

Call to Action Series | *Community Assessment*

## *State and Local Leaders Need Integrated Data Approaches and Tools to Better Coordinate Early Childhood Programs and Services*

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### ***States Lack Comprehensive and Coordinated Community-Level Early Childhood Program and Service Data***

Community-level data<sup>1</sup> are valuable for understanding the need for, availability of, and quality of early childhood programs and services. But these data are often provided through a plethora of websites and program reports. Reports often only include data on one type of program (e.g., child care or health services). Given the complexity of early childhood programs and services, policymakers and community leaders require clear, timely, and integrated information that cuts across program areas. Without these integrated data, it is difficult to effectively assess needs, evaluate impact, customize solutions for their communities, and foster greater community engagement in early childhood efforts. States and local public agencies lack information that enables a holistic understanding about early childhood programs and services that can inform their decision-making.



ECDataWorks developed the Community Assessment Framework to guide states in the integration and use of early childhood data across four key areas: eligibility, access, services, and impact. Tools and reports that align with this framework can support early childhood providers, advocates, state administrators, and policymakers with strategic planning.

### ***Why a Call to Action?***

State agencies are being charged to examine how to create tools and reports to better use integrated data to support program and policy decisions. ECDataWorks, in partnership with state agencies, identified the need for analytic tools in four critical policy areas: school readiness, community assessment, data stories, and data governance.

The Call to Action Series examines common challenges and highlights states' successes in using topical frameworks to build tools to address these policy issues. These briefs charge other states to develop similar analytic tools to guide evidence-based program and policy decisions.

<sup>1</sup> A community may be defined as a service region, a school district, or a county.

## Utah's Community Assessment Tool: A Comprehensive and Consistent Approach to Community-Level Reporting

Utah's early childhood providers and state-level early childhood administrators wanted integrated data to help them understand the programs and services offered in communities and the needs of children and families. Given that programs are managed by different agencies and funded in different ways, the Utah Department of Health identified the need for a comprehensive and consistent approach to assessing community needs and reviewing current programs and services. Responding to the need for a new approach, the Utah team partnered with ECDataWorks and used the Community Assessment Framework to develop and implement an analytic process and tool called the Early Childhood "Community Assessment Tool", or the CAT, leveraging both public data and data from the state's Early Childhood Integrated Data Systems (ECIDS). The CAT is designed to allow users to easily access and compare integrated data in one place and can be used to inform decisions about improvements to programs or services.

As a result, the CAT includes the following data:



### Eligibility

Data on the number of children by age, child/family risk factors at birth, and children living in poverty.



### Access

Data on child care slots and vacancies by age and a map of early childhood providers by program.



### Services

Data on whether children are participating in early childhood programs and counts of children by program, age, and gender.



### Impact

Data on kindergarten entry assessments.



*The Utah team hopes that using the CAT as part of their community needs assessment and strategic planning processes will yield the following benefits:*

1. Increased understanding by state staff about the populations served to better respond to funding requests
2. More robust and targeted information to share with key decision makers
3. Better informed and more targeted local and regional planning and improvement, including identification of any new assessments needed
4. Increased coordination between programs
5. Increased engagement by community members
6. Data to inform the Governor's Utah Education Roadmap initiative

## Are You Ready to Take Action?

If you are interested in using the Community Assessment Framework to build integrated data tools to better coordinate early childhood programs and services, ECDataWorks and their state partners recommend four steps. First, engage your state/community partners to determine their interest in developing a tool or report using the framework. When engaging your partners, consider using the following prompts.

- Do state and local stakeholders struggle to make data-informed decisions about early childhood services?
- Do stakeholders express a need for tools to examine community-level data about the status of early childhood services?
- Are there data requests/needs common across groups that could be included in an analytic tool, thus reducing the number of requests?

Second, review the [Community Profiles: Getting Started - Guidelines and Tools for Developing Early Childhood Community Profiles<sup>2</sup>](#) developed by ECDataWorks, in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education's Statewide Longitudinal Data System program. This guide will inform your efforts and includes a set of questions that you will be able to answer and take action from using a community assessment tool. Third, to determine the feasibility of developing and implementing a tool or report using the Community Assessment Framework in your state/community. Fourth and final, visit [ecdaworks.org](http://ecdaworks.org) to access more resources on this topic.

<sup>2</sup> Please note that the term "Community Profile" is used in the SLDS/ECDataWorks guide. For this document, community profile can be used interchangeably with "Community Assessment Tool."