

Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council (AECCC)

Videoconference

Meeting Date

Thursday, December 16, 2021

Minutes

Members Present:

Commissioner Adam Crum
Abbe Hensley
Amber Vaska
Anne Shade
Brian Holst
Christie Reinhardt
Christina Hulquist
Interim Deputy Commissioner Heidi Teshner
Dr. Matthew Hirschfeld
Elizabeth Siddon
Jennifer Weisshaupt
Joshua Arvidson
Margaret Bauer
Maureen Harwood
Stephanie Berglund
Supanika Ackerman
Trevor Storrs

Guests:

Chelsea Burke
Deborah Riddle
Diane Peck
Jimael Johnson
Meghan Johnson
Tamar Ben-Josef

Staff:

Kristen Spencer, DEED
Emily Urlacher, DHSS

CALL TO ORDER – 1:02 P.M.

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Following a videoconference briefing, Commissioner Crum welcomed attendees to the meeting. Roll call was taken, and guests were introduced. New member Amber Vaska was introduced, and she gave a short summary of her experience.

APPROVAL OF PREVIOUS MEETING MINUTES

Dr. Matthew Hirschfeld **MOVED** to approve the minutes from the September 16, 2021, meeting, **SECONDED** by Trevor Storrs. Margaret Bauer remarked on a correction to the minutes, and hearing no opposition, the motion **PASSED**, and the minutes were approved as amended.

LEARN & GROW PROGRAM UPDATE

Meghan Johnson reminded everyone that there are three goals for Learn & Grow:

1. Advancement through the levels of quality;
2. Participation of all program types into Learn & Grow; and
3. Infrastructure to implement and meet recruitment and scale-up goals.

Meghan explained that when Learn & Grow first started in 2016, there were just two levels out of five that were available to licensed child care programs. Last April the full framework was made available, and 21 programs are moving to Level 3 from Level 2, and more Head Start and pre-elementary programs are being supported. At the end of quarter 2 there were 122 programs participating 46 Centers, 59 Homes, and 13 Group Homes. 3663 children are enrolled in the 122 programs and 1081 of these children also receive Child Care Assistance.

Last year Learn & Grow purchased Thread tools, an online shared services platform, which is helping to run the early childhood programs a little easier. A multi-year budget is being prepared to go along with an evaluation plan and strategic plan so the work can be monitored as time progresses.

She explained that by FY '26, they are hoping for 40 percent participation and 20 percent at Level 3, 4, or 5. Currently, there are 125 out of 526 eligible early childhood programs participating: 10 are working toward Level 1, 64 are at Level 1, and 51 have achieved Level 2. If half of the Level 2 programs move up to Level 3, 4, or 5, the FY '26 advancement target will be met.

Meghan compared the Alaska state strategic plan goals and Learn & Grow with the Build Back Better proposed plan and explained some of the differences between the two. For more information, visit www.ffyt.org/faq-on-the-child-care-and-preschool-provisions-in-the-build-back-better-act/

Meghan requested that AECCC help develop policy language or a path forward for Learn & Grow to help it become the full quality framework for all early childhood program types in Alaska.

Stephanie Berglund added that Learn & Grow is working, but that is not necessarily reflected in the numbers. The progress might have been a little slower than expected, but the feedback is that the programs are improving in quality, and it is helpful to have so many of the teachers trained on the same content.

Christina Hulquist added that if there was a silver lining to the COVID pandemic it was that the programs engaged in Learn & Grow had an extra support system available to connect with and troubleshoot and have technical assistance.

Brian Holst asked if Learn & Grow has seen a response in the market for increased demand for higher levels. Meghan Johnson replied that the plan is to do more outreach and marketing to families, but it has not been a priority with just two of five levels available. Stephanie Berglund added that they have not yet seen a market shift in families because the top three things that are driving people's decisions are availability, cost, and location.

Anne Shade asked if the scores to advance to the next level in a multiple classroom setting are scored for the classroom or the program. Meghan explained that one classroom per age group is selected at random for assessment. Typically, that would be one infant, one toddler, and one preschool, and then one school age if present.

Anne Shade noted that the administrators needed to be a nine or ten on the SEED level but wondered if that could be modified because many administrators have masters or Ph.D. degrees but not in early childhood so they don't qualify. Meghan replied that the SEED committee did revisions, and they have an extensive related degree area. They are still working on that and are adding more related degrees.

Commissioner Crum asked for comments about what items would be helpful to include in the data dashboard. Meghan said that she wanted to provide regular updates and if there are other data points that would be helpful, she could include those, such as number of children or those on child care assistance.

Supanika Ackerman was interested in seeing a map of where the programs are located. Christie Reinhardt requested that the map not only list the child care assistance but also include the Alaska IN! program. Meghan said she would work on both of those requests.

Abbe Hensley wondered how many programs dropped out or decided not to proceed and if it is known why that would happen. Meghan said that most of the time it's because they closed or they moved out of state and then closed, but she would include this information also.

Meghan also provided a link to the Learn & Grow website tab that is updated quarterly. The marketing department is currently in process of updating it. <https://www.threadalaska.org/learn-and-grow/for-educators/become-a-program/programs-participating-in-learn-grow>

EARLY CHILDHOOD COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEMS (ECCS) FINAL UPDATE

Emily Urlacher is the ECCS program manager, and this is the final presentation regarding the last five years in the grant cycle, which ended in July of this year. She stressed that this work has been a team effort, and she gave a brief description of the members of the team.

Emily reviewed the logic model provided by the National Institute for Children’s Health Quality (NICHQ). The ECCS grant aim is to improve population-level developmental health outcomes in children ages 0 – 3. The growth toward increased developmental outcomes was measured through the administration and data collection of the Ages & Stages Questionnaire (ASQ).

The logic model has three core domains as follows:

- Collective Impact
- High Quality & Coordinated Developmental Services
- Systems Development & Improvement

Collective Impact Domain

Emily shared information about the work accomplished in three place-based communities and their backbone organizations: Kodiak and the Kodiak Area Native Association, Norton Sound and the Norton South Health Corporation, and Mat-Su and Raising Our Children with Kindness (R.O.C.K. Mat-Su).

Each community had to establish or build upon an already established Early Childhood Coalition meant to bring stakeholders together to improve the local early childhood systems. PARTNER analyses were performed using the five conditions of collective impact: common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone organizational support. The results of the analyses helped form reports and plans and were important in helping to understand and strengthen the networks so they could be sustained beyond the life of the grant.

The numbers of partners in each community increased substantially from 2017 to 2020 thanks in part to the partner analyses and improved working relationships.

Some of the outstanding activities and events for each community are listed below:

Mat-Su:

- The R.O.C.K. Mat-Su Community Baby Shower was an outstanding event and is nationally recognized.

Kodiak:

- Annual Children’s Fair where 376 children attended.
- With several partnerships, hosted a Books, Blocks, and Balls event.
- Virtual Conscious Discipline classes for families.
- At-home preschool curriculum to low-income families.

Norton Sound:

- Established a lactation club that supported breastfeeding or pregnant moms.
- Provided weekly kinder-gym events where the children get to play, socialize and explore.
- Family movie night in Nome with reserved bubble spaces.

Systems Development and Improvement Domain

The Alaska Early Childhood Network (ECN) was created with the goal of developing and maintaining partnerships in communities other than the three place-based communities. The organization is growing, and they recently hosted two special sessions, one in partnership with the Child Care Program Office and one for potential funders.

Family leadership is another goal of ECCS, and to that end, the family engagement and leadership training (FELT) was designed to teach families how to advocate for themselves. A diverse group of parents and early childhood educators took part in the online training. The effectiveness of the 20 modules was tested, and all were rated highly efficient by the participants. An additional parent training module sponsored by FELT is being designed, and FELT is now part of the Title V block grant.

High Quality and Coordinated Developmental Services Domain

The promotion and availability of developmental screening was a priority of the ECCS grant. Young children’s medical providers were given the opportunity to integrate the Ages & Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) into their practices. This allowed providers to have meaningful conversations with families about child development based on the outcome of the ASQ.

This initiative started in 2015 with six medical providers participating, and presently there are 25 medical practices included. This year there were over 5,500 screenings with Alaska’s ASQ online system.

The Universal Developmental Screening Advisory Committee (UDSAC) brings key stakeholders together to ensure that all Alaska children have access to developmental screening. Emily also discussed Help Me Grow Alaska, an agency dedicated to promoting healthy child development statewide and invited the group to visit the Help Me Grow Alaska website.

Emily pointed out that free developmental screening through the ASQ system is available through many community partners and is funded by DHSS.

CHILD CARE PROGRAM OFFICE (CCPO) FEDERAL RELIEF FUNDS

Christina Hulquist reported that Alaska received approximately \$95 million in federal relief funds for ARPA stabilization, ARPA discretionary, and CRRSA. Each funding stream comes with its own set of federal requirements and guidelines for planning and spending.

Christina reviewed three documents which had recently been released to providers that outlined spending plans for the funds. The documents include federal and state background information, planning efforts, spending projections, and a timeline of funds received and spent as of November 2021. The spending plan is broken down into four categories:

- Improve affordability and subsidy.

- \$28 million of ARPA set-aside funds.
- Increase access to licensed care.
 - Includes stabilization funding.
- Increase supports for quality improvement.
- Infrastructure.

The stabilization grants totaled \$45 million. Phase 1 took \$1 million. Phase 2 of the stabilization grants will be based on licensed capacity and per slot to help programs reach their licensed capacity by building back enrollment. It is anticipated that at least \$15 million of the stabilization funding will be used for Phase 2. Phase 3 is expected to be implemented in the summer of 2022, and Phase 4 in the fall and winter of 2022.

Christina said there will be another town hall meeting the first week of January. Abbe Hensley asked if the group could help get the word out about the town hall, and Christina said that would be helpful because sometimes questions are directed to legislators or providers instead of to the CCPO. She also tries to give providers as much information as she can without being misleading, because many are making business decisions based on that information.

Trevor Storrs asked about salaries of the workers and if there will be assistance to after-school programs. Christina referred to the spending plan document that sets out specific strategies and also said that workers can receive a \$3,000 bonus for working in a licensed program. Another plan is to develop specific courses at the university to help with professional development and support that with scholarships.

First Children’s Finance will be helping to recommend how to use direct services funds to support child care assistance and long-term improvements to the Child Care Assistance Program.

Supanika Ackerman asked about the long wait times for background checks for providers and if there are funds to help with that. Christina explained that no state has become compliant with the BCDF rule changes, but there are funds set aside to look at what improvements can be made to come into compliance.

Abbe Hensley asked if there is a plan or resource that might help to receive Build Back Better funding. Commissioner Crum said a vote on that would not happen until at least March since it has not yet started the Byrd Rule process. He added that the ARPA funds are not pass-through; there are specific rules and guidelines, and states are being asked to step into the redesign of the long-term child care process.

AECCC CHARTER AND SUBCOMMITTEE WORK UPDATE

Brian Holst reported that they have started to work on the charter, but they need more time, and they do not have changes today to present to the group. Christina Hulquist added that they do have a draft charter and have the subcommittee list outlined, and she is confident they will have a recommendation at the next meeting.

Abbe Hensley pointed out that she noticed that this group was composed of half state employees and half from the private sector, so it is a public/private partnership, and she appreciates that.

PROGRAM UPDATES OR NEW BUSINESS

Commissioner Crum said that yesterday in the Governor's budget release, there is a not a budget for the Department of Health and Social Services. Instead, there is a budget for Department of Health and the Department of Family and Community Services. It looks like the department is going to be restructured, which he believes is the best way forward for the department because it is so large. It is anticipated that Public Assistance and Public Health would be combined in the Department of Health and that all other divisions would stand alone on their own. He added that the priority is to not have a disruption in services.

Stephanie Berglund said she had been participating on the governance subcommittee work, and she would like that added to the agenda of a future meeting.

ADJOURN

Commissioner Crum thanked everyone for attending and working together, and the meeting was adjourned at 3:27 p.m.