

Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan

Proposed Priority Strategies for Consideration

January 13, 2014

INTRODUCTION

This document is a first attempt at identifying possible priority strategies for Vermont's two-year Early Childhood Action Plan. Thank you for taking time to provide input on what you consider to be key strategies related to the six **goals** in Vermont's Early Childhood Framework:

- Goal 1: A Healthy Start for All Children
- Goal 2: Families and Communities Play a Leading Role
- Goal 3: High-Quality Opportunities for All Children
- Goal 4: Invest Now for Our Future
- Goal 5: Know We're Making a Difference
- Goal 6: An Innovative and Connected System

In considering which strategies you believe Vermonters should focus on during the next two years, please consider the Framework's twelve guiding **principles**:

- Think about the whole child
- Consider all children
- Focus on quality
- Build on what we know is working
- Take the long view
- Hold ourselves accountable
- Involve communities and families as equal partners
- Strengthen connections between education, human services and health
- Invest early
- Promote families' economic security
- Emphasize prevention
- Keep collaboration at the heart of our work together

OVERVIEW OF ACTION PLAN DEVELOPMENT

The pre-Summit focus sessions, the parent focus group and parent survey, an online comment period, a statewide meeting held via Vermont Interactive Technologies, three conference calls (open to the public) and discussions at the Governor's Summit generated many ideas that have the potential to become strategies or actions in Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan. (A

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complete inventory of those ideas will be available soon at <http://governor.vermont.gov/blog-early-childhood-action-planning-committee>.)

- **Strategies** are defined as “a set of combined or aligned programs, activities or events that focus on common outcomes or goals. Typically, strategies are aimed at multiple end-results, including changes among individuals or families, changes in systems or policy, and changes in resources or investments.”ⁱ
- **Actions** are activities, “processes or events that are required to implement a program, deliver a service or carry out planned strategies. Activities typically describe what staff must do in order to achieve intended outcomes or results.”ⁱⁱ (As part of the Action Plan’s development, the Action Planning Committee is creating a Glossary of Terms, which will include additional frequently used terms identified during the pre-Summit focus sessions as needing common definitions.)

Given that we cannot do it all nor do everything we want to all at once, the first step in developing the Action Plan involves sifting through these ideas and identifying priority strategies. (These ideas will also inform the related actions, measures of progress, timeframes, and lead groups/teams identified in Phase II.) To assist with this process of sifting and prioritizing, the [Action Planning Committee](http://governor.vermont.gov/blog-early-childhood-action-planning-committee) is gathering input from Vermonters across the state through meetings, conference calls, and an online survey. For more information about the action planning process, go to <http://governor.vermont.gov/blog-early-childhood-action-planning-committee>.

PRIORITY STRATEGIES FOR CONSIDERATION

As a starting point, the Action Planning Committee compiled the following list of **possible strategies for your consideration**. (The finalization of related actions will occur during Phase II of the action planning process.) These strategies reflect the priorities and concepts that bubbled up to the top repeatedly during the focus sessions, the Summit, and other efforts undertaken last spring, summer and fall to seek input from Vermonters across the state. As you can see, we have collectively come quite close to identifying a manageable number of strategies related to some goals. In other areas, we need to make some choices to get to an achievable number of strategies.

Please note that nothing has been decided yet. The Action Planning Committee will spend the months of December and January gathering input from Vermonters about which strategies they think are important to prioritize. The Committee will then spend the month of February reviewing that input and deciding on a realistic number of priority strategies based on agreed-

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upon criteria. A draft statewide Early Childhood Action Plan will be ready by the end of February for elaboration and refinement during Phase II of the action planning process.

Proposed Criteria to Establish Final Priorities (Round #1)

The following proposed criteria reflect input received during the development of Vermont's Early Childhood Framework. When deciding on the final criteria to use to determine the strategies in the Action Plan, the Action Planning Committee will consider your feedback on these proposed criteria, as well as any suggestions you have regarding additional criteria not listed here.

1. Have a proven track record in Vermont or elsewhere
2. Innovative and/or haven't been tried in Vermont
3. Effectiveness can be measured using existing data
4. Touch the whole population, not just at-risk children/families
5. Put systems in place (versus a bandaid approach)
6. Get at the root causes of social issues (rather than address symptoms)
7. Holistic in how they approach child development and family stability
8. Shared across sectors (health, child development, human services, education)
9. Silo-busting (breaks down divisions between providers, programs, funding, etc.)
10. Solution-oriented (versus concentrating on the problems)
11. Areas around which there is a broad consensus
12. Funding can be sustained over time and/or which leverage existing resources

Goal 1: A Healthy Start for All Children (Round #2)

1. Establish a statewide, uniform system for universal assessment and monitoring of all children birth through third grade
2. Strengthen family-centered health and preventative care including prenatal care
3. Expand community resources that address food insecurity and promote good nutrition

Goal 2: Families and Communities Play a Leading Role (Round #2)

1. (Re-)establish a statewide community/parent leadership training to be delivered at the local level
2. Block-grant funds to communities using an outcome-based model so they have more flexibility to determine how to allocate resources based on each community's specific needs; tie funding to outcomes based on regular community needs assessments (this is similar to recommendations under goal #6)

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3. Establish a mechanism to ensure equitable funding of community resources from region to region
4. Create multiple pathways for parents to become involved in local decision-making by focusing on issues that parents have identified as important
5. Adopt a statewide framework to guide the design and delivery of child and family services at the state and local level
6. Develop common family engagements standards across all programs in all sectors of the system
7. Move to family-directed & family-centered decision-making (example of a possible related action: change eligibility and how families access public funds aimed at healthy child development and family stability by calculating the amount of public funds a family is eligible for based on new rubric then work with families to determine how those funds would best be used)
8. Build increased awareness of/sensitivity to issues related to poverty and economic security into workforce development of personnel who work with children and families

Goal 3: High-Quality Opportunities for All Children (Round #2)

1. Define and/or agree to definitions of quality based on standards and evidence-based programming in early care and education, home visiting, developmental screenings, parent training, prenatal care etc.
2. Establish paid parental leave
3. Establish universal access to high-quality early care and education for all three and four year olds (pre-k)
4. The pre-Summit focus sessions highlighted the importance of increasing families' economic security specifically related to employment, housing, transportation and food insecurity (all of which are integral to child and family stability and well-being). However, we need to get specific about which strategies to pursue.
5. Vermonters offered a range of ideas along a continuum having to do with access to critical community resources, including but not limited to high-quality early care and education (including "pre-k"). We need to make some decisions about which direction to go in. The ideas offered below are not necessarily mutually exclusive and could be combined.
 - a. Increase funding for the Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP)
 - b. Move to a statewide, universal (geared to whole population) early childhood and family support program geared towards serving all Vermonters (sliding fee scale); accessible to all but not mandatory (universal access but not free; everyone pays based on uniform sliding fee scale)

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- i. Create a universal, statewide two-generational early care and education system by expanding Early Head Start/Head Start (important components: prenatal focus, home visiting, infant/toddler care, preschool-age program, parent leadership, family engagement emphasis, performance standards)
 - c. Move towards universal access to all child development and family support programs and re-evaluate/re-align eligibility guidelines with what it takes to prosper (determine threshold for economic self-sufficiency by region); start with adequate and increase from there
 - d. Eliminate eligibility guidelines and make all programs universal; replace with sliding fee scale that would apply to everyone
 - e. Create a new Early Childhood Development benefit that promotes healthy child and family development (focus on low/moderate income families); fund by pooling all funds currently allocated for the Child Care Financial Assistance Program, publicly-funded early education partnerships (Education Fund), parent co-pays/tuition
- 6. Support development of strong parenting skills
 - 7. Support the early childhood workforce by increasing wages, benefits and access to higher education
 - 8. Create an inter-disciplinary, cross-sector workforce (birth through grade 3) that shares a common base of knowledge and skills

Goal 4: Invest Now for Our Future (Round #3)

- 1. Develop a financing plan that combines existing and new funding; emphasizes prevention; permits blending/braiding of funds; changes payment system; relies on diversified funding sources; has funding source that is earmarked for early childhood; builds in accountability tied to quality; focuses on investments in community resources that come out of a common agenda with agreed-upon outcomes; maximizes use of federal waivers to innovate; focuses on sustainability long term
- 2. Promote sustainable business models (e.g. shared services alliances)
- 3. Educate and engage Vermonters to (a) bring about a cultural shift in how we think about children's and family's development and (b) build public and political will to push for changes, especially big-ticket items

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Goal 5: Know We're Making a Difference (Round #3)

1. Adopt and implement a statewide framework for evaluating and monitoring progress that includes a consistent feedback loop from the population being served about the value of services and the barriers to getting those services
2. Require and fund a community plan for every community that is linked to the Early Childhood Framework's goals and principles, the Early Childhood Action Plan, standards, outcomes, etc.
3. Establish statewide ["promise"] standards for every setting/service delivery component in Vermont's early childhood system

Goal 6: An Innovative and Connected System (Round #3)

1. Clearly define and coordinate leadership at the highest levels of state government
2. Adequately fund Vermont's early childhood non-profit network of Councils (Building Bright Futures) so they serve as the early childhood hub in every region
3. Create a continuum of care and support for families prenatal through age 22
4. Move from a competitive to a collaborative approach to resource allocation at the community level, e.g. pool all funds in to one pot—"un-turf" the dollars
5. De-silo funding by removing barriers to blending funding so money can be braided at state level and then distributed to communities based on a continuum of need and available community resources
6. Agree on one set of geographic boundaries to define catchment areas (AHS regions, Supervisory Unions, etc.)
7. Create seamless transitions from early childhood to K-12 system by creating a 0-8 continuum (example of a possible related action: Merge early childhood and K-12 standards to make explicit a developmentally appropriate continuum of learning opportunities that enable children to thrive)
8. Create common set of expectations within early care and education by standardizing (preferred) or aligning regulations, standards & reporting requirements (e.g. Head Start, child care licensing regulations, STARS, accreditation)
9. Streamline access to community resources (example of a possible related action: have a common application for services including those provided by non-governmental agencies)
10. Create intentional linkages among all community resources that support families/children
11. Use schools as one of the primary means of providing comprehensive community resources to families (example of a possible related action: Promote expansion of full-service schools)

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12. Promote a culture of collaboration (example of a possible related action:
13. Streamline communication among agencies, between the state and communities, within communities, etc. (example of a possible related action: create a unifying, statewide clearinghouse for disseminating information)

For more information about the action planning process, contact Kim Friedman, Action Plan Developer, at 802-348-9879 or kfriedman@svcable.net.

ⁱ Organizational Research Services, *Glossary of Evaluation Terms*, prepared for the Northern New England Early Childhood Network, 2012, pg. 6. "Note: In philanthropy, the term 'strategy' is frequently used to describe a comprehensive, long-term investment or effort that is focused on addressing and improving large-scale social or environmental problems" (Glossary, pg. 6).

ⁱⁱ Ibid, pg. 2.