



STANDING UP A DEPARTMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD: WHAT PEER STATES CAN TEACH ILLINOIS

CIVIC FEDERATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Illinois is undertaking a significant governance change in early childhood policy by establishing the Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC). The new department is intended to consolidate key early childhood programs currently administered across multiple state agencies, including the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), the Department of Human Services (IDHS), the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), and coordinating functions within the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development (GOECD), into a single cabinet-level agency. This shift reflects a broader national trend toward creating dedicated early childhood departments or offices intended to coordinate fragmented programs, streamline administration, and provide clearer system leadership.

This report examines how four peer states—Colorado, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Oregon—structured and implemented similar early childhood departments. These states provide useful points of comparison because each established a standalone agency responsible for key early childhood programs such as child care assistance, licensing and regulation, and early learning or preschool. In each state, the creation of a dedicated department was intended to address fragmentation across agencies, simplify system navigation for families and providers, and strengthen policy coordination across programs serving young children.

Although the states share a broadly similar governance model, important differences exist in program scope, funding structures, and implementation timelines. In general, peer states consolidated child care subsidies, early learning programs, and licensing functions into the new departments, while leaving programs such as K–12 education, Medicaid and public health services, and child welfare in existing agencies. As a result, cross-agency coordination remained necessary for many services affecting young children and families.

Across the four states, implementation occurred through multi-year transition processes rather than immediate program transfers. States typically used formal transition councils, working groups, or external consultants to plan program transfers, map staff and funding streams, and address operational issues such as eligibility rules, procurement systems, and information technology infrastructure. Despite this planning, states reported similar implementation challenges, including disentangling programs from legacy agencies, maintaining stable payment and eligibility systems during transitions, integrating staff from multiple agencies, and aligning data systems and program rules.

Peer state experience also highlights that governance reform alone does not resolve broader structural challenges in early childhood systems. Workforce shortages, funding pressures, and uneven access to services continued to require policy attention after the new departments were created. While consolidation can clarify leadership and create a more coherent administrative structure, improvements in access, affordability, and outcomes depend on

sustained funding, policy decisions, and administrative capacity beyond the initial organizational transition.

For Illinois, the experiences of Colorado, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Oregon provide insight into the types of operational and administrative issues that often emerge when establishing a new early childhood department. The report therefore highlights key areas that are important for Illinois to monitor during IDEC’s transition, including operational stability in payment and eligibility systems; workforce capacity; cross-agency coordination, particularly at key transition points; and funding stability. Additional indicators include access and equity (enrollment, waitlists, and navigation), provider-facing systems such as licensing and technical

Early Indicators to Watch

- Delays in provider payments or eligibility processing
 - Increases in waitlists or declines in enrollment
 - Licensing backlogs or slower response times
 - Rising staff vacancies or turnover
 - Breakdowns in cross-agency transitions or referrals
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assistance, data system integration, and the State’s ability to produce cross-program performance metrics. Over time, tracking child and family outcomes—such as kindergarten readiness, continuity of care, and disparities in access—will be important for assessing whether governance changes translate into improved results.

Illinois’ creation of IDEC places the state within a small group of “department states” that have chosen to organize early childhood programs under a single cabinet-level agency. As the transition unfolds, peer state experience suggests that the effectiveness of this governance reform will depend not only on the organizational structure itself, but also on how successfully the state manages implementation and uses the new department to coordinate programs, align policies, and track outcomes across the early childhood system.

INTRODUCTION

Illinois is undertaking a major governance shift in early childhood policy. The state is creating a standalone Department of Early Childhood (IDEC) to bring key early childhood functions under one roof and consolidate programs currently administered by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), Department of Human Services (IDHS), Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), and coordinating functions currently housed in the Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development (GOECD).

The creation of IDEC reflects a broader effort to address longstanding fragmentation in Illinois’ early childhood system. Historically, early childhood programs have been administered across multiple agencies with different eligibility rules, funding streams, and administrative systems. Establishing a single department is intended to provide clearer leadership for early childhood policy, simplify administration for families and providers, and improve coordination across programs serving young children.

Illinois is not the first state to pursue this governance approach. Several states have created standalone early childhood departments designed to consolidate major early childhood programs within a single cabinet-level agency. This report examines how four peer states—Colorado, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Oregon—structured and implemented similar early childhood departments. Because Illinois is undertaking a comparable governance shift, the experiences of these states provide useful context for understanding how early childhood departments are structured, how transitions are implemented, and what operational challenges may emerge during the early years of a new department.

The report focuses on describing how these departments were created, how programs were consolidated, and what implementation issues states documented during the transition period. The goal is not to rank or evaluate states, but rather to examine common design features, implementation strategies, and administrative challenges across peer states to inform Illinois' own implementation and gather lessons learned.

Because states organize early childhood programs and budgets differently, the analysis is descriptive rather than evaluative. The report focuses on governance structures, program scope, and implementation experiences in peer states and does not attempt to attribute causal impacts on child or family outcomes. While funding context is discussed where relevant to program structure or implementation, the report does not attempt detailed fiscal comparisons across states. Any implications for Illinois are framed as areas to monitor during IDEC's transition, to assess implementation progress and identify emerging challenges, rather than as prescriptive policy recommendations.

MODELS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD GOVERNANCE

States organize early childhood programs in several different ways. The peer states examined in this report represent one specific governance model: the standalone early childhood department. However, early childhood programs are administered through several different structures.

The most common model places early childhood programs within larger agencies such as state education departments, human services agencies, or public health departments. In these systems, child care subsidies, preschool programs, licensing, and family supports are often administered by separate divisions or agencies, requiring coordination across multiple departments.

A smaller number of states, such as Florida and Maryland, have created coordinating offices or divisions for early childhood that sit within a governor's office or another agency. These structures are intended to improve collaboration and strategic planning across programs but

typically do not consolidate administrative authority over funding, licensing, or program operations.

Finally, a limited group of states have created standalone early childhood departments or cabinet-level agencies. These agencies consolidate major early childhood programs, including child care assistance, early learning or preschool programs, licensing and quality systems, and selected prenatal-to-three services, within a single department. The goal is to provide clearer system leadership, reduce fragmentation, and align policies affecting families, providers, and the early childhood workforce. Illinois' creation of the Department of Early Childhood places it within this third model.

WHY ILLINOIS IS NOW COMPARABLE TO OTHER STATES

Illinois is now structurally comparable to a small group of “department states” because it is making the same core governance move they already made, such as creating a standalone, cabinet-level early childhood department that consolidates major programs previously split across multiple agencies.¹ With IDEC, Illinois is pulling together programs from the Illinois State Board of Education, Department of Human Services, Department of Children and Family Services, and the Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development, mirroring how peer states regrouped child care subsidies, early learning or preschool and licensing under one departmental roof.²

Like Colorado,³ Massachusetts,⁴ New Mexico,⁵ and Oregon,⁶ Illinois used enabling legislation often supported by transition councils, advisory groups, or formal planning processes, rather than an immediate, “flip-the-switch” transfer. The design logic is also similar; address fragmented governance and funding, reduced administrative complexity and unclear eligibility rules, and build more integrated data systems and system-level accountability.⁷ In all five states, early childhood special education remains in the K-12 education system, with core health, Medicaid, and child welfare programs remain in their legacy agencies, which means Illinois’ “cut lines” look much like those in peer departments.⁸

Finally, Illinois and the peer states share a comparable reform ambition. They are framed not just as an administrative organization, but as a way to create a more coherent early childhood system that can coordinate mixed-delivery early education and care, support providers and the

¹ Civic Federation, [Illinois' New Department of Early Childhood](#), 2025.

² Civic Federation, [Illinois' New Department of Early Childhood](#).

³ Colorado General Assembly, House Bill 21-1304, [Early Childhood System](#), 2021.

⁴ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, [An Act Establishing the Department of Early Education and Care](#), Chapter 205 of the Acts of 2004.

⁵ New Mexico Legislature, Senate Bill 22, [Early Childhood Education and Care Department Act](#), 2019.

⁶ Oregon Legislative Assembly, House Bill 3073, [Department of Early Learning and Care](#), 2021.

⁷ Raising Illinois, [Understanding the Illinois Early Childhood Funding Landscape](#), 2026.

⁸ Civic Federation, [Illinois' New Department of Early Childhood](#).

workforce, and advance equity in access and outcomes.⁹ That combination of cabinet-level status, program mix, transition structure, and stated aims is what makes Illinois meaningfully comparable to these specific early childhood departments now.

PEER STATES SELECTED AND RATIONALE

Selection Criteria

This report focuses on a small set of peer states that have created standalone, cabinet-level early childhood departments comparable to Illinois' new Department of Early Childhood. Peer states were selected based on three criteria:

1. The presence of a dedicated early childhood department or agency at the cabinet level (rather than an office or division within a larger department);
2. A consolidation approach that brings together major early childhood functions previously spread across education, human services, and/or health agencies, particularly child care assistance, early learning or preschool, and licensing; and
3. A program mix and reform agenda that emphasize mixed-delivery systems, equity, data integration, and system-level coordination rather than single-program reforms.

These criteria are designed to capture states that have undertaken a governance shift similar in scope and intent to Illinois' move to IDEC, rather than states that have only created coordinating bodies or limited-scope offices.

Peer States

Based on these criteria, the primary peer states examined in this analysis are Colorado, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Oregon. Colorado created the Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) via HB21-1304,¹⁰ with operations beginning July 1, 2022. Massachusetts created the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) via Chapter 205 of the Acts of 2004,¹¹ with operations beginning July 1, 2005. New Mexico created the Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD) in 2019 via legislation,¹² with operations beginning July 1, 2020. Oregon created the Department of Early Learning and Care (DELIC) via HB 3073 in 2021,¹³ with operations beginning July 1, 2023. Other states have important early childhood structures, such as departments or offices focused on early care and learning within broader agencies. However, they differ in age, scope, or placement (such as broader children and families

⁹ Civic Federation, *Illinois' New Department of Early Childhood*.

¹⁰ Colorado General Assembly, *HB21-1304 Early Childhood System Act*, 2021.

¹¹ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *Acts of 2004, Chapter 205*.

¹² New Mexico Legislature, *SB22 Early Childhood Education and Care Department Act*, 2019.

¹³ Oregon Legislative Assembly, *HB 3073 Relating to Early Learning Governance*, 2021.

departments or older agencies) and are therefore referenced only for context, not treated as primary peers.

Scope and Method

This analysis is a comparative, case study of governance structure, transition design, and administrative implementation in the four peer states based on public documents. It draws on enabling statutes and bill summaries, transition reports and advisory council materials, official agency websites and guidance, and, where available, budget documents and strategic planning materials. The scope is descriptive and comparative; it does not attempt causal impact analysis on child or family outcomes, and differences in how states structure budgets and programs limit direct fiscal comparability. Funding information is therefore presented in rounded ranges rather than precise cross-state dollar comparisons, and any implementation lessons for Illinois are framed as “what to monitor” rather than prescriptive recommendations.

HIGH-LEVEL CROSS-STATE DESIGN DIMENSIONS

Illinois’ new Department of Early Childhood (IDEC) now sits in a small cohort of states that have created standalone, cabinet-level early childhood departments with similar consolidation logic and implementation challenges.¹⁴ Across Colorado,¹⁵ New Mexico,¹⁶ Massachusetts,¹⁷ and Oregon,¹⁸ the new agencies were established by statute, given one to two years of transition time, and charged with pulling together child care assistance, early learning or preschool, licensing, and selected family support or prenatal-to-three services, while leaving K-12, health/Medicaid, and child welfare in legacy agencies. Each state used formal transition structures, such as working groups, councils, or external consultants, to plan phased transfers of staff, funding, and IT systems,¹⁹ and several states documented early implementation issues related to untangling shared operations,²⁰ maintaining payments and eligibility systems during transition,²¹ and integrating workforces and organizational cultures.

¹⁴ Bipartisan Policy Center, [Integrated Efficient Early Care and Education Systems: Revisiting A State-by-State Analysis](#), 2023.

¹⁵ Colorado General Assembly, [HB21-1304](#).

¹⁶ New Mexico Legislature, [SB22 Early Childhood Education and Care Department Act](#).

¹⁷ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, [Acts of 2004, Chapter 205](#).

¹⁸ Oregon Legislative Assembly, [HB 3073](#).

¹⁹ Illinois Department of Early Childhood, [Transition Planning Workgroups and Engagement Opportunities](#), 2024.

²⁰ Colorado Department of Early Childhood, [CDEC Transition Plan](#), 2022.

²¹ Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, [Overview of the Department of Early Education and Care](#), 2023.

High-Level Design Features of Illinois' Department of Early Childhood and Peer Agencies

Dimension	Illinois – Department of Early Childhood (IDEC)	Colorado – Department of Early Childhood (CDEC)	Massachusetts – Department of Early Education and Care (EEC)	New Mexico – Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD)	Oregon – Department of Early Learning and Care (DELIC)
Authorizing Pathway and Launch Timing	Created by 2024 legislation establishing a standalone Department of Early Childhood and setting out a multi-year transition from ISBE, IDHS, and DCFS; IDEC is scheduled to be fully operational in mid-2026.	Created by HB21-1304 “Early Childhood System” legislation, with a statutory transition period and formal working and advisory groups; CDEC became operational July 1, 2022.	Established by Chapter 205 of the Acts of 2004 and related FY05 budget language; EEC became operational July 1, 2005 after a planning year led by an Early Education and Care Council.	Established by 2019 legislation as a cabinet-level department consolidating most early childhood functions; ECECD launched July 1, 2020 following a defined transition period.	Established by HB 3073 (2021) as a new agency for early learning and child care; DELIC became operational July 1, 2023 after a two-year planning and disentanglement process.
Program Scope and Consolidation Choices	Brings together the Early Childhood Block Grant (PFA, PFAE, Prevention Initiative), the Child Care Assistance Program, child care licensing, Early Intervention, and major home visiting programs; ECSE (619), K-12, Medicaid, and child welfare remain in legacy agencies.	Consolidates child care assistance (CCCAP), state preschool folded into universal preschool (UPK), licensing, early childhood mental health, and selected family support programs; preschool special education, Medicaid, and child welfare remain outside CDEC.	Consolidates child care subsidies, licensing, and early education and care grant programs; Early Intervention, preschool special education, broader health/Medicaid, and residential/placement licensing remain outside EEC.	Houses child care assistance, NM PreK (school- and community-based), home visiting, Early Intervention, and related prenatal-to-three supports; preschool special education, Medicaid, and child welfare remain in other departments.	Brings together former Early Learning Division programs (Preschool Promise, hubs, home visiting initiatives), child care licensing and background checks, and the Employment Related Day Care (ERDC) subsidy program; health/Medicaid and child welfare remain with other agencies.
Governance and Leadership Structure	Standalone, cabinet-level department headed by a director/secretary, with transition structures (working groups, councils) created by statute and executive action to guide program transfers and design.	Cabinet-level department with a statutory transition working group and advisory group charged with recommending program transfers and phasing.	Executive department with a Board of Early Education and Care and a statutorily created Early Education and Care Council that led transition planning.	Cabinet-level department with a secretary and supporting structures such as regional equity councils and local coalitions to guide implementation.	Executive agency headed by a director, building on prior Early Learning Division governance structures and using external consulting support during transition.
Budget and Administrative Integration	Integrates multiple funding streams and administrative functions from education, human services, and child welfare agencies into a single department budget and administrative structure over several phases.	Combines preschool, subsidy, licensing, and family support funding previously split across departments into a single departmental budget and administrative apparatus.	Unifies child care subsidy, licensing, and early education appropriations into EEC while leaving health and K-12 funding in their respective agencies.	Coordinates previously separate early childhood appropriations under one department, augmented by an early childhood trust fund and associated governance structures.	Integrates Early Learning Division and ERDC resources into a single agency budget, requiring substantial disentanglement of shared systems and staff from ODHS.
Transition Timelines and Sequencing	Uses a multi-year, phased transition (planning, partial transfer, full operationalization) with programs and staff moving in stages rather than all at once.	Used roughly one year between authorizing statute and operational launch, with explicit statutory authority for phased transfers and detailed transition planning.	Used a planning year between authorizing legislation and operational start, with a council charged to recommend which programs move and how.	Used a staged transition, launching ECECD in 2020 and layering in additional funding and structures (e.g., equity councils, coalitions) over subsequent years.	Used roughly two years of detailed mapping and planning, particularly for ERDC, before full transfer and launch in 2023.
Documented Early Implementation Issues	Illinois is early in its transition; anticipated issues mirror those in peer states: IT and data integration, payment stability, workforce and culture integration, and boundary management with K-12, health, and child welfare.	Experienced strain from combining structural change with universal preschool rollout, including rate-setting, eligibility platform issues, and local coordination challenges.	Encountered ongoing boundary issues at EI/ECSE transitions and persistent funding and workforce constraints despite improved alignment of subsidy, licensing, and quality systems.	Faced COVID-19 disruptions, rapid expansions in child care assistance, and the need to simultaneously stand up new governance, systems, and programs.	Managed technically complex ERDC disentanglement, early payment delays, and internal capacity and culture concerns during and after launch.

Sources: Illinois Department of Early Childhood, Transition FAQs; Civic Federation, Illinois' New Department of Early Childhood, Novembr 2025; Colorado General Assembly, HB21-1304 Early Childhood System, 2021; Colorado Department of Early Childhood; New Mexico General Assembly, SB22, 2019; New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, Strategic Plan 2022-2027; New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department; Massachusetts General Assembly, Chapter 205 of the Acts of 2004; State of Massachusetts FY2005 Budget; Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 15D; Oregon General Assembly, HB3021, 2021; Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care.

IMPORTANT DIFFERENCES ACROSS STATES

While Colorado, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Oregon provide useful precedents for Illinois, important differences remain in how each state structures early childhood programs, budgets, and governance authority. These differences mean the peer states should be understood as illustrative examples rather than direct templates.

First, states vary significantly in program scope. Although all four peer states consolidated child care assistance, licensing, and early learning programs, the specific mix of programs differs. For example, New Mexico's department includes home visiting and several prenatal-to-three programs, while Massachusetts' department focuses more heavily on child care subsidies and licensing. Illinois' Department of Early Childhood will have its own distinct program mix based on existing state structures, focusing on consolidating core early childhood education and care functions while maintaining strong connects to existing agencies.

Second, funding structures differ substantially across states. Some states have created dedicated revenue sources or trust funds for early childhood programs, most notably New Mexico's Early Childhood Trust Fund, while others rely primarily on annual appropriations or federal funding streams. Because states categorize and report spending differently, cross-state funding comparisons are only approximate and should be interpreted cautiously.

Third, states differ in institutional history and policy timing. Massachusetts created its early childhood department in 2005, while Colorado, New Mexico, and Oregon created theirs more recently. The policy environments in which these reforms occurred, including economic conditions, federal funding availability, and broader early childhood policy initiatives, also differ.

Finally, the transition timelines and implementation strategies varied across states. Some states used longer planning periods or external consultants to map program transfers and IT systems, while others relied more heavily on internal planning processes. These differences shape how implementation challenges emerged and how states responded to them.

What Happened Across All States

- Governance reform clarified leadership but did not resolve funding or workforce challenges
 - Transitions required multiple years
 - Similar operational challenges emerged
 - Cross-agency coordination remained necessary
 - Progress depended on administrative capacity, funding, and system alignment
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For these reasons, the peer states should be understood less as templates and more as illustrations of common governance approaches, implementation challenges, and policy design choices that Illinois may encounter during the transition to IDEC.

STATE PROFILES

Colorado – Department of Early Childhood (CDEC)

Authorizing Statute and Launch

The department was created in 2021 with a one-year transition period and the department launched in 2022.

HB21-1304 “Early Childhood System” created the Department of Early Childhood and directed a formal transition planning process.²² CDEC was created to provide early childhood opportunities, coordinate the availability of early childhood programs statewide, establish state–community partnerships for a mixed-delivery system, prioritize input of parents, providers, and communities, prioritize equitable delivery of resources, and “unify the administration of early childhood programs and services.”²³

From 2021–2022, a transition working group and advisory group were charged with developing a comprehensive plan to coordinate the transfer programs from the Departments of Education, Human Services, and Public Health and Environment, with explicit authority to consider phased transitions to maintain alignment with services beyond early childhood.²⁴ CDEC formally launched as the state’s early childhood department on July 1, 2022.²⁵

Programs Brought Under CDEC

- Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP);
- The Colorado Preschool Program and related early learning programs, now administered through the Universal Preschool (UPK) system;
- Early Intervention services for infants and toddlers (IDEA Part C);
- Child care licensing and related regulatory functions;
- Early Childhood Councils and community coordination supports; and
- Early childhood mental health consultation, home visiting programs, and other family support initiatives.²⁶

Programs that did not Move into CDEC

- Preschool special education (IDEA Part B-619), which remains within the K–12 education system;
- Medicaid and broader health programs (including Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment [EPSDT], maternal and child health, and other public health services); and

²² Colorado General Assembly, *HB21-1304*.

²³ Colorado Department of Early Childhood, *About the Colorado Department of Early Childhood*.

²⁴ Early Milestones Colorado, *HB21-1304 Engagement*, 2022.

²⁵ Colorado Department of Early Childhood, *Colorado Department of Early Childhood Begins Supporting Children, Families and Early Childhood Professionals*, 2022.

²⁶ Colorado Department of Early Childhood, *About the Colorado Department of Early Childhood*.

- Child welfare and foster care programs administered through human services agencies.²⁷

Noted Early Implementation Issues

Launching CDEC at the same time as statewide universal preschool (UPK) created pressure on rate-setting, the new UPK enrollment platform, and local mixed-delivery coordination.²⁸ Colorado has continued to address operational issues related to payment systems, IT platforms, and coordination with K-12 and health systems.²⁹

Massachusetts – Department of Early Education and Care (EEC)

Authorizing Statute and Launch

EEC was created in 2004, had a one-year transition period, and became fully operation in 2005.

Chapter 15D of the Massachusetts General Laws created by Chapter 205 of the Acts of 2004 enacted “An Act Establishing the Department of Early Education and Care.”³⁰ The legislation stated that EEC “shall serve as the lead agency for the administration of all public and private early education and care programs and services,”³¹ be the state agency for federal early education and care requirements, and “facilitate the coordination of federal, state, and local policies concerning early education and care.”³²

The FY2005 state budget³³ established an Early Education and Care Council to develop a transition plan and recommend program transfers from the Department of Education, Office of Child Care Services, and Department of Public Health, and with developing a comprehensive transition plan.³⁴ The department became operational under new Chapter 15D of the General Laws on July 1, 2005.

Programs Brought into EEC

- State-administered child care subsidy programs, including those funded through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF);
- Licensing and regulation of non-residential early education and care programs (center-based and family child care);
- State-funded early education and care programs and grants;

²⁷ Colorado Legislative Council, [Fiscal Note of HB21-1304](#), 2021.

²⁸ Colorado Department of Early Childhood, [CDEC Independent Evaluation](#), 2023.

²⁹ Colorado Department of Early Childhood, [Colorado Early Childhood Investment](#), 2023.

³⁰ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, [Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 15D](#), 2004.

³¹ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Acts of 2004, Chapter 205.

³² Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Acts of 2004, Chapter 205.

³³ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, [Report of the Massachusetts Early Education and Care Council](#), 2004.

³⁴ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, [Report of the Massachusetts Early Education and Care Council](#).

- Early childhood quality improvement systems and program standards (including QRIS); and
- Workforce development and professional development supports for the early childhood workforce.³⁵

Programs that did not Move Under EEC

- Early Intervention (IDEA Part C), which remained within the Department of Public Health;
- K–12 special education, including early childhood special education, which remained within the state education system; and
- Residential and placement licensing for child welfare settings, which remained with human services and child welfare agencies.³⁶

Noted Early Implementation Issues

EEC improved alignment of subsidy, licensing, and quality systems, but coordination challenges remained at program boundaries with programs that remained in other agencies and workforce shortages and funding pressures continued to affect the sector.

New Mexico – Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD)

Authorizing Statute and Launch

New Mexico’s ECECD was established in 2019 and became fully operation in 2020 after a one-year transition period.

Legislation establishing ECECD was signed in March 2019, consolidating most early childhood services into a single department.³⁷ ECECD was charged with “optimizing the health, development, education, and well-being of babies, toddlers, and preschoolers through a family-driven, equitable, community-based system of high-quality prenatal and early childhood programs and services.”³⁸ ECECD’s own description emphasizes creating “a more cohesive, equitable, and effective early childhood system,” coordinating a continuum of programs prenatal to five, and ensuring access to services in all parts of the state.³⁹

ECECD launched following a defined transition period, then layered in stable funding (e.g., early childhood trust), expanded child care assistance, and built governance structures such as regional equity councils and local early childhood coalitions.⁴⁰ On July 1, 2020, ECECD formally launched as a cabinet-level department. In subsequent years, the state layered in stable

³⁵ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *Acts of 2004, Chapter 205*.

³⁶ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *Acts of 2004, Chapter 205*.

³⁷ New Mexico Legislature, *SB22 Early Childhood Education and Care Department Act*.

³⁸ New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, *Strategic Plan 2022–2027*.

³⁹ New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, *Strategic Plan 2022–2027*.

⁴⁰ New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, *Strategic Plan 2022–2027*.

funding (e.g., an early childhood trust), expanded child care assistance, and built out governance structures such as regional equity councils and local coalitions, as described in the department's 2022–2027 strategic plan.⁴¹

Programs Brought into ECECD

- Child Care Assistance and related early care and education supports;
- New Mexico PreK (both school- and community-based);
- Early Intervention services (IDEA Part C) and coordination with preschool special education programs;
- Home visiting programs and other prenatal-to-three family supports;
- Early childhood mental health consultation programs;
- The Head Start State Collaboration Office; and
- Coordination with nutrition programs serving early childhood settings (such as CACFP).⁴²

Programs that did not Move Under ECECD

- Early childhood special education (IDEA Part B-619), which remains within the K–12 special education system administered through the Public Education Department and local school districts; and
- Medicaid and broader health programs (including maternal and child health, perinatal health, and behavioral health services), as well as child welfare programs administered through the Children, Youth and Families Department.⁴³

Noted Early Implementation Issues

The department launched just before COVID-19 and managed both crisis response and structural reform. Rapid expansions in child care assistance and program scope created operational strain even as consolidation was intended to improve coordination compared with the previously fragmented system.⁴⁴

Oregon – Department of Early Learning and Care (DELIC)

Authorizing Statute and Launch

Oregon authorized DELIC in 2021 and, after a two-year transition period, the department launched in 2023.

In 2021, Oregon enacted House Bill 3073,⁴⁵ establishing DELIC as a new early learning agency and setting a multi-year implementation schedule. HB 3073 is characterized as “the next

⁴¹ New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, [Strategic Plan 2022–2027](#), 2022.

⁴² New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, [Strategic Plan 2022–2027](#).

⁴³ New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, [Strategic Plan 2022–2027](#).

⁴⁴ New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, [Strategic Plan 2022–2027](#).

⁴⁵ Oregon Legislative Assembly, [HB 3073](#).

evolution in early learning and child care,” consolidating programs so families and providers “have one state agency dedicated to ensuring high-quality, family-centered and culturally appropriate early learning and care opportunities.”⁴⁶

Early Learning Division (ELD) and the Department of Human Services (ODHS) hired a consulting firm (Alvarez & Marsal) to map out how deeply Employment Related Day Care (ERDC) was embedded in ODHS, plan disentanglement, and design new processes, systems, policies, and procedures for DELC.⁴⁷ DELC became Oregon’s official agency for early learning and child care policy and program administration on July 1, 2023.

Programs Brought into DELC

- Programs previously administered by the Early Learning Division of the Oregon Department of Education, including Oregon Prenatal to Kindergarten, Preschool Promise, Healthy Families Oregon, Relief Nurseries, Early Learning Hubs, and related home visiting and early learning initiatives;
- The Spark Quality Rating and Improvement System and related quality improvement initiatives;
- Child care licensing functions and the Central Background Registry; and
- The Employment Related Day Care (ERDC) child care subsidy program, including the Direct Pay Unit and associated ERDC staff.⁴⁸

Programs that did not Move Under DELC

- Early Intervention (IDEA Part C) and early childhood special education (IDEA Part B-619), which remain within the K-12 education system administered through the Oregon Department of Education;
- Medicaid, public health, and maternal and child health programs administered by the Oregon Health Authority; and
- Child welfare and broader human services programs administered by the Oregon Department of Human Services.⁴⁹

Noted Early Implementation Issues

The ERDC transfer was technically complex⁵⁰ and, despite planning, Oregon experienced early operational challenges, including payment delays and capacity constraints during the

⁴⁶ Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care, [About Us](#).

⁴⁷ Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care, [House Bill 3073 Department of Early Learning and Care Report to the Interim Committees of the Legislative Assembly](#), 2022.

⁴⁸ Oregon Legislative Assembly, [HB 3073](#).

⁴⁹ Oregon Legislative Assembly, [HB 3073](#).

⁵⁰ Oregon Secretary of State, [Department of Early Learning and Care Agency Transition Documentation](#).

transition.⁵¹ DELC is framed as the start of a longer-term modernization effort rather than a completed reform.⁵²

WHAT THESE EARLY CHILDHOOD DEPARTMENTS ARE DESIGNED TO DO

These early childhood departments are designed first and foremost to solve problems of fragmentation and to create a clearer, more accountable “home” for early childhood policy and administration. Across Colorado, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Oregon, enabling statutes and agency materials describe a common set of core purposes: bringing major early childhood programs under one roof, elevating early childhood to cabinet-level attention, and aligning policies that affect families, providers, and the workforce.⁵³ In practical terms, this means a single department is expected to manage and coordinate child care assistance, state preschool or early learning programs, licensing and quality functions, and selected prenatal-to-three services, rather than leaving those functions scattered across multiple agencies.

Consolidation is intended to address several recurring governance challenges that states identified before creating these departments. These include:

- **Fragmented governance**, where no single entity was responsible for early childhood as a system;
- **Administrative complexity** for families and providers, with multiple “doors,” forms, and eligibility pathways;
- **Misaligned policy levers**, such as subsidy rates and quality standards set in different places without coordination; and
- **Disconnected data systems** that made cross-program participation difficult to track.⁵⁴

By unifying programs and oversight, the new departments are expected to simplify access, modernize licensing and quality systems, and build more integrated data infrastructures.⁵⁵

At the same time, the peer states’ own materials and early experience make clear what consolidation alone does not do. Creating a new department does not by itself address broader issues such as program funding levels, workforce compensation, or family economic conditions.⁵⁶ Governance reform can create a better platform for addressing these issues by

⁵¹ Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care, [Budget Narrative / Agency and Program Overviews, 2025–27 ARB](#).

⁵² Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care, [About Us](#).

⁵³ Center for American Progress, [States Can Improve Early Childhood Outcomes by Consolidating Systems](#), 2025.

⁵⁴ New America, [Toolkit for Using Policy to Enable Effective and Supportive Transitions for Children, Families, and Educators](#), 2022.

⁵⁵ Civic Federation, [Illinois’ New Department of Early Childhood](#), 2025.

⁵⁶ Bipartisan Policy Center, [Integrated Efficient Early Care and Education Systems: Revisiting A State-by-State Analysis](#).

clarifying responsibility, improving data, and aligning policy tools, but it does not generate new dollars or automatically fix structural workforce and equity challenges.⁵⁷

Finally, each department frames its role in system-building terms rather than as a narrow administrative reorganization. Colorado’s CDEC highlights unifying early childhood opportunities and mixed-delivery preschool;⁵⁸ Massachusetts’ EEC positions itself as the lead agency for early education and care policy and coordination;⁵⁹ New Mexico’s ECECD emphasizes building a cohesive, equitable prenatal-to-five system;⁶⁰ and Oregon’s DELC is described as the “next evolution” in early learning and child care, offering a single agency

dedicated to high-quality, family-centered early learning and care opportunities.⁶¹ Taken together, these descriptions suggest that the departments are intended to function as system stewards and integrators, rather than as administrative restructurings that shift program placement without fundamentally improving how the system operates.

What Consolidation Is Intended to Achieve

- Provide a single point of accountability
 - Reduce fragmentation
 - Simplify system navigation
 - Align policy leavers
 - Support the development of integrated data and IT systems
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HOW STATES IMPLEMENTED THE TRANSITION

Transitions to New Departments

While authorizing statutes established new early childhood departments, the practical work of implementation required states to address complex operational challenges, including staffing transfers, procurement and contracting challenges, eligibility alignment, and the integration of multiple information and data systems. To accomplish this, each state used phased, multi-year transition timelines rather than immediate program transfers and transition planning relied on formal councils or working groups. Several states allowed for approximately one year between authorizing legislation and operational launch, while Oregon allowed for roughly two years of planning and transition work.

⁵⁷ Bipartisan Policy Center, *Integrated Efficient Early Care and Education Systems: Revisiting A State-by-State Analysis*.

⁵⁸ Colorado Department of Early Childhood; Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care; New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department; Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care. Agency mission statements and program descriptions, 2004–2024.

⁵⁹ Colorado Department of Early Childhood; Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care; New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department; Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care. Agency mission statements and program descriptions, 2004–2024.

⁶⁰ Colorado Department of Early Childhood; Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care; New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department; Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care. Agency mission statements and program descriptions, 2004–2024.

⁶¹ Colorado Department of Early Childhood; Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care; New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department; Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care. Agency mission statements and program descriptions, 2004–2024.

In Colorado, a transition working group and advisory group were charged with developing a comprehensive plan to coordinate and transfer programs from the Departments of Education, Human Services, and Public Health and Environment, with explicit authority to consider phased transitions to maintain alignment with services beyond early childhood.⁶²

In Massachusetts, the FY05 budget created an Early Education and Care Council charged with developing a comprehensive transition plan, including recommending which programs to transfer from the Department of Education, Office of Child Care Services (OCCS), and Department of Public Health.⁶³

In Oregon, ELD and the Department of Human Services (ODHS) hired a consulting firm (Alvarez & Marsal) to assess how deeply ERDC functions were embedded in ODHS, plan program disentanglement, and support the design of new processes and administrative systems for DELC.⁶⁴

Common Implementation Challenges

Across Colorado, New Mexico, Massachusetts, and Oregon, several recurring implementation challenges emerged across the states:

Where Transitions Most Often Faced Challenges

- Untangling programs, staff, and systems
 - Maintaining stable payment, eligibility, and service delivery
 - Managing boundaries with programs outside the departments
 - Integrating staff, roles, and organizational culture
 - Addressing funding gaps and funding sources
 - Moving from structural changes to measurable outcomes
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Untangling deeply embedded processes, staff, and IT from legacy agencies

In each state, major early childhood functions such as child care subsidy, licensing, and early learning programs were embedded within larger departments prior to consolidation. Untangling those functions meant separating shared staff roles, redoing interagency memoranda of understanding (MOUs), and rebuilding or reconfiguring shared business processes.⁶⁵ A clear example of this is Oregon's ERDC move. The state needed a detailed mapping exercise to understand how deeply ERDC functions were woven into ODHS operations before it could stand up DELC.⁶⁶ Even with that planning, Oregon experienced early operational challenges, including payment delays as legacy and new systems interacted.⁶⁷

⁶² Colorado Department of Early Childhood, *CDEC Transition Plan*.

⁶³ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *Report of the Massachusetts Early Education and Care Council*.

⁶⁴ Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care, *Agency Transition Documentation*, 2022.

⁶⁵ New America, *Lost in the Labyrinth: Helping Parents Navigate Early Care and Education Programs*, 2023.

⁶⁶ Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care, *House Bill 3073 Department of Early Learning and Care Report to the Interim Committees of the Legislative Assembly*.

⁶⁷ Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care, *Birth Through Five Literacy Plan*.

Additionally, states reported that key early childhood programs often operated on multiple legacy IT systems that were not fully integrated. Colorado⁶⁸ and New Mexico⁶⁹ have undertaken efforts to build or upgrade integrated early childhood data and enrollment systems; implementation was slower and more complex than anticipated, especially when introduced at the same time as major policy changes (e.g., universal preschool, new child care rules). Massachusetts' efforts to align QRIS, licensing, and subsidy systems similarly illustrated challenges associated with aligning quality, licensing, and subsidy data across programs.⁷⁰

Keeping payments, eligibility, and service delivery stable while changing rules and structures

When the agency responsible for paying providers and determining eligibility moves, changes to payment systems or administrative processes can result in temporary payment delays or processing backlogs, temporary billing confusion, or inconsistent eligibility decisions. States tried to keep "front-door" experiences stable at launch (same phone numbers, forms, payment cycles), but still saw pockets of disruption as new agencies learned old systems and processes.

Colorado combined a major structural change (creating CDEC) with a major policy change (free statewide universal preschool). This created additional implementation pressure because rate setting, a new enrollment platform, and mixed-delivery coordination were introduced simultaneously.⁷¹ New Mexico launched ECECD just before COVID-19 and simultaneously expanded child care assistance dramatically. The department had to manage both crisis response and structural reform, which placed additional operational demands on staff and administrative systems.⁷²

Managing cross-agency coordination for programs outside the new department

Programs left outside the new department still need tight coordination. Early Intervention (IDEA Part C) is administered by the early childhood departments in Colorado and New Mexico, while Massachusetts and Oregon continue to house the program in their health and education systems, respectively. In Massachusetts, even with EEC, transitions from EI to preschool and preschool to kindergarten remained friction points.⁷³ Colorado,⁷⁴ New Mexico,⁷⁵ and Oregon⁷⁶

⁶⁸ Colorado Department of Early Childhood, "Colorado Department of Early Childhood Releases Independent Evaluation Report."

⁶⁹ Harvard Graduate School of Education, Zaentz Early Education Initiative, "[New Mexico Early Childhood Integrated Data System](#)."

⁷⁰ Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy, "[A Case Study of the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, 2008](#)."

⁷¹ Early Milestones Colorado, "[Supporting Families Through Mixed Delivery in Colorado's UPK Program](#)", 2023.

⁷² New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, "[Universal Child Care Brief](#)."

⁷³ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "[Technical Assistance Advisory SPED 2019-1](#)", 2019.

⁷⁴ Colorado Department of Early Childhood, *House Bill 21-1304*.

⁷⁵ New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, "[Local Early Childhood Coalitions](#)."

⁷⁶ Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care, "[Federal Changes and State Early Learning Policy Updates](#)."

all have elements of health, K-12 education, or child welfare outside their early childhood agencies, and coordination challenges across agency boundaries persisted.

Additionally, questions sometimes emerged about the division of responsibilities between the new department and legacy agencies. When a new department appears, the roles of remaining agencies are not always immediately clear. For example: Who leads on inclusion for children with disabilities (Early Care and Education agency vs. State Education Agency vs. health agency)? Who “owns” family engagement strategy statewide? Without formalized cross-agency structures (joint councils, MOUs, shared outcome frameworks), duplication and gaps re-emerge.

Integrating workforces and cultures under time and political pressure

Staff came from different agencies, bargaining units, cultures, and norms. Integrating them into a unified mission and structure proved challenging. Misaligned expectations, unclear career paths, and inconsistent management practices were reported in several states during the transition period.⁷⁷

There were also capacity mismatches. Several states reported needing additional specialized capacity beyond what was initially planned, particularly in IT and data systems, change management and provider-facing technical assistance, and legal/policy analysis to reconcile differing program rules and funding requirements.⁷⁸

Avoiding funding cliffs and recognizing that “doing it right” costs more than a simple reorganization

New Mexico⁷⁹ and Colorado⁸⁰ relied heavily on temporary federal pandemic relief funding, including child care stabilization grants, to fund large expansions in child care affordability and provider stabilization. They subsequently faced pressure to replace or backfill those funds as temporary relief expired to avoid reversals. Massachusetts⁸¹ and Oregon⁸² used, or had to replace, federal dollars for quality grants and expansion initiatives, facing similar “cliff” dynamics once relief or grant cycles ended.

States reported that implementing governance reforms required investments in administrative systems, workforce supports, and program infrastructure. Governance reform created the opportunity to invest, but did not itself generate the money.

Moving from structural metrics to meaningful child and family outcome measures

⁷⁷ Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, *2026–2030 Strategic Action Plan*.

⁷⁸ Colorado Department of Early Childhood, *“Colorado Department of Early Childhood Releases Independent Evaluation Report.”*

⁷⁹ Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care, *Update on the Progress of HB 3073 Implementation*, September 30, 2022.

⁸⁰ Bipartisan Policy Center, *State Governance of Early Childhood Systems*, 2023.

⁸¹ The Pew Charitable Trusts, *“What Happens When States No Longer Have Federal Pandemic Child Care Dollars,”* March 21, 2024.

⁸² Child Care Aware of America, *State Session Round Up: Summer 2025*; Oregon Legislative Fiscal Office, *2025–27 Budget Review: Department of Early Learning and Care*.

In the beginning of transition, early reporting frequently focused on structural change related metrics (how many programs transferred, how many staff moved, how many systems integrated) far more than outcomes for children and families. Over time, states have increasingly emphasized child and family outcomes such as access, affordability, developmental outcomes, and kindergarten readiness.

Program-specific evaluations (e.g., QRIS, PreK, home visiting) often remained organized through separate contracts or program units. Agencies had to retrofit a system-level evaluation framework on top of those pieces.

CROSS-STATE PATTERNS AND OBSERVATIONS

Several patterns emerged across the four states:

Governance. Governance reform was seen as a means to better access, equity, and quality, not an end in itself. When consolidation was treated primarily as an organizational reform rather than a platform for system improvement, progress on service delivery could slow. All four states created a single, cabinet-level early childhood agency to consolidate programs previously split across education, human services, and other departments. In each state, policymakers cited fragmented governance, multiple access points for families, misaligned funding streams, and limited system-level accountability as key motivations for reform. The new departments were framed as the way to provide a clear home and champion for early childhood, unify or coordinate policy across child care subsidies, preschool, and related services, and reduce duplication and administrative burden for providers and families.

Scope. Each of the four states made similar program decisions. moving child care subsidies, state-funded preschool and early learning programs, licensing, and select family support/home visiting into the new departments. Meanwhile, early childhood special education, health/Medicaid programs, Early Intervention, and child welfare may not have moved.

Process. The states that emphasized extensive planning leaned heavily into front-loaded planning and realistic phasing. Each state passed enabling legislation, then completed 1-2 years of transition work before full operational launch. Common features of the transition process include statutory or executive transition councils/working groups to recommend which programs move and how, detailed mapping of staff, funding streams, and IT systems before transfers, and phased program movement rather than all at once, often with contingency language allowing phased implementation if the initial timeline proved too ambitious.

Pain points. The common and biggest challenges states faced were IT and data integration, payment, eligibility, and provider stability, cross-agency boundaries, workforce and culture inside the new agency, funding cliffs and sustainability, and measuring impact beyond structure.

Success factors. Departments have emphasized investments, systems upgrades, and governance mechanisms. Several approaches that the states took include using consolidation to justify specific visible investments, hard-wiring funding where possible, making integrated data a core deliverable, formalizing cross-agency governance, and building regional/local structures that center families and equity.

For Illinois, these patterns are useful as a ready-made checklist of where IDEC is most likely to face implementation challenges, and where proactive design and investment in governance, coordination, and system capacity can lead to a genuinely stronger early childhood system.

Why Peer States Are Not Direct Templates

- Program scope varies across states
 - Funding structures and revenue sources differ
 - institutional history and timing of reforms are not uniform
 - Transition timelines and implementation strategies vary
 - State experiences should be understood as illustrative, not prescriptive
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IMPLICATIONS FOR ILLINOIS

Drawing on the experiences of Colorado, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Oregon, several considerations are particularly important for Illinois as it implements the Department of Early Childhood (IDEC). These states undertook similar governance reforms,⁸³ and their experience indicates that creating a standalone department can clarify leadership and coordination for early childhood policy, but it does not eliminate the need for sustained cross-agency collaboration. Illinois will continue to rely on coordination with agencies such as the Illinois State Board of Education, the Department of Healthcare and Family Services, and the Department of Children and Family Services for programs that remain outside IDEC.

Peer states also demonstrate that the practical work of consolidation occurs over multiple years. Colorado, New Mexico, Massachusetts, and Oregon each used transition periods to plan the transfer of staff, programs, and administrative systems before their new departments became fully operational. During these transitions, states reported operational challenges such

What This Means for Illinois

- Consolidation can improve coordination but does not eliminate the need for cross-agency collaboration
 - Implementation will occur over multiple years, not a single point in time
 - Early Challenges are likely to center on operations, staffing, and system alignment
 - Long-term outcomes will depend on funding, policy decisions, and administrative capacity
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as aligning eligibility rules across programs, integrating information systems, and maintaining consistent payment and licensing processes. These experiences suggest that implementation sequencing and administrative capacity are important factors during the early years of a new department.

⁸³ Authorizing statutes and agency materials for the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (HB21-1304), Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (Chapter 205 of the Acts of 2004), New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department (2019 legislation), and Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care (HB3073).

Finally, the peer states illustrate that governance reform alone does not resolve broader challenges in early childhood systems. Although the new departments were intended to reduce fragmentation and strengthen coordination, issues such as workforce shortages, funding pressures, and uneven access to services continued to require policy attention after consolidation. As Illinois implements IDEC, the experiences of these states suggest that the creation of a dedicated department can provide a clearer administrative structure for early childhood programs, but long-term improvements in access, quality, and outcomes depend on sustained policy, funding, and programmatic decisions beyond the organizational transition itself.

WHAT ILLINOIS CAN MONITOR DURING ITS TRANSITION

Illinois can use the experiences of consolidation in the other four states to inform what indicators to monitor closely during IDEC's own transition. Based on IDEC's transition phases and workgroup structure, implementation challenges and system priorities can be organized into the following domains:

- Access and equity,
- Operations and payments,
- Workforce capacity,
- Cross-agency coordination,
- Funding stability,
- Data systems, and
- Child and family outcomes.

The indicators identified in this section were selected based on common implementation challenges and system priorities observed during early childhood agency transitions in the other states, as well as IDEC's planned transition phases and workgroup structure. Together, these measures are intended to reflect areas where governance changes are most likely to affect access, operations, and outcomes during the transition period.

Access, Equity, and Family Experience

Periods of administrative transition can create access risks, including losing access to services, for families if systems, responsibilities, or processes are unclear. Experience in the other states suggest that consolidation alone did not automatically produce increased participation in child care and preschool, and, in some cases, families in certain regions and demographic groups continued to struggle to access services.

Monitoring access, equity, and family experience during IDEC's transition can help identify whether governance changes are improving system navigation or inadvertently disrupting services or reinforcing disparities.

Indicators to monitor include:

- **Application and navigation:** time and steps required to apply for Early Intervention (EI), Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), and Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) programs; use of cross-program referrals (“no wrong door”).⁸⁴
- **Access patterns:** enrollment and waitlists by income, race/ethnicity, language, disability status, and geography.⁸⁵
- **Family experience:** survey-based measures of clarity, responsiveness, and perceived administrative burden.⁸⁶

These indicators mirror measures used in the other states to assess whether consolidation improved access and equity in practice, rather than simply reorganizing administrative structures. Where indicators stagnate, other states paired outreach with targeted policy adjustments, including changes to eligibility rules,⁸⁷ copay structures, and geographically focused investments.⁸⁸

Operational Stability: Payments, Eligibility, and Licensing

Across peer states, the most acute implementation challenges during early childhood agency transitions involved system and payment disruptions, even where transitions were carefully planned. States experienced late provider payments, processing backlogs, or confusion following changes to agencies or information systems.

During IDEC's transition, Illinois can monitor a set of operational indicators to identify whether similar disruptions are emerging:

- **Provider payments:** on-time payment rates for providers and the frequency and duration of payment errors or delays.⁸⁹
- **Eligibility and continuity:** time from initial referral or application to service start and the number and rate of breaks in services.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *Report of the Massachusetts Early Education and Care Council*, December 16, 2004; Colorado Department of Early Childhood, “Colorado Department of Early Childhood Releases Independent Evaluation Report.”

⁸⁵ New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, *Annual Outcomes Report*, April 2024.

⁸⁶ Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy, *A Case Study of the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care; New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, Family Engagement and Satisfaction Survey Findings*, July 2024.

⁸⁷ New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, *Annual Outcomes Report*, April 2024.

⁸⁸ Oregon Legislative Fiscal Office, *2025–27 Budget Review: Department of Early Learning and Care*.

⁸⁹ Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care, “Update on the Progress of HB 3073 Implementation” September 30, 2022.

⁹⁰ University of New Mexico Center for Child and Family Policy, *Trends After Policy Change in New Mexico's Child Care Assistance Program*.

- **Licensing and safety:** licensing and complaint processing, response times, and backlog levels.⁹¹

Deterioration in any of these indicators relative to pre-IDEC baselines may signal the need to pause or re-sequence elements of the transition. In other states, responses to such disruptions focused on correcting system issues⁹² and simplifying underlying rules and processes, rather than simply expanding staffing without changing workflows.⁹³

Workforce and Internal Capacity

Merging staff, responsibilities, and organizational cultures was a common stress point during early childhood agency transitions among the peer states. Even where structural consolidation, the formal alignment of programs and administrative functions within a single agency, was clear, states reported staffing strain, turnover, and difficulty sustaining program quality during the transition period.

During IDEC's transition, Illinois can monitor workforce and internal capacity indicators to assess whether the new department has sufficient staffing stability (vacancies and turnover) and organizational cohesion to manage change:

- **Staffing and turnover:** vacancy and turnover rates in key IDEC functions; time required to fill critical positions.⁹⁴
- **Staff-reported climate:** conducting internal surveys measuring clarity of roles, workload expectations, training adequacy, and organizational culture as staff move from legacy agencies.⁹⁵
- **Provider-facing support:** responsiveness of help desks and technical assistance lines; volume of provider inquiries related to new systems or rules and average resolution time.⁹⁶

Weakening trends in staffing stability, internal climate, or provider support metrics relative to baseline conditions may signal that transition tasks are outpacing organizational capacity. In peer states, persistent workforce or quality challenges were addressed not only through communication or training, but through structural adjustments such as wage investments,

⁹¹ Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, "Promoting High Quality Early Education and Care"; Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care, "Update on the Progress of HB 3073 Implementation" September 30, 2022.

⁹² Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care, "Update on the Progress of HB 3073 Implementation" September 30, 2022; Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab, *Evaluation of Colorado's Department of Early Childhood*.

⁹³ Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, "Promoting High Quality Early Education and Care"; Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab, *Evaluation of Colorado's Department of Early Childhood*; and University of New Mexico Center for Child and Family Policy, *Trends After Policy Change in New Mexico's Child Care Assistance Program*.

⁹⁴ Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care, "Update on the Progress of HB 3073 Implementation" September 30, 2022.

⁹⁵ Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care, "Update on the Progress of HB 3073 Implementation," September 30, 2022.

⁹⁶ New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, *Annual Outcomes Report*, April 2024.

scholarship supports,⁹⁷ substitute coverage strategies, and modifications to quality systems informed by validation findings.⁹⁸

Cross-Agency Coordination

In all peer states, certain early childhood-related functions remained outside the new department, requiring sustained cross-agency coordination. Where boundaries between agencies were not actively managed, states experienced persistent friction at transition points, particularly between Early Intervention and special education, and between early childhood programs and child welfare or health systems.

Because Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE), K-12 education, health services, and child welfare will remain outside IDEC, Illinois can monitor how effectively interagency boundaries are functioning:

- **EI-ECSE transitions:** compliance with required transition indicators, including timely transition conferences, referrals, and individualized education program (IEP) development; family-reported smoothness of transitions from EI to ECSE.⁹⁹
- **Shared populations:** number and share of children in child welfare, experiencing homeless, or identified with disabilities who are successfully linked to EI, CCAP, and ECBG programs.¹⁰⁰
- **Governance mechanisms:** frequency and attendance of cross-agency meetings; tracking of joint decisions and follow-through on shared work plans.¹⁰¹

Persistent challenges in cross-system transitions or linkage rates may indicate the need to strengthen coordination mechanisms. In peer states, responses to boundary-related issues focused on deepening cross-agency governance structures,¹⁰² clarifying shared accountability, and developing joint planning frameworks, rather than reversing consolidation decisions.¹⁰³

Funding Stability and Use of Dollars

⁹⁷ University of New Mexico Center for Child and Family Policy, *Trends After Policy Change in New Mexico's Child Care Assistance Program*; and Early Milestones Colorado, *Early Childhood Workforce Policy and Investments*.

⁹⁸ Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, *"Promoting High Quality Early Education and Care"*; and Colorado Department of Early Childhood, *Quality Initiatives and Workforce Supports*.

⁹⁹ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *Report of the Massachusetts Early Education and Care Council*, December 16, 2004.

¹⁰⁰ New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, *Annual Outcomes Report*, April 2024.

¹⁰¹ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *Report of the Massachusetts Early Education and Care Council*, December 16, 2004.

¹⁰² Colorado Department of Early Childhood, *Colorado Early Childhood Strategic Plan*; and Prenatal-to-Three Policy Impact Center, *New Mexico Early Childhood Governance Case Study*.

¹⁰³ Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy, *A Case Study of the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care*.

Peer states found that consolidation alone did not ensure program stability without sufficient funding. In several cases, states faced funding cliffs, reliance on one-time dollars, or misalignment between program goals and sustained revenue streams.

During IDEC's transition, Illinois can monitor funding stability and alignment indicators to assess whether governance reform is supported by sufficient resources:

- **Overall early childhood funding:** year-over-year trends in state and federal early childhood appropriations for EI, CCAP, ECBG, licensing, quality, and data systems; share of funding that is recurring versus one-time.¹⁰⁴
- **Rate and affordability measures:** CCAP reimbursement rates relative to market prices and cost-of-quality benchmarks;¹⁰⁵ co-pay levels as a share of family income across income bands.¹⁰⁶
- **Funding alignment and simplification:** number of separate early childhood funding streams and grants; progress toward braided or streamlined mechanisms; provider experience with applications and reporting requirements.¹⁰⁷

Increasing complexity, growing reliance on non-recurring funds, or widening affordability gaps may signal emerging fiscal risks, even if the organizational transition appears administratively successful. In peer states, long-term stabilization¹⁰⁸ often involved embedding reforms into base budgets or dedicated funding streams to reduce vulnerability to future funding disruptions.¹⁰⁹

Data Integration and Accountability

States that treated integrated data systems and performance measurement as core transition deliverables were better positioned to identify implementation challenges and adjust policy in real time. Conversely, fragmented data systems limited the ability of new departments to demonstrate progress or manage across programs.

Illinois can monitor the development and use of integrated data and accountability systems during IDEC's transition:

¹⁰⁴ New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, *Annual Outcomes Report*, April 2024.

¹⁰⁵ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education*.

¹⁰⁶ University of New Mexico Center for Child and Family Policy, *Trends After Policy Change in New Mexico's Child Care Assistance Program*.

¹⁰⁷ Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care, "Budget Narrative / Agency and Program Overviews, 2025–27 ARB."

¹⁰⁸ The Pew Charitable Trusts, *How States Safeguarded Against Future Budget Challenges*.

¹⁰⁹ Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, *Early Childhood Workforce Index 2024*.

- **Data system integration:** number of major legacy systems operating independently versus connected through an Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS); progress toward interoperability.¹¹⁰
- **Cross-program analysis capacity:** ability to produce unduplicated counts of children, families, and workforce across EI, CCAP, and ECBG.¹¹¹
- **Performance dashboards:** existence and regular publication of a public-facing IDEC dashboard covering access, equity, quality, workforce, and outcomes; frequency with which data is referenced in board, legislative, or budget materials.¹¹²

If IDEC cannot produce timely cross-program analyses or integrated reporting, consolidation may not yield the intended analytic benefits. In peer states, limited or incomplete metrics were addressed through investments in upgraded data systems,¹¹³ formal outcome reporting requirements, and evaluations used to refine program design.¹¹⁴

Child and Family Outcomes

Although structural and administrative indicators are most immediate during transition, long-term success depends on whether governance reform connects to measurable improvements for children and families.

Illinois can begin designing and monitoring outcome indicators that link system changes to downstream results:

- **Child development and school readiness:** kindergarten readiness indicators disaggregated by participation in EI, CCAP, and ECBG programs; EI child development outcomes and timeliness metrics.¹¹⁵
- **Stability and well-being:** reductions in suspension or expulsion from early childhood programs; reductions in gaps in service during transitions between programs; measures of continuity in provider relationships.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰ Colorado Department of Early Childhood, “Colorado Department of Early Childhood Releases Independent Evaluation Report.”

¹¹¹ Buell Foundation, “Colorado Department of Early Childhood Data Dashboard.”

¹¹² Buell Foundation, “Colorado Department of Early Childhood Data Dashboard”; and New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, *Annual Outcomes Report*.

¹¹³ Buell Foundation, “Colorado Department of Early Childhood Data Dashboard”; New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, *Annual Outcomes Report*; and Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care, *Strategic Plan Implementation Materials*.

¹¹⁴ Colorado Department of Early Childhood, *Colorado Early Childhood Strategic Plan*; and Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, *Strategic Action Plan*.

¹¹⁵ Colorado Department of Early Childhood, “Independent Evaluation of the Department of Early Childhood”; and Prenatal-to-Three Policy Impact Center, *New Mexico Early Childhood Governance Case Study*.

¹¹⁶ New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, *Annual Outcomes Report*; and Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care, *State Early Learning Strategic Plan Reports*.

- **Equity in outcomes:** differences in readiness, EI access and outcomes, and early learning participation by race/ethnicity, income, language, disability status, geography.¹¹⁷

These indicators are longer-term measures but should be defined during the transition period so IDEC can connect structural reforms to child and family outcomes over time.

CONCLUSION

Illinois’ transition to a standalone Department of Early Childhood places it within a small group of states that have pursued similar governance reforms. Colorado, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Oregon each created cabinet-level early childhood departments to address fragmentation, administrative complexity, and weak system-level coordination.

Across these states, consolidation clarified accountability and aligned policy levers, but implementation brought predictable challenges: untangling legacy systems, maintaining payment and eligibility stability, managing cross-agency boundaries, integrating staff and cultures, and securing durable funding. Governance reform alone did not resolve funding gaps, workforce shortages, or broader economic pressures affecting families.

For Illinois, peer state experience offers a practical roadmap. The risks IDEC may face are not unique; they are structural features of consolidation and can therefore be monitored. By tracking operational stability, workforce capacity, cross-agency coordination, funding durability, data integration, and child and family outcomes, Illinois can assess whether IDEC is functioning as more than a new organizational chart.

Ultimately, the significance of IDEC will depend less on its creation and more on how its implementation translates structural change into sustained system coherence and accountability over time.

Bottom Line

- Creating IDEC establishes a clearer governance structure for early childhood programs
 - The primary risks are not unique and have been observed in other states
 - Implementation success will depend on how effectively Illinois manages operations, coordination, and capacity
 - Monitoring key indicators can help identify challenges early and support course correction
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¹¹⁷ New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, *Annual Outcomes Report*; and Buell Foundation, “Colorado Department of Early Childhood Data Dashboard.”