

## Proposal for an Idaho Office of Early Childhood

**Purpose:** *Because of the fragmented way that state government oversees early childhood services, families have a hard time accessing those services – and providers have a hard time delivering them, which contributes to the current child care crisis. Creating an Office of Early Childhood will help state government serve those families and providers more efficiently and effectively; that will help to maintain access to the affordable, high quality child care needed to support Idaho’s workforce.*

The State of Idaho uses federal and state funds to provide a variety of highly valued education and care services for young children and their families. These services include [subsidized child care](#), [home visiting](#), and [early intervention services for children with special needs](#). Idaho also collaborates with the federal Head Start program. Families are not obligated to take advantage of any of these supports, but thousands of Idahoans utilize them every year. To support those families, this proposal would create an Idaho Office of Early Childhood – which would be designed improve the state’s ability to deliver early childhood services effectively.

### I. Why Unifying and Elevating Early Childhood Services Matters

Idaho has approximately 115,000 children under the age of 5; 18% of those children are from families with incomes below the federal poverty line. The first five years of life are an incredibly important time for child development, and the interaction children have with adults during these years shape their future trajectories in important ways. Parents may seek support for their developing child in many ways.

Idaho is a state that has experienced high employment rates, which has drawn new residents from across the country. But surveys of Idaho parents show that they will stay out of the workforce if they cannot find suitable care arrangements for their young child. Because earnings tend to increase over time, families with young children may have more limited resources, making it harder for them to afford the child care services they need. A disruption in adults’ ability to work can negatively affect families’ long-term earning potential, as well as the state’s economy.

Families seeking services for young children tend not to think about all of the different available government funding streams, with all of their different eligibility and programmatic requirements; they simply know what’s best for their family and are looking for help in providing it. Unfortunately, in Idaho – as in many states across the country – it can be hard for them to find the services they want. Moreover, once they find those services, they may have to go through burdensome processes to determine their eligibility and enroll their child. Truly supporting parent choice means making sure that parents have good options available, and then helping them to navigate those options effectively.

Many service providers try to help families by bundling together services, making it easier for families to find what they need. But this bundling creates its own issues for the providers. Early childhood service providers are often small, independent businesses, who operate on thin margins and have little capacity to deal with government oversight. So when they bundle services, they can find themselves subject to multiple overlapping requirements.

Effective state governments support early childhood services by performing the following functions in a coherent manner:

- Setting expectations for service quality, measuring progress toward those expectations, and providing supports for improvement;
- Managing funds to ensure that the system is producing the desired outcomes;
- Ensuring that there are enough qualified staff to fill the needed roles – which requires setting up a preparation and training pipeline, providing ongoing professional development, and supporting adequate compensation for essential roles;
- Determining eligibility for services and programs;
- Partnering effectively with local collaboratives to support their work; and
- Communicating with the public in a manner that builds awareness and trust.

Having a single agency responsible for all of those functions makes it easier for communities, families, and providers to thrive. Currently in Idaho all of those responsibilities are spread across multiple units of state government. A unified Office of Early Childhood would also be able to develop expertise in the entire early childhood system, not just parts of it. The needs of families with young children – and the workforce serving those families – cut across multiple services; a unified office could be designed to meet those needs and support that workforce more effectively.

## **II. How Unifying and Elevating Early Childhood Services Could Work**

According to the Education Commission of the States, almost half of the states in the nation have acted to create a new agency focused on early childhood, or to unify governance of early childhood in an existing agency. Multiple states have moved to unify their early childhood governance in the last few years, including Missouri and North Dakota. States often focus on establishing unified governance with a core set of early education and care programs; starting with a more limited scope allows the unified entity to get up and running successfully, with the understanding that additional services can be added to the agency over time if it is successful. A unified early childhood office can administer programs holistically, designing and implementing policy in a manner that supports effective operations by local service providers – and meets the needs of families.

Many of the core early childhood services in Idaho – the [Idaho Child Care Program](#), [IdahoSTARS](#), [home visiting](#), the [Infant-Toddler Program](#), and the Head Start Collaboration Office – are housed in different divisions of the Department of Health and Welfare. DHW is also responsible for a [significant number of services](#) beyond early childhood, including health insurance, child protection, mental health services, and a wide range of other public health and public assistance initiatives. Given the full scope of its responsibilities, it is not fair to expect DHW to have significant bandwidth to provide leadership on early childhood issues. Separating and elevating early childhood governance will strengthen the state’s ability to serve its constituents.

Creating a new Office of Early Childhood should not require a significant increase in state headcount. A new Executive Director could provide leadership and accountability on early childhood issues and should be supported by a small leadership team of at least two to three people. The line staff overseeing individual programs could be moved over from those programs’ current agencies. The new unit can leverage administrative capacity from other agencies – including functions like legal, human resources, and information technology.

The charge for the Office of Early Childhood should include the following:

- Working across programs to set definitions for service quality to guarantee quality for children and families, in a way that is feasible for providers to implement;
- Measuring and reporting on the quality of service in a way that guarantees accountability, while supporting providers to be successful;
- Reporting an annual Office budget that provides transparency on the state’s investment in young children;
- Implementing a plan for strengthening the early childhood workforce – building on [existing plans](#) – to ensure that talented personnel are being attracted into the field, and then supported to remain in the field;
- Creating a unified eligibility portal that makes it easy for families to enroll in services;
- Communicating to the public about the value and availability of early childhood services;
- Leveraging existing data more effectively to quantify the state’s existing early education and care capacity and the needs of families – and then mobilizing resources to meet those needs;
- Collaborating with other agencies that have responsibility for critical services for young children and their families that go beyond early education and care;
- Supporting effective transitions into kindergarten for all children, and effective transitions in special education for all young children with special needs<sup>1</sup>; and
- Providing an annual report on the current status of the early childhood field that utilizes integrated data to provide transparency and accountability for the Office’s work.

Federal law also requires Idaho to maintain a State Advisory Council that provides policy guidance on a range of early childhood issues. By law that Council must include a mix of stakeholders from inside and outside government. Idaho currently has an [Executive Order](#) creating an Early Childhood Advisory Council that is meant to fulfill this federal requirement. With the establishment of the Office of Early Childhood the Council should be re-established with two co-chairs – one the Executive Director of the Office of Early Childhood to represent state government, and the other a leader from outside of state government.

The timeline for creation of the Office could look as follows:

Time Period	Activity
<b>2024 Session</b>	Legislation passes authorizing the creation of the Office. An appropriation is made for FY 2025 (“Year Zero”) to hire an Executive Director and 2-3 additional staff to support and lead the transition. The legislation will authorize the full launch of the agency on July 1, 2025.
<b>Before July 1, 2024</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Governor’s Office will post the position of Executive Director and begin its search.</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> The federal law governing services for children with special needs is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Under Part B of the law – which applies to children over the age of 3 -- the State educational agency is responsible for ensuring that the state meets all statutory requirements, and that services are properly administered at the state and local level. 20 U.S.C. [§1412\(a\) \(11\)\(A\)](#). Part C of the IDEA applies to children under the age of 3, and for these services the state may designate a lead agency. 20 U.S.C. [§1437\(a\)\(1\)](#). Idaho has currently designated the Department of Health and Welfare.

<b>Time Period</b>	<b>Activity</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Governor's Office will establish a work group to support the transition on an ongoing basis. The work group will be comprised of key stakeholders from inside and outside government; throughout the course of the process it will provide advice to the Governor's Office and Executive Director.</li> </ul>
<b>July 1, 2024</b>	The Governor's Office will hire the Executive Director, who will begin managing the process of transition. The Executive Director will also be able to hire additional staff to assist with the process.
<b>Fall 2024</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Executive Director works with existing state agency staff to build out specific plans for the transition, including details on how all business systems that support the field will change over seamlessly.</li> <li>The Executive Director engages with stakeholders to build relationships and establish communication about the goals for the Office.</li> <li>The Executive Director will work with agency staff and stakeholders to build an Office budget request for the 2025 session.</li> <li>The Executive Director will engage with legislators regarding the Office's forthcoming budget request.</li> </ul>
<b>2025 Session</b>	The Executive Director will engage with the Legislature as it considers the Office's FY 2026 budget. In all likelihood the primary focus of the budget request will be on solidifying operations with existing headcount and ensuring continuity of service in existing programs.
<b>Spring 2025</b>	The Executive Director and team will finalize transition plans, including plans to implement the approved budget.
<b>July 1, 2025</b>	The new agency will launch.
<b>Summer and fall 2025</b>	The Executive Director will focus on successfully integrating the operations of the agency, and communicating with stakeholders about the process of transition. The Executive Director will also focus on preparing an FY 2027 budget.
<b>2026</b>	<p>Activities to conduct once the agency has launched include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Examining existing services to determine whether there are any efficiencies that can be realized.</li> <li>Working with stakeholders to create a consistent definition of quality, and plans to support providers to meet that definition.</li> <li>Building a plan to strengthen the early childhood workforce.</li> <li>Planning for and implementing a unified eligibility portal.</li> <li>Strengthening the state's early childhood data infrastructure.</li> </ul> <p>On an ongoing basis the Office will collaborate with other agencies and stakeholders, communicate about the value of early childhood, and work to support successful transitions into kindergarten. The Office will also engage actively with legislators to hear their feedback and keep them informed of the Office's activities.</p>
<b>June 30, 2026</b>	The Office will submit its first annual report to the Governor and Legislature detailing its activities and future plans.

Idaho has shown a willingness to reorganize government to meet the needs of its constituents. For example, the 2017 creation of the [Workforce Development Council](#) was designed to help Idaho employers fill essential roles – and attract new employees to move to Idaho. Idaho is a [national leader](#) in attracting new residents, in significant part due to its thriving economy. An Office of Early Childhood

could help make Idaho a national leader in supporting families with young children, which in turn would support the state's continued economic growth.

### **III. Conclusion**

In sum, under this proposal Idaho would:

- Create a new Office of Early Childhood that brings together child care, IdahoSTARS, home visiting, the Infant-Toddler Program, and the Head Start Collaboration Office;
- Hire an Executive Director and small leadership team for the Office of Early Childhood, with authority to set policy for all of its programs – and a charge to collaborate with other agencies and key stakeholders; and
- Re-establish Idaho's Early Childhood Advisory Council as an inside-outside partnership dedicated to charting a productive course for the state.

The goal of the change would be to make it easier for families to access the services they need, make state government a better partner to community early childhood leaders, and better support the service providers working with families to help their children thrive.