

# Navigating the Political Landscape for Early Childhood Success

The purpose of this brief is to provide an overview of this Early Childhood Municipal Policy Fundamental with policy and practice levers to consider and questions for local leaders to ask themselves as they move their city's early childhood agenda forward so that ALL young children, their families, and those who care for them thrive.

**Local government has a key role** in ensuring all young children have the resources and opportunities to reach their full potential and with their families, live healthy and prosperous lives. Understanding how to navigate one's city governance structure is essential to building strong and effective programs, policies, and practices for young children prenatal through age 8 years and their families.

# Key Takeaways

No matter how their municipal government is organized or what structures are in place, all elected officials and leaders have a role to play in early childhood success for their communities. There are 4 key attributes in successfully navigating the political landscape.

## Navigating the Political Landscape for Early Childhood Success



## NAVIGATING FOR SUCCESS

The political landscape across the nation has been drastically changing since the turn of the century. We have seen increasing levels of partisanship and a decrease in compromise and coalition decision-making. Local authority has been challenged and seemingly, politics and political party affiliation is more valued than working across party lines to get work done on behalf of all residents. The more we understand how local government works, the more likely we will figure out the best way to get support for programs and policies that support young children. We cannot change the current culture overnight and it will take time to build trust, but we can work towards supporting local leaders in making sustainable early learning agendas a reality. We can learn more about how to navigate through local government, its structures, its associated politics and cultural norms to increase our chances of success.

To be effective, we need to become students of the way city governments carry out its functions and duties, the priorities of elected officials, local and regional trends, and how decisions are made.

It is especially important to align early childhood agendas with the priorities of the elected officials and the values of the community. Municipal leaders as agenda setters, problem solvers, and policy makers are well positioned to champion the needs of their youngest residents. No matter what governance structure a city has, when stakeholders pursue major policy initiatives with the hope of having significant positive public outcomes, all elected officials and leaders have a role to play in early childhood success.

Successfully, navigating one's political landscape is essential to building a strong and effective early childhood system, for children prenatal to age 8 and their families.



Investments in high-quality early care and education starting at birth can provide up to a 13% return on investment through better education, health, social, and economic outcomes later in life.



# Attributes of Successful Navigation

## Know your government’s structures & power influences

Understanding the different forms of governance, and who and how decisions are made, and policies formed, can help stakeholders find the most effective ways to work with elected leaders, governmental agencies, and the community to build early childhood systems. [Governance structures](#) inform process and power. It is important for champions of early childhood success to understand:

- Types of local government, and its impact on power, functions, and essential procedures,
- How laws and budgets are passed, and if a city has [home rule](#),
- Where formal and informal powers lie, within local government and the community, and
- Intersections between early childhood and municipal priorities.

The [municipal charter defines](#) the powers, functions and essential procedure of local government. The [two most common forms of government](#) found in American cities, towns, and

villages are Council-Manager and Mayor-Council. With Council-Manager form of government, the council is the legislative body of government. Elected by the community, the council oversees the general administration while appointing a city manager to carry out day-to-day administrative operations and mayors are typically chosen from among the council. In Mayor-Council form of government, the Mayor is elected separately from the council and typically holds significant administrative and budgetary authority.

Learn the priorities of individual council members, the mayor, and the city manager. Look for the intersections between their priorities and early childhood priorities and look for ways to support each other. Understand the broader local context and how it impacts and is impacted by early childhood issues. Help leaders see their role and the city’s role by providing clear definitions of what it means to be part of the early childhood system, aligning with broader city-wide issues, and sharing ways coordinating efforts and developing shared priorities. There are a number of actions elected officials and local government can take to champion early childhood success including but not limited to:

- Being an advocate and supporter,
- Using the bully pulpit,
- Elevating family voice through engaging parents and caregivers

- Reviewing how each city department and policies impact children and families, and
- Using influence to convene stakeholder to align efforts, reduce silos, and make connections.

It is necessary to plan for leadership transitions as elections can have consequences. Elected officials who are strong supporters for early childhood may not always be in office, due to term limits, election results, and retirement. To build sustainable support, it is important to connect with multiple officials and engage with potential future officials and members of the community with influence.

## POLICY & PRACTICE LEVERS

- Assign** dedicated staff to organize and manage early childhood agendas
- Align and develop** shared goals and city-wide early childhood plans
- Partner** actively with local collaboratives
- Use** your influence
- Leverage** municipal policy and practices

“*As the saying goes, success begets success. Help your leaders build on their predecessors’ legacies.*”

**DR. TONJA RUCKER**  
NLC’s Director for Early Childhood Success at the Institute for Youth, Education, and Families

## MOVING TO ACTION ASK YOURSELF

- What is your local government structure (i.e. council-manager, strong mayor...)? How are laws, regulations, and ordinances passed? What is the budget approval process?
- Where is there common ground? Look for intersections between early childhood and municipal priorities.
- Identify local government partners supportive of your agenda and how you can/have engaged them?
- Who are the formal and informal influencers outside of government that are driving the agenda?
- What barriers/challenges have you encountered in support of young children, their families and the early childhood workforce?
- What are the opportunities you can leverage within your city’s governance structure and local leadership in support of young children, their families, and the early childhood workforce?

# Lead with a focus on young children, families, and community

It is key to keep young children, families, and community at the center, when navigating the political landscape for early childhood success. This means recognizing families as children’s first and forever teachers. It includes acknowledging that young children and families are experts in their experiences and how young children and families experience policies, practice, and programs is an individual experience and is not uniform. Understanding the landscape, who is benefiting, who is burdened and who is missing are key questions when considering the impact and unintended consequences of local policies, practices, and programs. This includes using data, both qualitative and quantitative to understand resources and needs. To further answer the three questions, disaggregate

data to understand impact across the early childhood continuum (prenatal-to-age-3/PN-3, pre-K, and K-3rd grade, workforce) and across race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, geographic location and ability.

Local early childhood systems include a diverse mix of public and private initiatives and require a commitment to work and coordinate across sectors to assess needs, identify shared goals and take effective action. “If you can get everyone to the table, and everyone starts talking, you realize you have more commonalities than differences,” said Councilmember Kelly Allen Gray of Fort Worth, Texas. “Good government figures it out and pivots to address the needs of everyone and works in partnership with others.” Municipal governments can serve as examples to local businesses and organizations by ensuring their internal policies and practices are family-friendly and support their workforce. They can lead with equity through inclusive policy practices and understanding the impact and unintended consequences of municipal policies, practices, and programs.

## POLICY & PRACTICE LEVERS

- Use** indicators and develop a dashboard with an equity focus
- Make data-informed decision** around early childhood success in your community
- Disaggregate** data and use an outcomes-based approach
- Collaborate** & partner with stakeholders
- Recognize** families as children’s first and forever teachers
- Include** families and your local early childhood workforce in decision making process

## MOVING TO ACTION ASK YOURSELF



- Is equity embedded in your early childhood success agenda?
- What is and where is the unmet need in your city for services to support young children and their families?
- Always ask: Who is benefitting, who is burdened, and who is missing?
- Understand and track your impact and unintended consequences. What is the impact along the early childhood continuum (PN-3, pre-K, and K-8)? What’s the impact across race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, geographic location and ability? What’s the impact for early childhood providers?
- How are you engaging with and involving families and the early childhood caregivers in local decision making?
- Are services and information provided to residents culturally sensitive? Are they available in the languages and literacy levels reflective of your city? Are they equitably available, affordable, and accessible to all neighborhoods?
- Does your city have a process to review current and proposed public policies and practices to understand the impact on young children, families, and the early childhood workforce?

“*I still have hope, passion, and drive, that regardless of how we vote politically, we are here to serve the people and that is what it should be regardless.*”

**KELLY ALLEN GRAY**  
Councilmember, Fort Worth, Texas





# Collaborate across departments

Providing programs and services for children, prenatal through age 8, and families takes involvement and resources of more than one department within local government. It is easy to see how roles of departments which provide direct programming “fit” into the early childhood agenda. Other departments play an important ancillary role in program and service offerings. Regardless of where the city’s early childhood agenda sits, all municipal departments play a role in improving outcomes for young children and families. Knowing this, many city leaders are placing children and families at the center of policymaking, asking how all municipal departments support children and families and considering ways to improve collaboration across departments.

Collaboration across departments is essential to placing children and families at the center of policymaking and can take a variety of forms and functions. Common challenges to fostering collaboration include, data sharing may be difficult (department systems don’t talk to each other or laws may prohibit data-sharing), conflicting priorities, and “under-resourced” or unfunded mandates. It is essential that city leaders come together collaboratively to understand how young children and families are impacted by city-wide policies and practices, determine what children and family friendly city may look like in their community and how to achieve it.

All municipal departments play a role in improving outcomes for young children and families even when it is not immediately apparent. Coral Manning, former [Early Care and Education Manager](#) for the City of Madison, Wisconsin worked with colleagues in Community Development and City Planning, keeping connected with regular meetings to stay informed and actively looking for ways to support each other’s work.



## POLICY & PRACTICE LEVERS

- Align** efforts towards increasing local early childhood success
- Support and create** shared services models
- Create** a Children’s Cabinet of stakeholders to inform decisions and recommendations regarding early childhood policies and practices
- Establish** interdepartmental meetings
- Use** your influence and authority
- Place** children and families at the center of policy and practice
- Leverage** existing city departments and local resources

“*Relationships are key to success in government. Have confidence to approach your elected officials and colleagues.*”

**CORAL MANNING**  
Madison, Wisconsin, Impact Early Childhood Systems Consultant, ICF, and NLC Early Childhood Municipal Fellow, 2020-2021

## MOVING TO ACTION ASK YOURSELF



- What is the current political landscape across departments?
- How are you currently connecting and collaborating across departments?
- Identify specific department leaders and/or staff supportive of your agenda and how you have/can engage them.
- What barriers/challenges have you encountered in collaborating across departments in support of young children, families, and the workforce?
- What are opportunities you can leverage to improve collaboration across departments in support of young children, families, and the early childhood workforce?
- Where do your early childhood plans and priorities intersect with other departments’ plans and priorities? How can you support each other?
- Does your city have a process to review current and proposed public policies and practices to understand the impact on young children, families, and the early childhood workforce?



# Build political will

Change happens when local leaders and their communities are aware of the needs of children and families, engaged in the issues, and invested in solutions. It happens when families have a voice in community policy. Building political will is key to successfully navigating the political landscape for early childhood success. It involves building a shared vision. It takes authentic engagement, seeking to understand the experiences of local young children, families, and the early childhood workforce that support them. And it takes accountability, with leaders holding themselves responsible for the outcomes and using data-informed decision-making processes.

Supporting early childhood education and success is one thing everyone can get behind but may find difficult to put into action. Effective and authentic communication with allies and across the community is a key strategy in building and continued support of their early childhood plan. In authentic communication it is important to,

- Own your city’s history and acknowledge the impact,
- Begin with the belief that families want the best for their families and are willing to do what it takes,
- Educate stakeholders on city government structure and processes, and
- Use data to understand issues, advocate for support, identify strategies, and monitor outcomes.



## POLICY & PRACTICE LEVERS

**Create** a Children’s Cabinets of stakeholders to inform decisions and recommendations regarding early childhood policies and practices

**Develop** a city-wide early childhood agenda

**Include** families in leadership and decision-making

**Dedicate** financing in support of early childhood success

**Share** data across government and community



“We need to be able to communicate specific markers of ‘high quality early learning’ and why it is important.”

**SARAH BARAY**  
CEO of [Pre-K 4 SA](#) and NLC Early Childhood Municipal Fellow, 2020-2021

## MOVING TO ACTION ASK YOURSELF



Are other city leaders, partners, businesses, families, and community members aware of the local disparities in outcomes for children?

How are you communicating and sharing information? Are communications and information sharing available in linguistic, literacy and cultural formats reflective of the city?

How is your city working with leaders across the community? What is your shared vision?

Does your work include diverse stakeholders, including parents, providers, social services, local governments, schools, non-profits, the health system and healthcare providers, business leaders, law enforcement, city planning, parks and recreation, and faith-based organizations?

How is the city investing in early childhood, both in finances and resources? How are city agencies and organizations sharing, blending or braiding resources to support the early childhood system in your city?

How are you engaging families, young children, and the early childhood workforce in local decision making? Are you addressing the gaps and needs that are important to them?

# Taking Action

Municipal leaders across the country are leveraging local policies and practices to **improve today and build a better tomorrow** for young children, families and their communities.

Many local leaders have a shared vision of thriving communities and early childhood success is part of that vision. Local leaders are placing children, families and community at the center of policymaking and [aligning efforts](#) by:

- **Considering a strong early childhood system as infrastructure** and an integral part of local economic development;
- **Serving as catalysts** for change using their convening power and bully pulpit;
- **Leveraging** their city departments policies, practices, and programs; and
- **Engaging** with and being a strong partner with families in their community.

## MOVING TO ACTION, ASK YOURSELF



What issue, social problem, related to early childhood success, are you trying to solve?

What is the objective and intended result across the early childhood continuum (PN-3, pre-K, K-3rd grade, and the early childhood workforce)? And across race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, ability, geographic location, gender, religion, and sexual orientation?

Which of the listed “policy & practice” levers identified in this brief can be implemented in your city? And how? Where is the action within the continuum of policy, practice, and program?

Where is the political will in your community? Whose voices are included in your decision-making?

How will you monitor impact and unintended consequences?



## Resources

[Cities 101](#) - National League of Cities

[Cities 101 – Delegation of Power](#) - National League of Cities

[Principles of Home Rule for the 21st Century](#) - National League of Cities

[Cities Supporting the Early Childhood Workforce](#) - National League of Cities

[Equitable Early Care and Education: An Alignment Framework and companion tool Early Childhood Alignment Rating Tool](#) - National League of Cities

[Early Learning Communities Action Guide](#) - National League of Cities and Center for the Study of Social Policy

[Center on the Developing Child](#) - Harvard University

[Heckman: The economics of human potential](#)

## Acknowledgements

This policy brief is the second in a series of briefs based on key municipal policy fundamentals. The briefs are designed to support municipal leaders as they leverage and [align local policies](#) and practices so that every city, town and village has healthy babies and happy families, and all children are thriving by 3, ready by 5, and on their way by 8.

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## Contact

Want to learn more about how to navigate the political landscape for early childhood success? Reach out to our team at [ECTeam@nlc.org](mailto:ECTeam@nlc.org).