CEE 101: An Introduction to Coordinated Eligibility and Enrollment

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Wei-Bing Chen, SRI; Carolina Zamora, SRI

In this brief, we introduce coordinated eligibility and enrollment (CEE) as an important strategy for building a comprehensive early childhood care and education (ECCE) system. We describe what CEE is, how to do it, what the benefits are, key decisions that must be made, and facilitators and barriers to implementation. We also share profiles of states and communities that have implemented CEE as examples that others may learn from.

What is coordinated eligibility and enrollment (CEE)?

- CEE is a **systems-building strategy** that states/territories and local communities can use to build a more robust and interconnected support system for children and families. The goal is to increase coordination of services and reduce fragmentation in an early childhood care and education (ECCE) system.

- It fits under a broader umbrella of **systems coordination efforts**[1] that can include program and eligibility alignment, coordination of funding (e.g., blending and braiding), and building integrated data systems, among others.

> **TA Center CEE Supports**
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> Since 2020, the PDG B-5 TA Center has supported states and territories with CEE implementation through informational presentations (e.g., coffee talks, conference sessions), peer-to-peer learning (e.g., workgroups), and intensive individualized TA.

- Collaboration activities fall along a spectrum including communication, cooperation, coordination, collaboration, and integration. CEE encompasses a **range of activities** that span the collaboration spectrum[2] – from joint recruitment and marketing of services, to using a standardized intake and referral process, to using a common application, to coordinated eligibility determination, and/or fully coordinating enrollment into a defined set of programs. Communities' goals may fall at different

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[1] For more information about broader systems coordination efforts, see **Early Childhood Systems Collective Impact Project | ASPE (hhs.gov); and Assessing Models of Coordinated Services for Low-Income Children and Their Families | The Administration for Children and Families (hhs.gov)**
[2] **https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/hubfs/Resources/Publications/Collaboration%20Spectrum%20Revisited_Liz%20Weaver.pdf**

points on the spectrum, with some aiming for increased cooperation, for example, and others pursuing integrated programming.

- **Similar terms** include coordinated application, eligibility, and enrollment; coordinated enrollment; and coordinated intake. Some users differentiate between different aspects of CEE by their choice of term while others use them interchangeably.

How do you "coordinate eligibility and enrollment"?

- CEE efforts can involve any aspect of the program enrollment process (e.g., recruitment/outreach, application, eligibility determination, selection/provider match, enrollment). Coordinating means moving from each program having distinct and separate processes to **creating joint processes** across programs.

- Communities choose the **scope of the programs and services** they want to coordinate. Most communities choose to work within a single service sector (e.g., early learning and child care programs), but some choose to coordinate across multiple sectors (e.g., early learning and health/mental health, or economic supports [WIC, SNAP, TANF[3]]) and use strategies such as categorical eligibility.[4]

- CEE may be implemented at the **local, regional, and/or state/territory levels.** When the scope of coordination is limited to services such as economic supports where there is no local "provider" and enrollment requires only eligibility determination, then coordination can potentially occur at the state level with little to no local involvement. When provider selection or matching of families to providers is needed, as is the case with fully coordinating enrollment into early learning programs, coordination typically needs to occur at the local or regional level. This is because individual service providers must work together to create and implement a shared selection and enrollment process that takes family preferences and program priorities into account. However, state/territory program administrators can still be highly involved by providing guidance, oversight, and supportive infrastructure. CEE has the farthest-reaching effects when implemented at both state and local levels, with aligned decision-making[5] and flow of data between the two levels.

- All CEE efforts require some level of **data sharing or joint data management** capacity. This can range from sharing simple Excel worksheets (taking care to ensure data are private and secure) to using an integrated data system. Consider a fully coordinated enrollment process that allows

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[3] WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; TANF = Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

[4] Categorical eligibility means that being eligible for one program guarantees eligibility for another without need for further verification (income or otherwise).

[5] An example of this is the state Head Start Collaboration Office and state preschool program administrators working together to give consistent guidance to local Head Start grantees and state preschool providers on how to work together.

families to submit a single application to all providers of a similar service (e.g., publicly funded preschool) and then be matched to their best-fit provider through a single best offer[6] based on eligibility and family preferences. Participating providers must somehow share family application information and slot availability with one another. Manual matching and tracking of slots, applications, and enrollment is possible, but using a shared data system for case management is far more efficient. Families and providers could directly enter and retrieve information from such a system, with eligibility and enrollment data held locally and/or at the state level. Data in a state system could also be linked or integrated with other information such as families' use of other services, provider data, and child outcomes to address policy questions about service use and impacts.

What are the benefits of CEE?

- When eligibility and enrollment are coordinated, **families have improved *and more equitable* access** to the services that are the most appropriate for them. CEE can simplify for families a confusing and labor-intensive process of identifying the service(s) they would like to use, submitting multiple applications for services, and then choosing from among those they qualify for. Access is more equitable when barriers to entry are reduced, and all families use the same clear and transparent application process for the same pool of services.

- CEE benefits service providers by **promoting collaboration rather than competition** as the main strategy for maintaining full enrollment. In a fragmented system, providers within a sector can feel like they are competing with one another to serve a limited pool of families who are eligible for public funding.[7] In a coordinated system, the use of joint application and selection procedures means that providers have equal access to what in practice is a generally large pool of families. This process produces the best provider-family match which is another CEE benefit for providers and families.

- Fully coordinating enrollment allows for **better use of public resources** due to more efficient allocation of slots and less redundancy in the application and enrollment process (although communities must make initial investments in infrastructure to facilitate coordination).

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[6] In a single best offer process, families indicate their provider preferences in their application, and they are then offered enrollment with a single provider who is their best match based on these preferences and other factors such as program priorities and the pool of other applicants also seeking a slot. This video from New Orleans Public Schools provides an example of how a single best offer process can work: see **https://vimeo.com/638792691**

[7] CEE approaches are usually limited to publicly funded programs and rarely include private self-pay child care providers because they operate under different market forces.

What key decisions must be made in order to implement CEE?

- **Scope of coordination-** Which programs are being coordinated? Is coordination occurring across service sectors (e.g., across early learning and health care) or within one sector (e.g., within early learning)?

- **Co-creation of joint enrollment practices-** How will programs work together to share recruitment efforts, crosswalk eligibility requirements, develop a common application, adopt shared selection and enrollment practices, etc.?

- **Level of implementation-** What coordination is occurring at the state vs. local level? For certain programs (e.g., early learning, home visiting) families must enroll with a local provider, but what is the state's role, if any?

Key Decisions

Scope of Coordination

Co-creation of Joint Enrollment Practices

Level of Implementation

Data Sharing and Data Management

- **Data sharing and data management-** How will programs work together to manage the flow of data across programs, and between localities and the state?

What are key facilitators and barriers to CEE implementation?

These are "key ingredients" that help foster success when present and become barriers when absent.

- **Relationship building** is critical. In communities looking to implement CEE, individuals representing different programs and interests need to come together to make joint decisions that move them from having separate enrollment processes for each program to having shared processes across programs. This takes problem-solving, compromise, and a willingness to change long-standing programmatic practices for a greater good that is yet unproven. Teams or committees need to work together to foster a sense of partnership rather than competition and treat relationships like human infrastructure that requires investment. Transparency between partners (including sharing data) and collaborative decision-making builds trust but also requires trust[8].

Key Facilitators and Barriers

Relationship Building

Funding

Champions

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[8] For the important role relationships played in building Louisiana's Ready Start Networks, see: **ready_start_aim_1_summary_report.pdf (see-partnerships.com)**

- Investing in CEE is investing in a more coordinated ECCE system but finding the "extra" funding to build the system beyond implementing programs can be difficult. To make progress, **steady funding is needed** to pay for both staff time to meet and develop processes, and for any data infrastructure.

- **One or more champion(s)** who will make CEE their cause and lead the work through challenges is another key to success. Ideally, these individuals will be in a position of leadership where they are empowered to make consequential decisions, and they are able to reach out across programs and/or agencies to build strong relationships with other leaders. As is true with any systems change initiative, having a dedicated "believer" with a high level of influence at the helm will further its success.

What examples are there of states and communities implementing CEE?

Below are profiles of several states that have worked to coordinate application, eligibility, or enrollment either at the state level or at the local/regional level with state oversight. We describe what they have accomplished so far and their future plans.

South Carolina

South Carolina achieved a major systems coordination milestone through the development of First Five South Carolina (First 5 SC), an **online statewide ECCE program portal**. The portal includes information for over 60 programs that are managed by 11 state agencies and features an eligibility screener for 44 of the programs. Built by state staff in partnership with an external vendor using Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five (PDG B-5) funds, First 5 SC will eventually be sustained by state staff and state funding. First launched in February 2021, state staff continue to improve upon and build out the capabilities of the site. In March, they added a function that enables providers to access the contact information that families input into the eligibility calculator (with the families' consent) so that providers can proactively reach out to families regarding services they are interested in and may qualify for. State staff are also working on a common application for a subset for the 44 programs, to be launched in early 2023. This will consist of a base application of commonly required data elements that can be ported over to individual programs where additional program-specific questions are added. Development has involved work with local providers such as individual school districts and Head Start grantees. Many programs in the state still currently use paper applications so the creation of an online application is viewed as a service to the programs as well. The development of the portal's back-end data processes is being integrally tied to South Carolina's Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS) work.

Resources: See the **First Five SC website** and a **podcast episode** about the development of the site.

Louisiana

In 2012, the Louisiana state legislature passed Act 3, a law that called for **statewide implementation of local integrated ECCE networks** comprised of child care, Head Start, and publicly funded (school- and community-based) preschool programs. The state Department of Education developed a competitive process to identify lead agencies for 65 Community Networks divided at the parish (county) level that would operate under a "unified system of academic and development standards, enrollment, and teacher preparation expectations." Implementing CEE became a requirement and Community Networks developed their own processes for information campaigns, applications, eligibility determination, and matching families with providers, under guidance from the state. Given the decade of implementation, Louisiana now has a well-established process for statewide implementation of local CEE. They continue to deepen and expand their work, however. In 2019, the state launched "Ready Start Networks," a pilot program to expand the reach and coordination of existing Community Networks. The Ready Start Network sites have expanded over several cohorts. In 2022, Community Networks were required to codify and submit to the state a handbook of their processes for the first time. To aid in eligibility determination, Community Networks have access to a system called DirectMatch, held by the Department of Health, which allows networks to determine whether children are categorically eligible for publicly funded preschool through their eligibility for SNAP or Medicaid. Department of Education staff are working to strengthen state-level coordination with the Department of Health and are continually refining their technical assistance supports to the Community Networks.

Resource: See **Louisiana's Early Childhood Guidebook: Preparing Children for Kindergarten; Strengthening Early Childhood Programs & Community Networks** for more on the role and responsibilities of Community Networks.

Oregon

In 2019, the Oregon state legislature passed the Student Success Act, a corporate activity tax, with the goal of expanding Preschool Promise, a state-funded preschool program. Leveraging their PDG B-5 initial grant and the Preschool Promise expansion, Oregon Early Learning Division (now Department of Early Learning and Care) staff moved to **require CEE statewide** across 16 regional Early Learning Hubs. Early Learning Hubs are cross-sector partnerships typically operated by state education service districts (ESDs), nonprofits, and universities. State staff tasked the Hubs with local coordination and gave them some autonomy to make decisions for their community, including identifying priority populations to serve, how to match children to providers, and what, if any, data systems to use. Hubs were to use a phased approach to implementing CEE, starting with Preschool Promise but eventually coordinating across all publicly funded preschool programs including Head Start, Oregon PreK (state-funded Head Start), and child care programs receiving subsidies. State staff provided guidance documents including a sample MOU and a template for a program comparison chart featuring programmatic similarities and differences and other important information for parents. CEE implementation began during the COVID-19 pandemic which delayed some of the work but allowed state staff to further develop an implementation plan and focus on state-to-local alignment, such as

having the state Head Start Collaboration Office and state preschool program administrators work together to give consistent guidance to local Head Start grantees and state preschool providers.

Resource: See **Oregon's Coordinated Enrollment Implementation Plan**.

Colorado

In 2020, as part of their PDG B-5 grant activities, Colorado Office of Early Childhood (now Department of Early Childhood) staff developed and launched a coordinated, application, eligibility, and enrollment (CAEE) toolkit for local organizations and communities to use to implement CAEE. In the same year, Colorado voters also passed Proposition EE, a nicotine tax, to fund universal preschool (UPK) for 4-year-olds. Following this, early childhood constituents expressed an interest in having state staff take a leadership role in **promoting the adoption of consistent CAEE processes statewide**. State staff established a CAEE workgroup including representatives from families, community-based ECCE programs, Head Start, the Denver Preschool Program, the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program, the Colorado Preschool Program, early childhood councils, advocates, and the Governor's Office to develop recommendations for implementing CAEE statewide within the context of UPK implementation and the creation of the new Department of Early Childhood. With support from the PDG B-5 TA Center, the workgroup mapped processes, timelines, and key considerations for operationalizing the system. A UPK bill was signed into law by the governor in 2022 and the program is set to launch in fall 2023. State staff are currently working with a vendor to develop an online UPK application to be ready in January 2023 and the goal is to eventually expand it into a common application that includes other PreK services in the community.

Resource: See **Colorado's CAEE workgroup recommendations**.

Michigan

In Michigan, state staff have **supported local communities in their pursuit of CEE** but these have not been statewide efforts. As part of their PDG B-5 grant activities, Michigan worked with a contracting firm to provide technical assistance to local communities interested in learning about and implementing CEE. They also created two guidance documents. The first is a Michigan Coordinated Eligibility and Enrollment Landscape report that provides an overview of CEE and how it is being successfully implemented in local communities. The second is a Michigan Coordinated Eligibility and Enrollment Planning and Implementation Guidebook that walks communities through a step-by-step process for developing and implementing community-based approaches to CEE. State staff in Michigan are also exploring how to increase coordination in their home visiting system through strategies such as creating consistency in what families find using the Michigan Home Visiting Initiative website (an online home visiting program finder), MI Bridges (a benefits application portal), MI Kids Matter (an early childhood system website), and their state 2-1-1 line (a free phone number that connects callers with essential community services).

Resources: See the [Michigan Coordinated Eligibility and Enrollment Landscape report](#) and websites for the [Michigan Home Visiting Initiative](#), [MI Bridges](#), and [MI Kids Matter](#).

Virginia

Virginia does not yet have statewide CEE efforts but is aiming to **scale up successful local efforts**. In 2020, The United Way of Roanoke Valley launched Smart2Start – a network of public school systems, nonprofits, faith-based organizations, and private providers – and coordinated enrollment across them to give families easy access to ECCE services. Smart2Start was recognized across the state as an innovative and successful coordination effort and considered a potential model for other communities. When the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation launched its Ready Regions initiative in 2022 which expanded Virginia's regional networks statewide, The United Way of Roanoke Valley became the lead of Ready Region West, one of nine Regions. In this role, they will have an even greater opportunity to share their expertise with the rest of the state.

Resources: See the websites for [Smart2Start](#) and the [Ready Regions](#) as well as a [podcast episode](#) about their development.

Additional Resources

[A Summary of PDG B-5 Grantee's Coordinated Eligibility and Enrollment Activities and the Impact of COVID-19](#)

To access this document and other resources on the PDG B-5 website, use this QR code.

For more information on this and other early childhood topics please visit The Office of Child Care's Technical Assistance webpage at **https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/** and the Office of Head Start's Technical Assistance webpage at **https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/about-us/article/training-technical-assistance-centers**.

ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES

Office of Child Care

PDG B-5 TA Center

A Service of the Office of Child Care
1100 Wilson Boulevard Suite 2800 (28th floor)
Arlington, VA 22209

Email: PDGB5TA@sri.com

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