

Standing Up a Department of Early Childhood: What Peer States Can Teach Illinois



by Lily Padula

Illinois is undertaking significant governance reform by establishing the Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC), a new cabinet-level agency designed to consolidate programs currently spread across multiple state entities. These include programs within the Illinois State Board of Education, Department of Human Services, Department of Children and Family Services, and coordinating functions in the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development. The new department is set to launch on July 1, 2026.

The goal of this reform is to address longstanding fragmentation in the State's early childhood system. Historically, programs have operated across agencies with different eligibility rules, funding streams, and administrative processes, creating barriers for families, limited coordination, and constraining the State's ability to track outcomes. IDEC is intended to simplify access, align policy, and create a more cohesive and accountable system.

Lessons from Peer States

Illinois joins a small group of states that have consolidated early childhood programs into a single, cabinet-level agency. While other states have established early childhood entities, this analysis focuses on a subset of peer states—Colorado, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Oregon—that have created standalone departments comparable in structure and scope to Illinois' new Department of Early Childhood.

While this single agency approach can reduce duplication and improve coordination, peer state experience shows that this process alone does not fully eliminate fragmentation. Key services such as K-12 education, Medicaid, and child welfare remain outside the new department, requiring ongoing cross-agency coordination. Implementation is also a multi-year process. Peer states relied on phased timelines, transition councils, and extensive planning to shift programs and systems. Even with these efforts, challenges emerged in aligning administrative processes, integrating staff, and disentangling programs from legacy agencies.

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Implementation Risks and Considerations

The most immediate risks are operational. Peer states experienced temporary disruptions to payment systems, eligibility processing, and licensing, leading to delays, backlogs, and confusion among families and providers. Maintaining stability in these core functions will be critical during Illinois' transition.

Long term challenges center on integrating systems and capacity. Effective consolidation requires aligning IT infrastructure, data systems, and workforce structures with the goal of improving accountability, and enabling cross program analysis. Peer state experience shows that these efforts are complex and time intensive.

Beyond Governance Reform

Peer state experience makes it clear that governance reform alone does not resolve broader challenges. Workforce shortages, funding instability, and uneven access to services persisted even after consolidation. While IDEC can provide a stronger foundation for coordination and policy alignment, improvements in access and outcomes will depend on sustained funding, policy decisions, and administrative capacity.

Bottom Line

The experiences of these comparison states highlight some key items for Illinois to monitor as it stands up its own department. The creation of IDEC is an important step toward a more coordinated early childhood system, but its success will depend on implementation:

- Consolidation can reduce fragmentation and clarify leadership.
- Transition will require a multi-year, resource intensive effort.
- Early challenges will likely center on operations, staffing, and systems integration.
- Long term improvements depend on funding, policy alignment, and data driven accountability.

Ultimately, IDEC's effectiveness will be determined by how well Illinois translates this structural reform into a more accessible, coordinated, and outcome focused system for children and families.

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