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COUNCIL FOR
**THRIVING
CHILDREN**



New Hampshire's Strategic Plan for Early Childhood

2021 UPDATE



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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In June 2020, the New Hampshire Council for Thriving Children released [New Hampshire's Strategic Plan for Early Childhood](#). This document — created in partnership with the University of New Hampshire, New Hampshire Department of Education, and New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services — provided a blueprint for the state to realize its vision that ***all families are afforded comprehensive and responsive supports, so they are healthy, learning, and thriving now and in the future***. The Strategic Plan was developed over a year-long process that considered the perspectives of the state's early childhood stakeholders, including thought leaders, service providers, parents, and community members.

Since the launch of this planning process, much changed in New Hampshire that affected the state's capacity to realize the goals outlined in the Strategic Plan. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, forced the early childhood system to adjust its care delivery model in ways that both strengthened and challenged families and providers. New funding sources, including a \$26.8 million dollar Preschool Development Grant, enabled the state to bolster its infrastructure for early childhood systems. In addition, social and political shifts across the country brought to light some of the inequities faced by our most vulnerable families.

Considering the evolving landscape, the Council embarked on a process to review and provide an update to the Strategic Plan, including identification of a Strategic Plan Update Team. The Team met to consider catalysts for change, challenges to progress, metrics for performance, and opportunities to align the statewide Plan with other initiatives in New Hampshire. Through these activities, New Hampshire could determine the extent to which it was meeting the Plan's identified goals and objectives.

This document shares the work of the Strategic Plan Update Team, including the process and findings. The purpose of this update is to enhance the comprehensive 2020 Strategic Plan document with reflective and enriching information; the Council did not revise the goals, objectives, strategies, or actions presented in the Strategic Plan. New Hampshire will embark on the next three-year strategic planning process in late 2021.

II. BACKGROUND

New Hampshire is passionately committed to building a comprehensive support structure that realizes its vision: ***All families are afforded comprehensive and responsive supports, so they are healthy, learning, and thriving now and in the future.***

With funding from the 2019 Preschool Development Grant, New Hampshire mobilized leadership from the state's Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and Department of Education (DOE), and the University of New Hampshire (UNH) to embark on a strategic planning process. The planning team included constituents at all levels of the early childhood system, including the families who benefit from it. Informed by a statewide needs assessment and a comprehensive stakeholder engagement process, this collaborative team identified strategies to significantly influence the early childhood system.

The draft Strategic Plan for Early Childhood was reviewed and approved by Governor Sununu and leadership from DHHS and DOE. The Council for Thriving Children released the final Plan in June 2020.

The Strategic Plan identified four goals to achieve the collective vision:

- GOAL 1: POSITIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCES — Effective learning opportunities are provided in all settings, including the home, child care, and after school programs, preschools, and elementary schools.
- GOAL 2: HEALTHY CHILDREN AND FAMILIES — Children and families throughout our state have access to the best opportunities for early and lifelong health.
- GOAL 3: STRONG FAMILIES — Families have the skills, basic resources, and supports to promote their children's development and learning before birth and continuing through age five and beyond.
- GOAL 4: STATEWIDE COORDINATION — NH's young children and their families have the benefit of well-coordinated early childhood programs and services that work effectively together on their behalf.

For each of these goals, the Strategic Plan includes measurable objectives along with strategies and actions for meeting the objectives. The Plan document also includes needs assessment data that informed each of the objectives, identified programs and initiatives in place during the Plan's release, and defined aspirational metrics of progress. By carrying out the Plan, New Hampshire will move the needle in creating a family-centric system that is inclusive, responsive, efficient, and evidence-informed.

New Hampshire has made progress on all goals, and recently released its 2020 Year In Review. The 20 stories in this document illustrate initiatives funded by federal and state resources and philanthropy, and happening at the state, regional, and community levels.

III. STRATEGIC PLAN UPDATE PROCESS

Aligning with best practices, the Council recognized the value of an annual review and update of the Strategic Plan. Accordingly, the Council convened an ad-hoc Strategic Plan Update Team that included cross-sector member representation.

- Jane Bard, President, New Hampshire Children’s Museum
- Phoebe Backler, Senior Program Officer, New Hampshire Charitable Foundation
- Christine Brennan, Deputy Commissioner, New Hampshire Department of Education
- Jackie Cowell, Executive Director, Early Learning NH
- Christina MacDonald, Part B 619 Coordinator, New Hampshire Department of Education
- Kimberly Nesbitt, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of New Hampshire
- Lara Quiroga, Director of Community-Integrated Health & Wellbeing, Amoskeag Health
- Christine Santaniello, Associate Commissioner, New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services
- Patricia Tilley, Director, Division of Public Health Services, New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services
- Rebecca Woitkowski, Esq., Parent Representative

The Council for Thriving Children’s staff also attended, including Director Christina Lachance, Business Analyst Dylan Gatta, and Executive Assistant Amy West. The Update Team convened in three two-hour virtual meetings held in March, April, and May, facilitated by Pear Associates, a strategic planning consulting firm.

In reviewing and creating an update to the Plan, the Update Team identified catalysts for change, including factors contributing to goal realization, as well as challenges to progress. In addition, the Update Team identified pragmatic metrics by which each of the objectives in the Strategic Plan could be measured. Finally, the Update Team explored ways to ensure alignment of the statewide Strategic Plan with other early childhood initiatives at the state, regional, and local levels. Given the significant level of stakeholder engagement during the initial planning process, the Update Team agreed that additional stakeholder input was not required for the update.

The Update Team presented their work to the full Council at the June 8, 2021 meeting. This report includes feedback provided by Council members.

IV. CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE

The Update Team identified the following **catalysts** in moving towards NH's collective vision for young children and families:

COVID-19 PANDEMIC:

Across the globe, communities faced the unprecedented public health crisis brought forth by COVID-19. While the pandemic negatively affected thousands of people across the Granite State, it also highlighted the strength of partnership across New Hampshire, particularly as leaders of family-serving systems activated new resources to keep providers running strong. Also, DHHS Division of Children, Youth, and Families teamed up with parent and community partners to publish a resource guide to help parents and families manage stress and access needed services. Moreover, the Governor established a COVID-19 Equity Response team to address the pandemic's impact on particular populations in the state. DHHS also created a COVID-19 website for families to access the latest statistics and local resources.

When social distancing became necessary, COVID-19 was a catalyst for the increased use of technology to connect. Telehealth became a more acceptable and reimbursed care delivery model, thereby offering a convenient and affordable way for families to receive necessary care without scheduling challenges or transportation barriers. Technology enhancements also created new partnerships and innovations in programming, such as local libraries partnering with museums to reach families with enrichment activities.

With many parents and caregivers working from home, and children remote learning, families were able to spend more time with each other. Parents and caregivers were able to learn more about and participate in their child's education. The NH Department of Education created a State School Reopening Guidance and Resources page of the DOE website, which includes the New Hampshire Grades K-12 Back-to-School Guidance, New Hampshire Learns Remotely, and a range of other resources. NH DOE partnered with Prenda schools on the Recovering Bright Futures initiative, which offers school districts and communities the opportunity to provide students with access to learning pods. The DOE Commissioner met monthly with school leaders to share news on COVID-19 waivers, grants, and safety protocols.

Finally, COVID-19 catalyzed child care providers to be recognized as part of the essential workforce. In March 2020, NH established an emergency child care collaborative to ensure coverage was available for essential workers. Furthermore, resources were available to ensure childcare providers could fulfill social distancing requirements and safety guidelines.

ENHANCED FUNDING:

The \$26.8 million-dollar Preschool Development Grant awarded in 2019 has supported a range of initiatives, including enhanced training and technical assistance for early education and public-school teachers, new tools and supports for parents and caregivers, infrastructure at the state and community level, and resources for communities to build local early childhood system capacity.

The state also received federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act dollars to meet Strategic Plan goals during the pandemic. The Emergency Broadband Expansion Program enabled families to connect to the Internet, enabling remote learning and working. New Hampshire received over \$650m from the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund to safely reopen schools and address disruptions to student learning resulting from the pandemic. The Governor also allocated \$35 million of CARES Act funding for the Child Care Recovery and Stabilization Program to support programs across the state.

NEW EARLY CHILDHOOD GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE:

In January 2020, Governor Sununu signed an Executive Order establishing the New Hampshire Council for Thriving Children to guide the state's new Early Childhood Care & Education (ECCE) governance system. The system includes four quadrants: Department of Education, Department of Health and Human Services, Birth-8 Family Advisors, and the Early Childhood Scientific Advisory Panel. The Council, co-led by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education, includes family member advocates, early care and education experts, state legislators, and Commissioners from other collaborating state agencies.

The Council ensures integration and coordination across state government and connection to local communities, strengthening NH's early childhood infrastructure in all environments, including home, childcare, schools, and community settings. With the Council in place, NH has begun to enhance the interoperability of data systems within and across government agencies. Through the Council's work, DOE and DHHS have experienced heightened collaboration between their agencies, other state agencies that touch upon children's lives, early childhood service providers, and family advocates.

INTENTIONAL SYSTEMS BUILDING:

In 2020 a Business Analyst was hired with Preschool Development Grant monies to establish an integrated, statewide early childhood data system and advance data interoperability tasks across DHHS and DOE to improve program effectiveness and child and family outcomes. In 2019, the state awarded a contract to the NH Children's Trust to assume the role of NH Family Resource Center (FRC) Facilitating Organization & Quality Specialist for the 15 independent FRCs across the state. Providing backbone support, coordination, training, and technical assistance, the Children's Trust promotes operational and quality control standards across the FRC network. Furthermore, FRCs benefit from a shared service delivery mechanism known as the Family Support Data System, designed to provide a uniform platform for programs across the state to track location-specific and collective work with children and families.

V. CHALLENGES TO PROGRESS

When exploring the challenges that impeded New Hampshire from realizing its vision for children and families, the Update Team identified the following:

COVID-19 PANDEMIC:

In 2020 alone, 44,000 Granite Staters tested positive for COVID-19. Tens of thousands more were affected by the loss of jobs, school and childcare program closures, and the social-emotional impact of social distancing. Families were faced with the challenges of balancing professional time with prioritizing their children's need to be in a new educational delivery system. COVID-19 brought equity challenges to the surface, with families with low incomes and families from communities of color at disproportionate risk. Despite the state's best efforts to provide emergency childcare and remote schooling, children experienced interruptions that affected learning and development.

COVID-19 created isolation for many families. For those struggling with substance use disorder, domestic violence, child maltreatment, or other challenges, many could not connect with support outside their homes. Also, while telehealth created opportunities for virtual care provision, children could not access oral health care, vaccinations, and other services that require an in-person visit.

ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY:

The digital divide between families with and without access to computers and Wi-Fi hinders the extent to which family members can access information or participate in remote learning and online activities. As the state and service providers depend on more technology-based methods to reach families, those who cannot afford or choose not to connect with the internet may be left behind. Depending on where a family resides geographically, some cannot access a stable internet connection.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND ENGAGEMENT:

The pandemic interrupted the employment of childcare and early education workers. According to a 2021 Urban Institute report, across the country, more than 370,000 members of the child care workforce left their positions between February and April 2020, and as of December 2020, the workforce was 17% smaller than before the pandemic began. In New Hampshire, child care providers and early educators are not returning to the field for a myriad of personal, medical, and financial reasons. Compounding the situation, as parents return to workplaces post-COVID-19 and require childcare, vacancies in the workforce limit the level of resources available for working families.

SYSTEM INTEROPERABILITY:

The past year highlighted the gaps and the need to work together in a coordinated way across all sectors. There is a recognition that the state needs to better align state, regional, and local agencies and organizations, and develop information sharing systems to support each other in addressing the needs of families and young children.

VI. METRICS

As NH builds a comprehensive and coordinated early childhood system, the Council is committed to developing performance measures that focus on progress and not on a point in time. These metrics reflect the current environment while focusing on what can be accomplished in the future. Such metrics will enable the Council to determine the extent to which NH realizes its Strategic Plan goals, and will support sustaining and expanding programs and position the state for future funding.

The Update Team reviewed the metrics identified in the Strategic Plan to determine whether progress could be measured. Upon careful review and discussion, the team noted that many metrics focused on processes as opposed to outcomes. Also, some measures were specific to an organization's activities and did not provide a statewide picture of the impact. The Update Team set high-level "North Star" measures for each objective and leveraged data already collected by state agencies or partners to ensure capacity to measure progress.

The Update Team explored data sources compiled by DHHS, DOE, NH Children's Trust, and others, and conducted a strategic session to map each objective to these data. As a result of this mapping initiative, the Council compiled a revised comprehensive metrics grid as an update to the measures currently in the Strategic Plan (Attachment). For each objective in the Plan, the Update Team agreed upon specific measures to determine progress in meeting the Strategic Plan goals. The measures were operationally defined, the source(s) of the data were identified, and any limitations to the data were described. Finally, the Update Team discussed the alignment of metrics with national standards and indicators.

VII. ALIGNMENT

The Strategic Plan was developed with a broad set of goals that encompasses early childhood education, health, and family support. As such, the Council is eager to ensure alignment between the statewide Strategic Plan and other Granite State and local plans that focus on one or more of the goals. Creating alignment at the state, regional, and local levels helps ensure shared ownership of the collective vision of thriving NH families and children. Furthermore, such alignment creates opportunities for shared planning.

In consideration of alignment strategies, the Update Team researched other state strategic plans. The **Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan**, for example, includes alignment across state-level organizations as an objective within their Plan. Likewise, **Early Childhood Alaska: A Strategic Direction for 2020-2025** lists existing statewide plans that coordinate with and support the efforts of their Plan. Colorado took another approach in **Colorado Shines Brighter Birth through Five Strategic Plan 2020-2025** by incorporating progress indicators for alignment efforts.

The Update Team considered these options and recognized the value of greater promotion of the Strategic Plan. By ensuring widespread knowledge of the vision and goals in the Strategic Plan, other organizations and initiatives can see themselves in the Plan. The Council will explore ways to ensure the updated Plan is disseminated across the Granite State, using Council members and their networks to assist with distribution. The Strategic Plan will be available on the Council for Thriving Children website.