child and Family Services Plan - State of Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Office of Children’s Services.	1
Strengthening the System: Alaska’s Comprehensive Integrated Mental Health Program Plan 2020-2024 - DHSS through a partnership with the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority	1

Child Care Development Fund Plan	2
Learn & Grow Strategic Plan - thread	2
Alaska SEED's 3-Year Professional Development Plan – thread	3
2019 Alaska MCH Title V Five Year Action Plan - State of Alaska Department of Health and Social Services	1,2
Healthy Alaskans 2020: Alaska State Health Improvement Plan - State of Alaska Department of Health and Social Services	1,2,3

STATE VISION AND PRINCIPLES:

A review of other state early childhood plans was conducted, and plan framework definitions were identified to include a North Star Ten-Year Vision, a five-year strategic plan from 2020-2025, guiding principles, and three goals supported by objectives, strategies, and actions.

NORTH STAR TEN-YEAR VISION

Alaska's children and families thrive in a strong and equitable early childhood system.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES:

- **Whole Child and Family Focus**
Alaska's children and families are at the center of our work. Families are engaged, empowered and respected as a child's most important and constant teacher. All areas of a child's growth, development and learning are considered and developmentally appropriate.
- **Committed to Equality**
Improving early childhood outcomes requires removing inequities. We are committed to providing resources, supports and services to all of Alaska's children and families regardless of geography, race, ethnicity, income, access, and lack of opportunity.
- **Inclusive, Honoring, and Respectful**
All programs, services and supports must be inclusive, culturally relevant and respectful of the language, history and knowledge of all Alaska families. We acknowledge, honor and respect Alaska Native and other cultures' indigenous ancestral heritage, practices and values.
- **Research Informed**
Strategies are informed by evidence and promising practices that are developmentally appropriate, locally influenced, actionable, measurable, and implemented by a capable and well-supported workforce.
- **Cultivating Systems Change**
This plan is our road map to guide policy and build a comprehensive, coordinated, outcomes-focused, measurable, and accessible early childhood system in Alaska. It is intentionally designed to be informed by data that builds on our strengths and indicates areas for continued growth and development.

ESSENTIAL STRATEGIC DOMAINS:

A Needs Assessment of Alaska’s Mixed Delivery System of Early Childhood Care and Education identified several essential domains and provided a set of considerations for the strategic planning process within each of the domains. The domains outlined in the needs assessment are: Availability, Accessibility/Affordability and Quality; Health, Socioeconomic Factors, and Trauma; Funding; Governance and Collaboration; Workforce; Transitions; Facilities; Research and Data; and an Integrated Data System.

These considerations also outlined the gaps and needs that could be addressed in the strategic plan which were incorporated into the planning process during the workgroups and leadership team meetings. These considerations were an essential part of the initial plan development, and **Early Childhood Alaska: A Strategic Direction for 2020-2025** aligns its goals and strategies with the recommendations and considerations in the needs assessment. The essential strategic domains also serve as the foundation of the planning framework used during the development of the goals, objectives, strategies, and actions.

GAPS/FINDINGS FROM NEEDS ASSESSMENT PROCESS:

Findings, figures, and data from the needs assessment are referenced and cited throughout the strategic plan and the gaps that were identified are correlated to the goal areas that were used to guide the development of this plan. In the table below, specific goals from the plan are cross walked with the essential domains and gaps from the needs assessment. For purposes of clarity, in the strategic plan document “availability” is included in the term “accessibility.”

ESSENTIAL DOMAINS FROM NEEDS ASSESSMENT	GAPS AND NEEDS – GOAL AREAS
ACCESSIBILITY, AFFORDABILITY, QUALITY	The needs related to this domain are the primary focus of the objectives, strategies, and actions in Goal 2.
HEALTH, SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS AND TRAUMA	The needs of Alaska’s children around these issues identified by the needs assessment are significant, and are addressed throughout the objectives in Goal 1.
FUNDING	The funding issues and needs for Alaska’s early childhood system are addressed in Goal 3, and the strategies aim to create pathways for collaboration.
GOVERNANCE AND COLLABORATION	The governance gaps, concerns and recommendations are also addressed in Goal 3, with special emphasis on establishing an effective system structure.
WORKFORCE	The workforce findings and subsequent recommendations from the needs assessment are considered in Goal 3, where the plan outlines ways to improve retention and increase job satisfaction.
TRANSITIONS	Goal 2 addresses the findings of the needs assessment relating to successful and supportive transitions.

FACILITIES	In Goal 3, the strategic plan summarizes ways to improve the quality and quantity of early childhood facilities across the state.
RESEARCH AND DATA	In Goal 3, and throughout the plan, the importance of data and reliable research is emphasized.
INTEGRATED DATA SYSTEM	The sharing and consolidation of data and numbers related to the early childhood system is a focus of Goal 3 in the strategic plan.

GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND STRATEGIES (2):

Action steps, which in the planning framework are defined as specific steps within each strategy to drive change toward meeting the objectives, are further detailed in the full plan document.

PLAN AT A GLANCE

Goal 1: Alaska Children and Families are Healthy, Safe and Stable

Objective 1 | Strong and Resilient Families and Communities

Families, programs, and communities partner to build protective factors that increase family resilience, enhance child development and reduce abuse and neglect.

- Build social connections and positive family relationships that provide emotional, educational and spiritual support.
- Increase the number of family and early childhood professional partnerships that use best practices in child development and parenting strategies that support physical, cognitive, social-emotional and language development.
- Increase access to concrete supports in times of need caused by a lack of safe housing, food security, out of home placement, behavioral health treatment and equitable access to resources that support healthy and resilient communities.
- Increase the social emotional well-being of children, their families, and their caregivers.

Objective 2 | Integrated Physical, Mental and Dental Health

Children and their families have regular, ongoing access to health care services that are comprehensive, equitable and culturally and linguistically responsive.

- Increase the percentage of insured children and pregnant women.
- Increase the percentage of children with and without special health care needs having a medical home.
- Integrate primary care and behavioral health services.
- Increase access to infant and early childhood mental health supports including family supports, therapies, consultation and reflective supervision services.

Goal 2: Alaska children have quality early learning experiences and are prepared for success in school

Objective 3 | Family Partnerships

As a child's first and most important teachers, families are full partners in all early childhood education experiences and are supported by, and connected to, early childhood education programs and services in which their children participate.

- Families' opinions and ideas drive the design of system policies and programming.
- Early childhood programs meet the cultural and language needs of children and families.

Objective 4 | Accessibility

Families have access to early childhood education programs that are high quality, culturally responsive, and affordable. Families have access to information that allows them to make choices that meet their individual needs.

- Identify all programs that provide and support infant/early childhood education across the state.
- Increase the awareness of early childhood education programs for all stakeholders with the common understanding that stronger consumer awareness results in more access.
- Increase technical assistance opportunities from the state and partners to improve access to high quality early childhood education programs.
- Assess and address barriers to access including transportation, facility and physical space needs of early childhood programs.

Objective 5 | Affordability

Alaska families have affordable early childhood education program options.

- Decrease the amount of income families spend on child care or early childhood education program expenses.
- Adjust child care assistance eligibility requirements to ensure financial support for more families.

Objective 6 | High Quality (6)

Alaska's children are in high quality early childhood education programs.

- Increase the number of early childhood education programs participating and advancing in Learn and Grow, Alaska's Quality Recognition and Improvement System.
- Provide information and tools to families on how to assess the quality of child care programs for their children.
- Increase access to high quality inclusive in-home or community based early childhood education programming.
- Provide supports to decrease suspensions and expulsions in early childhood education programs.

Objective 7 | Transitions (4)

Children and families experience supportive transitions and continuity of services within and across early childhood education programs and K-12 settings.

- Establish procedures and practices for collaboration and communication between early education programs and kindergarten that support all domains, including social-emotional learning.
- Establish procedures and practices for programs, in partnership with families, to develop transition plans for a child any time they move within a program or to a different program.

- Provide information to parents about transition points and best practices.

Goal 3: Alaska Children and Families are supported by a functional, comprehensive, mixed-delivery early childhood system

Objective 8 | Elevation of the Early Childhood System

Alaskans recognize the critical role early childhood plays and advocate to foster healthy families, early childhood development and access to quality care and education.

- Partner with families and local communities in all planning and decision-making on system change.
- Develop and implement communications and marketing strategies to increase public awareness about the importance of early childhood.
- Develop and implement a statewide public policy agenda.

Objective 9 | Strategic Funding

Funding for early childhood care and education is coordinated, based on current data, and supports the goals of this statewide plan.

- Develop fiscal policy that moves system sectors toward delivery of services in a whole-child approach.
- Provide financial incentives for ongoing quality and system improvement.
- Identify new and strategic ways to maximize funding.

Objective 10 | Data Integration and Accountability

Collection and use of reliable data on early childhood is coordinated, centralized, accessible and actionable.

- Map and analyze current early childhood data systems in Alaska.
- Regularly review, update, and use data to guide continuous improvement and inform planning, policy, practice and operations.

Objective 11 | Workforce

The early childhood workforce is stable, qualified, fairly compensated, diverse, and supported.

- Increase cross sector recruitment and retention of early childhood professionals.
- Increase professional development opportunities for early childhood professionals.
- Improve wages and compensation for early childhood professionals.
- Increase diversity across the early childhood workforce.

Objective 12 | Coordinated Plan Implementation

An aligned and coordinated process is used to implement this strategic plan resulting in a permanent and improved early childhood system for Alaska.

- Ensure coordination to develop aligned policies, standards, and regulations across all sectors and settings.(5)
- Create an improved, sustainable and accountable governance approach with decision-making authority.
- Establish roles and responsibilities to implement this strategic plan for both current and improved governance approaches.

PROGRESS INDICATORS FOR EACH GOAL OR OUTCOME (7):

Before the state can identify measurable progress indicators for each of the goals and objectives outlined in this plan, it must have a coherent and empowered governance structure to oversee implementation and ensure accountability. Early implementation of this plan will be carried out through the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council (AECCC), however a work group has been formed to write a proposal for a new approach to governing the early childhood system in Alaska. The proposed governance structure will include guidelines for establishing accountability for overseeing implementation of the plan. This will be done by developing a set of progress measures, roles, responsibilities, and desired outcomes for each of the goal areas outlined in the plan. Once adopted, the new governance body, working with partners across sectors, will use existing and collected data to assess progress, align quality standards across early childhood education, ensure cost and resource efficiency, and support continuous quality improvement.

The creation of a new governance approach for the early childhood system in Alaska is a key strategy for improving the early childhood system and operationalizing the new strategic plan. Developing a new governance approach is how Alaska will transform the current landscape and infrastructure into a coherent early learning system and establish progress indicators.

EXISTING RESOURCES (3):

Achieving the goals of this plan will require all sectors of Alaska's early childhood system working together. This document builds upon existing plans and many of the activities and strategies are already underway by partners across the state, however, there is a real need for ongoing coordination. Funding resources will be the biggest challenge to implementation of the plan. Identifying new funding streams and changing the way Alaska uses existing resources will be the task of the new governance structure.

The spirit of this plan is meant to encourage all early childhood stakeholders to leverage already existing planning efforts and resources through cooperation, alignment, and collaboration at all levels to make enduring and sustainable improvements in Alaska's early childhood system. The goals and objectives of this plan also aim to elevate the early childhood system to increase awareness among the public and policy makers.

GOVERNANCE:

There is a need to strengthen statewide program coordination and infrastructure support across Alaska. A workgroup is currently developing a new governance model for implementation which will address progress measures, responsibilities, and desired outcomes. Indicator data and benchmarks will be decided on during the implementation phase of the plan. The State Advisory Council, the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council (AECCC), initially will be responsible for carrying out the plan, while the new governance structure is being established. This plan outlines how to address gaps and build system-wide supports for early childhood programs, projects, and initiatives through improved system infrastructure and a collaborative approach to governance.

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS (7):

During the stakeholder engagement process, issues with both state and federal statutory requirements emerged as a common theme, especially among those living and working in the most rural and underserved areas of the state. Through input from survey and meeting participants, several roadblocks and barriers to access were identified:

- Issues around licensing requirements

- Background checks
- Funding restrictions
- Inconsistent statutory requirements across jurisdictions

These issues impacted the ability of stakeholders to operate and access quality care. Several of these issues are included and addressed in the plan, in Goal 3, through the establishment of a workgroup that will partner with tribal entities to evaluate current child care licensing requirements and make recommendations as to what areas can be streamlined without compromising quality. In addition, the plan proposes to expand investment in the background check system so that it is efficient and accessible to early childhood education professionals to accelerate the employment and hiring process. Through these strategies the plan assesses and addresses several statutory requirements at the state, federal and local level.

IMPROVED COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION (5):

Goal 2 of the strategic plan identifies improved coordination and collaboration as an essential part of a functional and effective early childhood system. The plan outlines an aligned approach to implementation through the new governance structure. Once adopted, the new governance body will work to ensure coordination among stakeholders to develop aligned policies, standards, and regulations across all sectors and settings. Central to the coordinated approach will be strengthening partnerships between education systems, providers, tribal organizations, non-profits, and local, state, and federal agencies. Also, important will be the development and implementation of shared monitoring systems among early childhood programs and an integrated data system to increase the accuracy and accessibility of data.

The final plan document includes action steps that encourage collaboration, coordination and partnerships and that leverage resources to increase service delivery across the system. There are specific objectives and strategies to improve transitions and increase participation in high quality early care and education for all children in Alaska. This plan has several goals that relate to coordination among service providers and among early childhood programs.

STATE ADVISORY COUNCIL (9):

Early Childhood Alaska: A Strategic Direction for 2020-2025 was made possible through the commitment, hard work, dedication, and energy of stakeholders across the state. Many people, including parents, families, educators, caregivers, system workers, and local, regional and tribal leaders and members of the Alaska Early Childhood Joint Task Force and the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council dedicated time and energy to this plan. The AECCC held several joint meetings with the 40+ member JTF which formed to align work on the early childhood needs assessment and strategic plan. The JTF and its eight-member Leadership Team provided important guidance on plan content and process throughout the strategic planning effort. This included face-to-face meetings on plan framework, content, feedback on process, workgroup participation, editing and ongoing support.

A workgroup is currently developing a new governance model for implementation which will address progress measures, responsibilities, and desired outcomes. Indicator data and benchmarks will be decided on during the implementation phase of the plan. The State Advisory Council, the Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council (AECCC), initially will be responsible for carrying out the plan, while the new governance structure is being established.

CONCLUSION

This plan will be disseminated widely across the state and can also be used as a road map for public and private decision-makers and local regional leadership to begin establishing their own early childhood system improvements. With dedication and commitment to the efforts outlined in this plan, Alaska's children and families will thrive in a strong and equitable early childhood system.

PDG B-5 REQUIRMENTS – The following “must haves” are cited throughout this document using the following numbers to identify their location.

The strategic plan must:

1. Identify the full range of stakeholders meaningfully impacted by the work and how these stakeholders were engaged in the strategic plan development/updates.
2. Clearly lay out a plan with goals and action steps that establish a comprehensive ECE system.
3. Identify the partnerships, collaborations, coordination, and quality improvement activities that will be used to leverage policy alignments and program quality and service delivery across ECE settings in the birth through five (B-5) system.
4. Identify activities that address improving transitions of children from ECE programs into elementary schools.
5. Delineate how the plan will build on and support improved coordination and collaboration among ECE programs.
6. Provide a strong framework for laying out how the state/territory will increase the overall participation of children in high-quality ECE programs, services, and settings within and across a mixed delivery system.
7. Assess current federal, state, and local statutory requirements and identify any potential barriers or roadblocks that these requirements put on future coordination.
8. Identify how the state/territory will use indicator data to assess progress, assess key desired outcomes, inform cost and resource efficiency, and support continuous quality improvement.
9. Describe how the state/territory will continue to involve the State Advisory Council in the implementation of the strategic plan.