



# **New Jersey Council for Young Children End-of-Year-Report 2021**

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## Introduction

The New Jersey Council for Young Children (Council) received a grant from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), to implement a three-year plan to improve the state's coordination and quality of programs and services for infants, toddlers, and young children from birth to age eight. The Governor-designated Council is authorized by the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 and held its first meeting in February 2010. New Jersey received \$1.7 million for the work of the Council.

The 25-member Council is in, but not of, the NJ Department of Education and represents all state agencies with oversight of programs for families and children from birth to age eight, including The Departments of Education, Human Services, Health, Labor, and Children and Families. Head Start agencies and organizations, advocacy groups, child-care organizations, school districts, universities, and foundations are also represented.

Except for some initial appointments at the outset, there is a three-year term for members, and gubernatorial appointments fill vacancies. There was a three-year term (except for some first appointments) for initial member appointments, and vacancies were filled by gubernatorial appointment.

With the federal funds, the Council developed the following goals:

- Develop a coordinated system of early childhood programs and services statewide with a data information sharing system that meets the early care and education needs of infants, young children, and their families throughout the state, from birth to age eight.
- Identify and improve services for infants, young children, and families by coordinating outreach efforts across state agencies, school districts, and community and faith-based organizations, including, but not limited to, underserved populations.
- Develop a coherent set of early learning and development and program standards that address all areas of development for ages birth to eight that lead to positive outcomes for infants, young children, and their families.
- Strengthen the preparation and ongoing professional development of all early education and care professionals to optimize their positive impact on the development and learning of young children, ages birth to eight.
- Identify and plan a system of comprehensive, aligned program quality improvement processes for early care and education from birth to age eight, including a tiered Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS).
- Provide information to help the public recognize the value of early care and education for the well-being of infants and children, ages birth to eight, and the state.

Since its inception in 2010, Council members have been instrumental in developing the following:

- Questions and outcomes-based objectives for the NJ Enterprise Analysis System for Early Learning (NJ-EASEL, the integrated data system)
- NJ Core Knowledge and Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals revised
- Birth to Three Infant and Toddler Early Learning Standards
- NJ Early Learning Pathways
- Family Engagement Practices that Help Children Thrive
- Workforce Studies
- Outreach Studies
- Infants and Toddlers in Center-based Care Study
- Infant Mental Health Endorsement

Other accomplishments include:

- Mapping a report of NJ Early Childhood Mental Health Professionals
- Promoting the Pyramid Model training and integration into early care and education programs

### **Purpose of Report**

The purpose of the New Jersey Council for Young Children's end-of-year report is two-fold:

1. First, this report will highlight the work and accomplishments of the Council during 2021.
2. Second, this report will share Council challenges and provide recommendations to improve the efficacy of the Council.

### **2021 Highlights**

While funding is no longer attached to the Council, the Council is still responsible for ensuring coordination and alignment of early care and education services across New Jersey to enhance the quality of the state's early childhood programs and systems from birth to age 8. The Council also makes policy recommendations and collaboratively sets the early education and care agenda.

In 2020, the COVID pandemic took the entire world by storm, and it continues to change

our daily lives. During this global crisis, Council members pushed for policies and funding to protect children, parents, caregivers, educators, essential workers, and other professionals in the early childhood workforce. The Council also continued with its charge to advance work that supports the coordination of quality, comprehensive systems of early care and education at the state level.

Some examples include:

- The Council presented at First Lady Tammy Murphy's Nurture NJ Maternal and Infant Health Interdepartmental Meeting. It highlighted their work to build a comprehensive, state early childhood system through partnerships with:
  - The BUILD Initiative
  - NJ Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (NJ PRAMS)
  - Center for Health Care Strategies
  - NJ Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Statewide Action Plan Interagency Team
- The Council successfully cultivated partnerships with pediatric providers via Zero to Three's Healthy Steps Initiative and Reach Out and Read, to support children and families and ensure a foundation for children's success
- The Council continues oversight of NJ's early childhood integrated data system, NJ-EASEL. It leads the way as a model in the area of data governance, presenting at two national conferences:
  - 2021 PDG B-5 Technical Assistance Center Virtual Convening
  - 2021 State Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) BEST Practices Conference
- The Council developed a self-assessment survey to collect information about the efficacy of the Council, prepare an end-of-year report, begin agenda planning for 2022 and make modifications as necessary

### Challenges

The Council's end-of-the-year survey identified some of the following challenges:

- Cross-functional/departmental/agency participation
- Effectively contributing to the Council's work and decision-making
- Council infrastructure (committees, working groups, Chair)
- Publicity

## Recommendations

According to the [bylaws](#) for the Council, the Council should have a Chair, Vice-Chair, Executive Director, and a Secretary. However, due to staffing challenges, the Council currently has only one person responsible for oversight, who also serves as the Administrator of the Council. The Administrator has other responsibilities within the Division of Early Childhood Services.

In the end-of-the-year survey, Council members shared recommendations on how to improve the efficiency of the Council without the infrastructure outlined in the bylaws:

### **The Council recommended the following for improving effective contributions to their work and decisions:**

- Identify and define leadership roles for the Council
- The Council's goals should define the expected contribution of its members
- Incorporate early childhood stakeholders across different sectors to fortify a comprehensive early childhood system that supports the workforce, students, and parents
- Engage members of the Council in the operations and priorities of the agencies, perhaps through volunteerism, to better inform their duties

### **The Council recommended the following for improving cross-functional/department/agency participation:**

- The goals of the Council should define the cross-functional/department/agency participation
- Include additional state agencies that impact the early childhood space, directly or indirectly, such as housing and transportation
- Encourage regular updates on departmental and interdepartmental work with respect to the goals of the Council

### **The Council recommended the following for improving their overall work:**

- Reestablish committees or working groups within the Council that could assist departments with analyzing progress and making solution-based recommendations
- Improve accountability to the Bylaws and measure progress against goals each year
- Continue to use meeting time as a useful way to share and discuss current issues, trends, and best practices from around the state
- Provide recommendations for appointments to address any gaps in key issue areas identified by the Council

- Identify ways to promote the work of the Council to the public

The Council Administrator is set to interface with the respective state partners' leadership teams to initiate a plan of action that includes resources and state supports necessary to implement the above-mentioned recommendations.