

*Child Care Policy Research  
Issue Brief 1*

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Research and  
Child Care Policy  
*A View from the States*

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#### About the Research and State Child Care Administrators Residency Roundtable

In August 1998 nine participants from five states worked together in Skamakowa, Washington, on the topic of research and state child care policy. They represented the perspectives of state-level child care administrators, researchers and child care practitioners. Participants included:

- Janis Elliot, Oregon Child Care Research Partnership, Portland, Oregon
- Arthur Emlen, Regional Research Institute for Human Services, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon
- Lee Kreader, Illinois Bureau of Child Care and Development, Chicago, Illinois
- Larry Shadbolt, Oregon Adult and Family Services, Salem, Oregon
- Rod Southwick, Massachusetts Office of Child Care Services, Boston, Massachusetts
- Linda Stern, Oregon Child Care Division, Employment Department, Salem, Oregon
- Barbara Tayman, Maryland Office of Child Care Administration, Department of Human Resources, Baltimore, Maryland
- Karen Tvedt, Washington Office of Child Care Policy, Olympia, Washington
- Bobbie Weber, Director, Oregon Child Care Research Partnership and Director, Family Resources, Linn-Benton Community College, Albany, Oregon

More than 45 state child care administrators participated in a survey or focused discussion that was held in Washington, D.C., as part of the Child Care Bureau's 1998 state administrators' conference. Their candor in responding and their evident commitment to the well-being of children and families informed and influenced the proceedings during the Roundtable. The National Center for Child Care Information is facilitating contact with the states. Their ongoing support is appreciated. The Oregon Child Care Research Partnership acknowledges its appreciation and gratitude for the contributions of roundtable participants, survey respondents, and discussion group members. Our deepest wish is that this effort will help them carry out their important work.

#### About the Residency Roundtables

A Residency Roundtable is a strategy to support cross-state learning and research development. The roundtables are designed to move forward understanding on a critical policy issue. Researchers, state staff and child care practitioners from a diverse set of states come together with Oregon partners for three days of shared learning and problem solving of issues on which Oregon partners and invitees bring expertise.

#### About the Oregon Child Care Research Partnership

The Oregon Child Care Research Partnership has ten years' experience working together on policy-focused research. Researchers from two major state universities work with staff administering the state child care programs, a community college's family support program, the Oregon Progress Board, Head Start, Department of Education, Oregon Child Care Resource and Referral Network, the Career Development Center, the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, and the parent-driven Policy Council. Working with the Child Care Bureau, other federal offices who provide leadership on child care, consortium partnerships, and other national organizations, the Oregon partnership works to enhance the capacity of states to do state-specific, policy-relevant research.

#### About the Child Care Policy Research Consortium

The Child Care Policy Research Consortium is an initiative of the Child Care Bureau in the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. In its unique approach to policy-relevant research, the consortium brings together researchers, state child care administrative staff, and child care practitioners from across the United States. Partnerships focus on state-relevant policy research, and the consortium identifies cross-state themes, trends and findings. Effective use of state administrative data for informing state policy is a common thread in a diverse set of research efforts specially focused on the needs of children in low-income families.

This paper is a product of the Oregon Child Care Research Partnership, which is supported in part by the Child Care Bureau in the Administration for Children, Youth and Families, Administration for Children and Families and the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services.

# *Abstract*

Child care research is reported with the hope that the findings will affect policy and practice. According to a survey of state child care administrators, it does not necessarily happen. This paper examines reasons for limited use of research by state policy makers. The paper explores policy issues states currently face and discusses research needed to inform policy decisions related to child care. Research partnerships, a promising strategy for addressing state research needs, are described. Recommendations emphasize strategies to close the gap between research and state policy making. The paper concludes with the need for strengthening the data and research capacity of states.

# Introduction

Child care serves a multitude of public and private policy initiatives in today's society. These include school readiness, welfare to work, family support, education reform and work force development. The diversity of policy initiatives in which child care is central challenges state child care administrators. They must think and act across agency lines and across private and public sectors to support the development of a child care system that serves this broad array of policy initiatives. Child care administrators work within a state agency whose mission is narrower than the vision for child care. They daily face the challenges of reaching outside the particular perspective of their home base to serve a varied and broad constituency.

While family policy questions (such as how to build a child care system that strengthens families) are always important, there is a special urgency to these questions at this particular time in history. The passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), otherwise referred to as "welfare reform," signaled the end of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. Not only did the passage of welfare reform end the basic guarantees to child and family support that were established 50 years earlier, but the legislation also shifted responsibility for creating alternative strategies to the state and local level. States have taken this responsibility seriously; indeed, federal legislators relied on state experiences in drafting the welfare reform legislation.

States are making major investments of flexible federal dollars and of state and local funds to build child care systems including expanded subsidy programs that will meet the needs of low-

income families. States are, however, making these investments with insufficient information about the child care choices of parents and the adequacy of the child care supply available to meet parent needs. Given that all child care is local, the capacity to answer supply and demand questions must be sensitive enough to capture local variation. With increased decision making in the states, a state capacity to collect and analyze data is critically needed in order to have timely, relevant information on which to base policy.

## Background

When Congress enacted the Child Care and Development Block Grant in 1990, a new and important era in federal child care policy was launched. The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) was followed in swift measure by child care programs designed to support efforts to move low-income households off public assistance and into the work force. The passage of welfare reform in 1996 and the concurrent merging of child care funding streams into the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) were accompanied by significant new federal and state dollars into the child care system. Almost overnight the states found themselves with considerable authority and significant responsibility to enact programs that would implement this policy initiative. Many states found themselves lacking information about children and families that was essential for good policy decisions. Some states had begun to implement research efforts that combined existing data sources (for example, census and administrative data) with new sources in order to answer basic questions relevant to child care policy.

In 1995 the Child Care Bureau of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families

established funding for three child care research partnerships to build on the efforts in Oregon and other states. The three partnerships joined in an informally structured Child Care Policy Research Consortium, and they invited other state and federal staff, researchers, and practitioners to participate in the effort to produce information that would enhance the capacity of states to carry out policy-relevant research on an ongoing basis. In 1997 the Child Care Bureau expanded the effort by creating five additional research partnerships. At the core of the research consortium is exploration of the relationship between the policy work of the states and research. By creating working partnerships of state administrators, child care practitioners and researchers, each research partnership is developing a model of state-level policy research.

The Oregon Partnership created Residency Roundtables to move forward knowledge on important policy research topics. A residency roundtable is a strategy to support cross-state learning and research development. The roundtables bring together experts for an intense three-day study of a topic. The research consortium identified the relationship of state policy making and research as a high priority topic for a roundtable.

In August 1998 the Oregon Child Care Research Partnership held a residency roundtable on the needs, experiences and issues of state child care administrators in the area of research. The task was to understand how research does and does not serve child care policy making for states.

# Method

**T**he Oregon Child Care Research Partnership explored the research needs of state child care administrators in two stages. The first stage focused on collecting information from the states through a survey and group discussion with state child care administrators. A survey was mailed, faxed, or e-mailed in summer 1998 to child care administrators identified by the National Child Care Information Center. Administrators who participated in a discussion of child care research needs at their annual meeting in Washington, DC in July 1998, also completed surveys. In all, 47 administrators replied to the survey from 38 identified states\* plus 8 administrators whose

state was not identified, and two known to be from the same state. It is likely that 45 states were represented.

The second stage was an intensive, three-day residency roundtable held August 17–20, 1998, in Skamokawa, Washington. Nine participants, representing the perspectives of state-level child care administration, research and delivery of child care services, came together to address the topic. The participants included administrators from Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Oregon and Washington. The roundtable began with review, analysis and interpretation of the survey findings, which led to a more in-depth discussion of changing demands on state child care administrators and how they meet their research needs.

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\* THE 38 IDENTIFIED STATES OR TERRITORIES REPRESENTED BY RESPONDING CHILD CARE ADMINISTRATORS: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Delaware, Florida, Guam, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, Nebraska, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, Texas, South Carolina, Tennessee, Vermont, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

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# Research and State Policy Making

## State Administrator Survey and Discussion Group

### Profile of survey respondents

The questionnaire identified how long respondents had been child care administrators and which funding programs they administered—Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or Title XX of the Social Services Amendments of 1974. Seven administrators had been on the job less than a year, and 8 for 10 years or more, with two-thirds falling in between. All were administering CCDF; 26, TANF; and 18, Title XX—with 15 administering both TANF and Title XX, 17 administering TANF or Title XX but not both, and 15 administering neither TANF nor Title XX (that is, CCDF only). These data helped in recognizing the diverse and changing jobs of child care administrators.

### Survey Findings

#### *What state administrators reported regarding use of research:*

The survey asked administrators to rate the extent to which their child care policy decisions were influenced by their own agency’s research, independent research, advocacy groups, practical experience, or political realities. Political realities and practical experience won hands down as the major perceived sources of influence on their policy decisions; that these had a great deal of influence was reported by approximately two-thirds. Independent research was least influential; 11% of administrators indicated it had a great deal of influence. Research conducted by their own agency was nearly three times as likely to have had a great deal of influence (31%) as did independent research. Advocacy had a great deal of influence for 26% of respondents.

CHILD CARE POLICY DECISIONS					
<i>To what extent do you think the child care policy decisions in your job as child care administrator are influenced by...</i>	Not Very Much	To Some Extent	A Great Deal	# of state administrators responding	percentage who indicated “a great deal”
<i>research conducted by our own agency:</i>	11	20	14	45	31%
<i>research conducted by independent organizations:</i>	14	28	5	47	11%
<i>advocacy efforts from early childhood organizations:</i>	8	26	12	46	26%
<i>practical experience from past and current programs:</i>	2	15	30	47	64%
<i>political realities:</i>	2	13	31	46	67%
<i>other:</i>	2	1	6	9	67%

**What state administrators reported regarding barriers to use of research:**

The survey explored barriers to use of research by asking for reasons they, as administrators, did not use research. The barrier to use of research most frequently cited by state administrators was that their agency was not able to conduct the kinds of research that would be useful.

Slightly more than half reported this lack of research capacity. Forty percent reported lack of time to review relevant research, and one-third had not found research relevant to their decisions.

Through open-ended questions, the survey also explored what kind of research was helpful, and which issues were confronting administrators at this time. These comments also contributed to the study material.

CHILD CARE POLICY RESEARCH BARRIERS		
<i>“To the extent that you do not use research in making major policy decisions, please check as many factors that apply.”</i>	# of administrators who reported a given barrier applies	percentage who reported a given barrier applies
<i>Don’t have time to review relevant research:</i>	19	40%
<i>Have not found research relevant to the kinds of decisions I face:</i>	15	32%
<i>My agency is not able to conduct the kinds of research that would be useful:</i>	25	53%
<i>I don’t feel confident interpreting the research that is available:</i>	4	9%
<i>Other:</i>	8	17%

NUMBER OF RESEARCH BARRIERS REPORTED		
	# of administrators	percentage of administrators
<i>No barriers</i>	10	21%
<i>One barrier</i>	11	23%
<i>Two barriers</i>	15	32%
<i>Three barriers</i>	9	19%
<i>Four barriers</i>	2	4%
<i>Total barriers reported</i>	47	99%

Discussion group findings

***What state administrators reported as priority policy topics:***

Through both survey and discussion groups, state administrators identified policy issues with which their states were currently dealing. Often reported topics are clustered into themes.

*Child care market*

- Determination of cost of care—methods for market rate studies
- Assessment of the capacity of the child care system to meet current and projected demands
- Evaluation of capacity-building efforts
- Needs assessments
- Conceptualization of market that includes relative and friend care
- Increased understanding of consumer decision making
- Assessment of capacity for inclusion of children with special needs

*Health and safety*

- Effective licensing practices
- Assessment of health and safety levels in care purchased with public funds

*Quality*

- Assessment of quality
- Impact of training initiatives on quality
- Impact of compensation strategies such as access to benefits on quality
- Relationship of relative and close friend care with quality, affordability, availability and continuity

*Subsidy programs*

- Estimation of need for subsidies
- Projection of demand for subsidies under different policy scenarios
- Linkage of training and other quality indicators to a differential rate structure

*General data issues*

- Data standardization
- Accurate and unduplicated counts
- Creation of longitudinal data sets
- Comparison of state data with that of other states or the nation
- Capacity to link data sets from subsidy, licensing, child care resource and referral agencies, early intervention and others

## *Research and State Policy Making*

# Reflections of a Residency Roundtable

### Current practice

**A** principal purpose of the survey was to equip roundtable participants with current information. The roundtable began by having experienced child care administrators interpret the survey data and dig more deeply into how useful research may or may not be to decisions faced in administering child care programs. Building upon the state administrators' responses, the roundtable participants articulated the following findings about the relationship between state child care policy making and research.

### *Child care administrators make limited use of research in decision making*

- Child care administrators face time constraints and find research not adequately relevant to their situation.
- Child care administrators perceive a risk when research is applied to agency operations. There is fear that research results can be misused or turned against the agency.
- Factors other than research (child care administrator's experience, history, political realities, budget processes decisions and available resources) are more influential in decision making research.
- There are substantial changes in the role of child care administrators, which relate at least in part to changes in source and level of funding.
- Child care administrators see research as relevant and credible when conducted by researchers who have respect for the practitioner and understand the complexity of the system, and when the research addresses questions of immediate concern to state policy decisions.
- Child care serves many public policy agenda.

Resources tend to drive policy making more than does applied research. (Resources currently come from TANF, but could come from some other direction in the future.) Research partnerships provide an opportunity to broaden the questioning beyond the needs of a single funding source.

- State administrators rate the influence of internal state research more highly than research by independent organizations, specifically that done by advocacy groups.
- There is a "Catch 22": Administrators are more influenced by their own research than by outside researchers but don't have time or capacity to conduct it.

### *Researchers are challenged by the complexity of the child care system.*

- The child care system encompasses multiple stakeholders, components and sectors. Even learning the language of child care is challenging.
- Administrative data were not created for research, but rather for eligibility determination or other administrative purposes. Using administrative data for research purposes presents challenges.
- There is value in sharing data among states.

### *Child care serves many public policy agenda for states.*

- Resources tend to drive policy making more than does applied research. Currently TANF is the primary source of resources, but the source could be labor or education initiatives in the future.
- Research partnerships provide an opportunity to broaden the questioning beyond the needs of a single funding source.

- Child care research needs to reflect the larger context of community and family life.
- Legislators and other policy makers desire state-specific data and findings to answer questions related to program design and administration.

#### Role of underlying values

Policy work is supported or guided by a set of values or basic beliefs. Articulation of those beliefs provides a foundation. Roundtable participants articulated the following basic values. They serve as the foundation of this work and as an example of the beliefs that underlie policy work.

#### ***Strong healthy communities play a vital role in supporting the positive growth and development of families and children.***

Access to child care is one important component of a system of community-based family support strategies. Families must have access to an array of supports as they manage the challenging task of raising a family in the current economic and social climate.

#### ***All child care is local.***

Families live and work in communities, and what goes on in communities, impacts family decisions. Employment, education and child care opportunities vary greatly from one community to the next. Therefore, child care policy decisions must be informed by local factors.

#### ***Policy decisions call for a marriage of research and experience.***

Decisions need to be informed by the real-life experiences of families and practitioners, as well as by research that offers additional objectivity, findings and perspectives. Decision making is strengthened when it draws on research as well as experience. Experience brings rich understanding of history, values, priorities and know-how in dealing with a policy and service environment. Experience can also be blindsided by unexamined program outcomes. Outcomes may result from population demographics as well as from policy and services. Research studies can detect impacts and outcomes that follow policy and program

decisions. Yet the ability of research to make useful and appropriate comparisons depends on the voice of experience in sharpening the questions, sampling, variables, measurements, analysis and interpretation of findings.

#### ***The risks involved in not doing research are greater than the risks involved in doing it.***

We live and work in a changing environment. To avoid change risks obsolescence and irrelevance. Good research strategies help us understand the nature of change and adapt to it in productive ways. Embarking on policies without research risks unintended consequences.

#### ***Working relationships among people are more effective when based on respect and trust.***

Making an effort to overcome barriers among disciplines, agencies, professions and political groups takes time and patience. The effort, which strengthens and improves our services to children and families, is worth it.

#### Research needs

States need to have methodologies for continuously answering basic questions such as the following:

- How much child care is there?
- How much child care do we need?
- Where are the gaps?
- How many families need subsidies? How many families are currently served and for how long? How many of those eligible for a subsidy will use it? What will it cost to provide subsidies?
- What does child care cost?
- What is the quality of available care? What is the quality of care purchased with subsidies?

Significant barriers exist. Needed data are not maintained by a single organization and are collected as a by-product of service delivery. Manipulating administrative data in order to answer basic questions is both challenging and time-consuming for researchers and organization staff. Important questions can only be answered by combining data from different sources.

Research and program needs differ. For instance, practitioners commonly delete outdated data to keep data sets manageable, and researchers need detailed histories to determine the impact of a policy on families served.

Policy makers want answers based on local and state data, and they typically want them in a few days. Few states have data in a format that can be easily queried; access to research staff who can find reliable answers is seldom available. Technology makes it feasible for states to answer basic questions and track changes.

A high level of consensus on priority policy issues emerged from the survey of the states. Access to basic research tools will enhance, and may even be necessary for, states' capacity to make informed decisions on policy issues. Examples include models for estimating child care supply and demand, market rate studies and complex models that will assess need for subsidy as well as predict usage under different policy scenarios.

Through research partnerships some states have created the research capacity to take on these challenges, but even they have much to do before basic questions can be routinely answered.

Essential components of an effective state-level effort to develop a research partnership

It is common for states to engage in research partnerships involving multiple state agencies and these partnerships may also include researchers and practitioners. Whether the research project is being conducted through a contract with an outside contractor or through a cooperative project with several other groups, the following are essential components of policy-related research partnerships.

### ***Build working relationships.***

Given the diversity of backgrounds, organizations and agendas involved in successful research partnerships, it is important to pay close attention to building effective working relationships. The Oregon effort began by assembling representatives of key groups in a largely informal setting. For the first year or more, meetings were held in the living room of one of the team mem-

bers to find "neutral ground" where the group could focus on identifying common interests. After a year or so, the group developed a memorandum of agreement that helped to clarify the contribution and expectations of member organizations. Once a partnership is built, the core group can bring others into the work as different projects develop.

Maryland built its partnership by starting with individuals whose trust and rapport already existed. As others joined the partnership, that climate of trust extended to them. Over time, members worked together and established their own sense of trust in the partnership. Whatever the process, paying attention to building strong, effective relationships from the beginning is important.

Trust is important because there will inevitably be challenges to agency staff working with people from outside the agency. There can be a tension between the free search of truth and agency policy. For example, a consumer survey can elicit responses that question the agency's current policy. These responses can be handled within the context of a trusting, working relationship. Without this base of trust, the questions might never be asked, or the responses may never be examined. Risks like these are inherent in doing meaningful policy research. The involvement of state administrators and staff in the research design and analysis is important to ensure that the research is put in an appropriate context.

### ***Who are the stakeholders?***

What do they bring to the table in terms of skills and resources? What is the context of their interest in the issue? How can you remain inclusive even if everyone is not involved on every project? What strategies will reduce barriers to participation such as those faced by parents? Policy research that involves stakeholders increases the relevance and usefulness of findings. Child care policy begins and ends with parents and their children. Other stakeholders include partners in the child care system who are responsible for licensing, subsidy, TANF, training, child care resource and referral, and child care plan

ning. Advocacy and practitioner groups are key stakeholders.

### ***What is a credible research capacity?***

How do you recognize and judge it? Having the knowledge, experience and skill of researchers in the partnership gives credibility to findings and will probably save time and money. Including researchers from outside state government increases perceived objectivity of the findings.

### ***Make it last.***

Make a plan to institutionalize the effort. Individuals with commitment, skill and vision unquestionably play a significant role in the success of research projects, but it's risky to rely on them indefinitely. By building networks and identifying persons in different agencies with the kinds of skill and interests needed for these projects, the departure of key staff will have less impact on the progress of projects. The reality of government agencies is that they reorganize.

### ***Look for a catalyst or "hot issue" and take advantage of it.***

In Oregon, a community planning initiative directed at improving the well-being of children and families provided the incentive to bring different partners to the table. A focused effort has been sustained by having a series of research projects linked to statewide benchmarks from a biennial household survey. The research funding opportunities provided by the Child Care Bureau provided the incentive in many other states. Have vision. Look for opportunities and take advantage of them when they present themselves.

Essential components of an effective state-level research project

The following are essential considerations when planning policy-related research projects. A project may be part of an ongoing research partnership, or a group may come together to carry out a specific project.

### ***Define roles and responsibilities.***

Since collaborative projects operate outside

of the traditional lines of authority, it is essential to attend to definitions of responsibility and authority for a project. There should be a designated point person for a particular project. This individual does not have to be, and probably should not always be, the same person. Responsibilities include the coordination of logistics, clarification of responsibilities and commitments, and overall project planning.

### ***What do you want to know?***

What are the questions? How are they different from the questions of others who have worked on this topic? Be specific, be quite clear, and set priorities. The Oregon project, for example, started with five questions that policy makers most needed answered. These five questions have continued to guide the research partnership over a decade. The questions were refined, narrowed or clarified, but they remained essentially the same. It is tempting to expand the scope of interest. In the roundtable's experience, it is essential to maintain priorities.

### ***What information will be most useful to your audience?***

Who will use the information and how will they use it? How are you going to disseminate and demonstrate its usefulness to your audience? Research findings can be reported in numerous formats, ranging from formal research papers to short, easily read reports. Audiences for the research findings can include legislators, state and local government leaders, professional organizations, advocacy groups, providers and parents.

### ***What data are needed?***

Given the research question(s), what information is needed? available? accessible? Do you need to gather data from other sources? The ability to access multiple sources of relevant data increases as more partners come to the table. The different organizations involved in early childhood development, child care, labor and work force development, family assistance and economic development all collect a variety of data for their particular organization objectives. These

sources can be combined to get important information about families' child care needs and choices. For example, consortium members have combined subsidy data with earnings data in Alabama, California, Florida and Oregon to increase understanding of the relationship between subsidy programs and employment. Child care resource and referral data provide supply and cost information for numerous studies. Efforts to collect new data can be designed to meet the needs of different organizations and facilitate collaborative research efforts.

***Can data from different sources be combined?***

Data standardization, including consensus on definitions for data fields, is critical to the ability to combine data in order to answer key policy questions. Reaching a common understanding about the meaning of different data elements and terms is especially important when representatives from many different agencies are involved. It is important to check back from time to time to make sure that definitions are still the same. Staff may turn over, or people may have developed dif-

ferent working definitions as the project evolves. Illinois, for example, found that the criteria initially used to define an active child care case changed during a state reorganization.

***What is your capacity for the project?***

Assess your capacity to carry out the project. Do you need outside resources or new and different partners? Do you need outside assistance to operationalize a project?

The technology of the researcher needs to match the capacity of the partner who collects the data; many agencies with access to important child care information are not necessarily equipped to present data in the format to which researchers are accustomed. For example, Massachusetts child care administration and its research partner provided equipment and training to child care resource and referral agencies to help with geo-mapping. As a result of this project, the Massachusetts resource and referral agencies were able to assist other geocoding efforts to map transportation routes, child care facilities, residences of TANF families and locations of large employers.

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THE CHILD CARE BUREAU PUBLICATION, *Planning Resources for State Child Care Administrators*, provides detailed help for planning collaborative research projects. Further help can be found in *Using Research to Improve Child Care for Low-Income Families*, also from the Child Care Bureau.

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# Recommendations to Stakeholders

**T**he issues facing states come out of a broad range of societal initiatives including welfare reform, education reform, early care and education, and family support. Given the breadth and complexity of social initiatives in which child care is involved, key issues for discussion are the link between research and political realities. Central to this discussion is how to maximize the impact of research on policy decisions. From the roundtable participants' point of view, the answers to this question lie in understanding the needs and perspectives of the stakeholders involved in building the child care system.

Recognizing that trust and respect play a crucial role in building a research capacity that can enhance child care policy decisions, the next section addresses the various stakeholder groups. One of the most important ingredients of conducting successful collaborative research is an understanding of the context of all the players. The following messages provide an opportunity to view issues related to research and state policy from multiple stakeholder perspectives.

## *A message to state child care administrators Your work is important.*

State administrators face a challenge. You are often seen as the spokesperson for the development of the state child care system, yet you work within an agency that has a more limited scope of responsibility. Research that addresses this broad system-building mission requires strategies to bring different perspectives together. Many changes have taken place that may complicate the role you are expected to play. There is an important role in policy making. Data is power if you use it. People who have the information can be influential in decision making; using data to

answer key policy questions can help maintain your role in the process.

## *Keep looking at the forest.*

Undoubtedly, the preponderance of your daily work focuses on program requirements. There are probably days when you think your work is about nothing but TANF or CCDF, or the micro detail of some administrative rule. It is important to remember that all of these individual programs are only a part of the larger context of building a system of family support. By aligning the information generated in the process of state administration and working with others in research efforts, your work can be connected with the larger picture. Research can help make meaning out of some of the daily tasks associated with child care administration. The good news is that you already have data and experience and don't have to start from scratch.

## *Remember what it's all about.*

The perspective of parents is frequently missing from public policy decisions about child care. It is very important that you work with partners to elicit parental input. Parental input must reflect the broad spectrum of families accessing the child care system, not just low-income families moving off public assistance. Administrative data do not provide that kind of information; it is important to develop specific strategies to obtain it.

## *A message to federal agency partners The states are where the action is.*

The direction of federal policy in recent years has moved more decisions to the state level. The research capacity to support state-level policy making has to follow. National and state policy

making are related and hopefully support one another. Research capacity is necessary to inform policy making at both levels. It is not a choice between national and state research capacity. The challenge is to conceptualize coordinated state and national child care research that informs policy. Establishment of the research partnerships in the states and the national research consortium are positive steps in that direction. The consortium is built on the state-level work of the partnerships.

*Federal partners should emphasize efforts to build state capacity.*

There will always be a need for state-specific data. In fact, administrators were very clear in emphasizing the importance of this kind of information to inform policy decisions. To the extent possible, federal reporting requirements should enhance state capacity. Local commitment to quality of data is directly related to perceptions of that data's usefulness. Federal funds need to be directed to the states in order to help states develop this capacity. Analysis of aggregate data provided by the states depends upon getting good state-level data.

***A message to the researchers***

*Learn to speak "child care."*

The complexities of the child care system can challenge researchers. Take time to learn about the context within which state child care administrators operate, and start with the policy questions that these administrators need to answer when formulating research questions.

*Face the challenges of administrative data.*

The information systems producing the administrative data were designed for other than research purposes—for example, making payments to providers. Administrative data are valuable but challenging to use. Many states are designing new information systems; knowledgeable and sympathetic researchers can offer suggestions on how administrative data could be gathered in order to make them more accessible to researchers.

*Listen and learn.*

By establishing good working relationships with state administrators, researchers can enhance their research efforts. Good working relationships are based on an understanding of state administrators' work environment and the context of their policy making decisions. Good policy-oriented research efforts that help build state research capacity are the result of ongoing relationships between administrators and researchers. The interests of all parties need to be considered and built into the agreements.

The focus on applied research does not imply that theoretical studies and national studies don't have value. Rather it is a reminder that there are great opportunities when the expertise of the university-based researcher and the state child care administrator are combined to look at policy-relevant research. It's worth the work.

***A message to colleagues in the Child Care Policy Research Consortium***

*Focus efforts on increasing state capacity for research.*

A core purpose of the research partnerships is building state capacity to do research relevant to their local populations, state policies, and systems of services. A useful test for a research activity is whether or not it enhances the capacity of states to carry out research that informs state-level child care policies.

***A message to the Governors, high level administrators, and state legislators, key child care policy makers***

*Your state child care administrators can help.*

They know the system with its strengths and weaknesses. In most cases, they have years of relevant experience and a body of expertise and knowledge to inform your decision making. They can play a significant role in providing the information you need.

What they often do not have is the capacity to analyze the available data in the forms most useful to policy makers. You can do a lot to further develop the capacity of child care administrators to use child care data to produce the kind of information needed for good policy decisions.

*Child care addresses a broad array of public and private policy questions.*

Child care is not an end; it is one means of many to promote family support and enhanced family functioning. Through the kinds of partnerships discussed here, states can maximize resources that can be brought to bear on these issues. Given the diversity of perspectives and the resources available from partner agencies, states can achieve results that could not be done by one agency working alone.

***A message to advocates, practitioners and other stakeholders***

*Both a teacher and a learner be.*

Your hands-on knowledge of how the system operates is important to informing relevant research questions and in making sure the analysis reflects real-world experience. You are an important source of information about quality of care. It is important for you to become an advocate for the use of research to inform policy decisions. Constructive advocacy requires an understanding of what research says and a comprehensive understanding of the context of the information. You may have to become a student again in order to learn the implications of the research. Failure to do this can actually undermine advocates' goals.

*Take off your hat when you come to the table.*

To be a constructive member of a research partnership, you must be willing to put your organizational agenda aside. A goal or purpose that is shared by all collaborators is key to success. Organization agendas are important, but usefulness increases when multiple voices are included in shaping research goals and design.

***A message to parents***

*Consider yourself "at home."*

Your participation in identifying important questions makes research relevant. Child care administrators and others who shape public and private child care policy need to hear parents' perspectives. States cannot make the system responsive to parents' needs without hearing from parents.

*What parents say does make a difference.*

Parents don't have to be alone in wrestling with child care decisions; it's important to tell your story to anyone who will listen. This can help get your questions addressed by researchers and by policy makers. They won't know if you don't tell them!

## *Importance of State-Level Research Capacity*

# Conclusion

**S**o how does research relate to policy making at the state level? State administrators reported limited use of research findings in policy making. Why did research have less bearing on decisions than other influences? Perhaps there is a disconnect between existing studies and the questions needing immediate answers. Survey respondents rated their own agencies' research as more influential than outside research, although survey respondents did cite numerous national studies (including brain research) as well as research flowing from state-focused research partnerships as useful.

An intriguing question is to what extent research should influence policy making. Given that the term "research" as used in this survey included analysis of the state's own data, one might expect higher levels of research usage. Values, advocacy, political forces and professional experience are legitimate influences in the making of social policy. Nevertheless, inability to conduct the kinds of research that would be useful was the most frequently cited barrier to the use of research by state child care administrators.

From issues of the relevance of research and influences on policy or administrative decisions, the roundtable discussion turned to how administrators come up with the data they need to make a decision due next Monday. Out of the agony of that task, and as the discussion expanded, a simple conclusion became increasingly clear. Roundtable participants concluded that state child care administrators do not have at their fingertips the data capacity and research capacity they need to answer the policy questions they face. Stories were told documenting how funding for data and research capacity suffers from low and tenuous priority. This led to recommendations for remedies involving funding streams,

institutional support and research partnerships that are sharply focused on strengthening the data and research capacity of states.

This is a time of exciting possibility in the United States. Major shifts in federal policy provide opportunities to make a significant contribution to the network of family support services essential to children's well-being. There is a window of opportunity to look at family support through a comprehensive perspective, one that addresses both child well-being and family self-sufficiency.

Opportunities are to be found on the state and local levels where families live and where decisions increasingly are made. The capacity for the kinds of research needed to guide those decisions must exist at the state level. There is an important role for national comparative studies. As important as they are, they don't take the place of states' capacity to understand their own populations and to assess the impact of the policies they implement using reliable research strategies. For each stakeholder there are opportunities to insure that state child care policy is well-informed.

While additional resources directed at policy research initiatives are necessary, it is possible for states to undertake these efforts with limited amounts of new funding. Even relatively small amounts of money can have a major impact and can be the necessary catalyst for more ambitious projects.

Policy making relies on accurate and credible basic information. National aggregate data are only as valid as the local and state-level data out of which the national statistics are built. Strengthening state-level data and research capacity is a critical next step in America's efforts to build a child care system that serves children, families and communities.

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