



Moving the Needle on Interagency Collaboration: Insights from Leaders on Vermont's Early Childhood System



Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	3
Statement of the Issue	3
Historical Context	4
Role of BBF and the Preschool Development Grant	5
Guiding Questions	6
Data Collection Process	6
Who Provided Data?	6
Survey Framework and Questions	7
Participant Validation	9
Results	10
Current State of Interagency Collaboration	10
Comparison of Current State to Desired Future State	10
Qualitative Evidence on Current State of Collaboration	11
Qualitative Evidence on Desired Future State of Collaboration	12
Qualitative Evidence on Barriers to Collaboration	13
Qualitative Evidence on Resources Needed	13
Ratings of Confidence and Responsibility	14
Discussion	15
Summary and Interpretation of Findings	15
Implications of the Findings	16
Limitations	17
Conclusion and Next Steps	17
Suggested Citation	18
Citations	19



Executive Summary

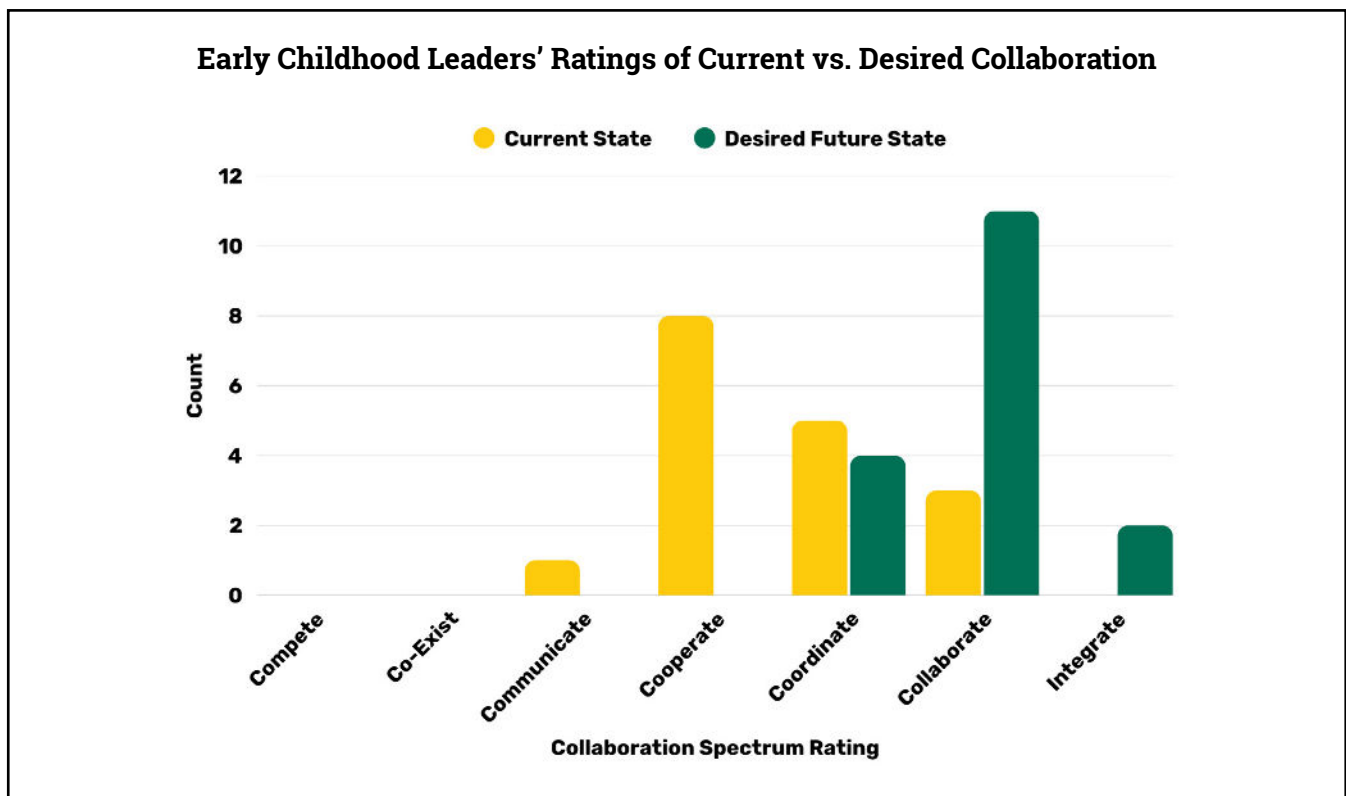
Overview

Vermont's early childhood systems are complex, with intersecting histories, policies, and populations served. Services that support young children and families are distributed across multiple state government agencies and early childhood partner organizations. And these systems are increasingly being asked to streamline their processes for working together to ease the burden of system navigation on families. Achieving this goal requires trust, collaboration, and partnership between early childhood partners and leaders. However, it is not clear whether or not leaders and their respective organizations share the same vision or are working towards the same goals.

To answer this question, Building Bright Futures (BBF), as the steward of Vermont's early childhood strategic plan, undertook a data collection effort to measure and monitor interagency collaboration among a select group of early childhood partners. BBF created a data collection exercise based on the Collaboration Spectrum,¹ which is a tool that describes collaboration as existing across a seven-point spectrum of efforts ranging from competition to full integration. This data brief presents the baseline data that was collected in January 2024 and provides a snapshot of early childhood interagency collaboration efforts at that time.

Findings and Limitations

A total of 17 early childhood leaders completed the Collaboration Spectrum exercise. The leaders represented the following organizations: Agency of Education, Building Bright Futures, Child Development Division, Department of Mental Health, Office of Racial Equity, and Vermont Department of Health.



The majority of early childhood leaders expressed a goal of increasing interagency collaboration (see graph titled Early Childhood System Leaders' Ratings of Current vs. Desired Collaboration). This desire was confirmed by the leaders' qualitative statements, such as "The collaboration is evidenced by partnerships and MOUs for federal grant work/shared goals" and "The focus of the collaboration has been to improve what we communicate about and how we engage in that communication."

This exercise also asked the early childhood leaders about barriers to increased collaboration. The top three barriers that emerged from the qualitative analysis were:

1. Competition, conflict, and tensions
2. Lack of leadership and shared vision
3. Lack of resources

When asked about the resources needed to overcome those barriers and reach the goal of increased interagency collaboration in the future, the following themes emerged:

1. The need to align vision, goals, and strategic planning
2. The need to strategically use time and resources
3. The need to utilize meeting facilitation and open communication to navigate conflict

Lastly, this set of early childhood leaders felt a strong sense of responsibility for helping to move the needle on interagency collaboration in a positive direction, but they were not entirely confident that the goal would be reached.

Implications

These findings provide insight into the degree of agreement on increased interagency collaboration as a goal across agencies and agency leaders and the level of individual and organizational motivation to achieve that goal. The results also provide insight into the resources needed to overcome long-standing barriers and challenges to interagency collaboration efforts. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this data. This data represents a point-in-time assessment of the state of interagency collaboration among a small and specific subset of Vermont's early childhood leaders and organizations responsible for administering early childhood services. It is unknown the extent to which results would vary if a larger, random sample of early childhood leaders had been surveyed.

These findings can help guide conversations and decisions about how to achieve the goal of greater interagency collaboration, including decisions about resource allocation, aligning strategic planning, and providing interagency teams with support to navigate areas of tension and conflict. Additionally, the Collaboration Spectrum exercise can be repeated in the future to provide a longitudinal view of the quantitative trends and qualitative evolution of thinking on interagency collaboration.





Introduction

Statement of the Issue

Vermont's early childhood systems are complex, with intersecting histories, policies, and populations served. Throughout this document, the term "early childhood systems" is defined as the systems providing supports and services to young children (from birth through age 8) and their families. These systems include the domains of early learning and education, family support, child welfare, economic well-being, food and nutrition, health, mental health, and early childhood systems initiatives.² There is no one early childhood system that single-handedly meets the needs of young children and their families. Rather, those supports and services are distributed across multiple state government agencies and early childhood partner organizations.

These systems, across agencies and partners, are increasingly being asked to streamline their processes for working together with the ultimate aim of increasing the availability of high-quality, accessible supports and services to all children and families in need. Ideally, these early childhood partners are building alignment across goals, vision, and strategies. However, up until recently, it was unclear if: 1) early childhood (EC) partners shared the same vision and 2) to what extent they were actively working to reach the same goals. And there is a good reason for this lack of clarity. Some of the known issues that have interfered with our ability to document a shared vision and progress towards shared goals are large system-wide issues, including the lack of an integrated data system, leadership transitions, and operating in an environment of resource scarcity.

Despite these challenges, Building Bright Futures (BBF), as the steward of Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan (VECAP), undertook a data collection effort to measure and monitor interagency collaboration among a select group of early childhood partners. This work was undertaken through support from Vermont's 2023–2025 federal Preschool Development Grant (PDG) to help provide evidence of our progress on fulfilling goal four of the VECAP, which states: "The early childhood system will be integrated, well resourced and data-informed."

In the VECAP, integration is described as "[a] connected and collaborative system championed by both agency and community leaders [that] is essential to build greater coordination with every sector... Integration requires collaborative leadership, coordination and communication at all levels starting with aligned vision and language." When the 2020 VECAP was written, there was no available data or evidence to measure or monitor progress on Goal 4. However, the following goals were identified in the VECAP:

By 2026, Vermont will be able to:

1. measure integration within the early childhood system,
2. to identify resource allocation
3. and [identify] whether decision-makers at all levels are using data to inform decisions.

The proposed solution for collecting information and data to fill the gap related to Goal 4 of the VECAP was to engage in the Collaboration Spectrum exercise. On behalf of the entire early childhood system, we can now share the results of this baseline data collection effort.

Historical Context

Over and over again, BBF and research consultants have identified the lack of integration and collaboration as a challenge to supporting children and families, despite the common vision articulated in Goal 4 of the VECAP that “the early childhood system will be integrated, well resourced and data-informed.” Evidence related to this issues includes the following:

- + In response to a proposal to reorganize the Child Development Division, BBF collected and analyzed data that found the following barriers and challenges to integration: 1) a lack of clarity and communication about governance, 2) gaps in funding and sustainability, 3) ongoing challenges and a current state of crisis related to the workforce, 4) barriers to providing access to services for all families and their children, and 5) a lack of integration in data systems.³
- + The legislatively commissioned report on Vermont’s Child Care and Early Childhood Education Systems Analysis⁴ found that, in part due to challenges with integration and collaboration, “The Systems Analysis concludes that Vermont’s system of early childhood governance (with a specific focus on childcare and early childhood education) is fundamentally broken, and needs to be changed. State government cannot in its current configuration reach the state’s goals for the success of Vermont’s children and families” (p. 3).
- + The BBF data brief on examining families’ perspectives on Children’s Integrated Services (CIS)⁵ found that while the majority of families reported a positive and helpful experience with CIS, they also expressed frustration with navigating the early childhood system. The brief found that some barriers to creating a more seamless and integrated system of care were: 1) rigid policies, 2) funding barriers, and 3) operating within silos.
- + More recently, the Early Childhood Systems Needs Assessment⁶ found that a lack of integration and collaboration was one of 10 key themes identified. Sub-themes included:
 - + Supporting transitions between programs
 - + Aligning messaging across the early childhood field
 - + A need to strengthen state agency partner partnership and leadership
- + The recent legislative report produced by the Preschool Education Implementation Committee⁷ highlighted that its ability to fulfill its charge and process were “influenced by a complex and changing landscape in state government, education finance, and public policy.” The report went on to say the work of the Committee “highlighted some of the ongoing tensions that impact the implementation of public Prekindergarten in Vermont.”

This evidence, especially the Child Care and Early Childhood Education Systems Analysis,⁴ points to a fragmented early childhood landscape that is difficult for families to navigate and one that limits quality experiences for children. The current structure has also led to frayed relationships between human services providers and advocates on the one hand, and education providers and advocates on the other. The early childhood system has lacked coherence, leadership, and vision—not through the fault of anyone working in the system, but simply because the system was not designed to be unified. What ultimately matters is that Vermont’s early childhood system is set up to ensure that children and families have positive experiences—and that those positive experiences lead to beneficial outcomes later in life. This requires understanding the degree to which early childhood partners share the same vision and are collaborating to achieve the same or similar goals. Collectively, we have struggled to figure out how to measure our starting point on goal alignment and monitor progress over time.

Role of BBF and the Preschool Development Grant

BBF holds responsibility for convening partners across the early childhood system to examine current data and data trends, explore knowledge about best practices, identify gaps in our data and knowledge, bring partners together to discuss opportunities for strengthening the early childhood system, and elevate new or long-standing barriers to progress. At all times, we center the voices and experiences of children and families, seek input from the community (including service providers), and bring the most up-to-date data and information to early childhood leaders to ensure they are making data-informed decisions.

One mechanism that Vermont is using to strengthen and align efforts across the early childhood systems is the Preschool Development Grant (PDG). The grant is a three-year award (2023–2025) investing \$23 million dollars in the state of Vermont’s early childhood system. The grant has brought together six Vermont organizations that are working on 19 activities to improve outcomes for children and families, strengthen the workforce, and increase systems alignment. The agencies and departments working together on the PDG are:

- + Agency of Education
- + Building Bright Futures
- + Child Development Division
- + Department of Mental Health
- + Office of Racial Equity
- + Vermont Department of Health

As part of the PDG, partner organizations took steps to increase interagency collaboration in a number of ways, including engaging in cross-agency partnership on:

- + Aligning and streamlining referral pathways
- + Data alignment and integration efforts
- + Pre-K monitoring and communication
- + Expansion of Early MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Supports) efforts
- + Improving supports for children with disabilities and special health needs
- + Understanding the needs of the workforce

For more details about the activities supported by PDG, visit [BBF’s webpage on PDG](#).

Because of the interrelated nature of the grant activities and the extent to which the partner agencies are working together on the shared goals of the grant, the current data collection effort focused on the PDG partner organizations. Specifically, the current data was collected from state agency leaders who attend the monthly PDG Directors meetings. As leaders within their respective organizations, the PDG Directors were well-positioned to share information on the extent to which their agency or department is collaborating with others across the early childhood system and what factors facilitate or hinder their collaboration. This aligns with several objectives and strategies under Goal 4 of the VECAP, notably to:

- + Strengthen and align leadership vision at the state level to coordinate agency programs and practices
- + Promote information sharing and coordinated vision to align efforts, reduce barriers and

duplication, and build opportunities for integration

- + Promote annual evaluation of collaboration and integration across agency partnerships (e.g. evaluate using the Collaboration Spectrum and the Building Bright Futures State Advisory Council and network infrastructure)

This data brief presents baseline data on interagency collaboration with the hopes that a future pre/post comparison will illustrate whether or not progress was made in this area.

Guiding Questions

To gather the baseline data, we surveyed leaders within the different sectors of Vermont's early childhood systems on the topic of interagency collaboration. Specifically, BBF adapted an exercise called the Collaboration Spectrum¹ in order to investigate the following questions:

1. What is the current state of interagency collaboration? What is your evidence for your answer?
2. What is the future desired state of interagency collaboration? What is your reasoning for your answer?
3. How confident do you feel that your organization will be able to collaborate more effectively by the end of the Preschool Development Grant?
4. To what extent do you feel that it is your responsibility to lead system change efforts related to collaboration at your organization?
5. What resources are needed to move from the current state to the desired future state?
6. What barriers could prevent us from moving towards the desired future state?



Data Collection Process

Who Provided Data?

A total of 17 early childhood leaders connected to the Preschool Development Grant were asked to participate in a discussion about interagency collaboration. Throughout this document, these individuals are referred to as the PDG Directors. The PDG Directors provided responses to the online survey instrument during a team meeting, with pauses to discuss thoughts on the questions and share their responses if they felt comfortable doing so. Table 1 (see next page) provides more detail on the Vermont organizations represented in the discussion and their roles in the early childhood systems.

Table 1: Organizational Representation and Role Within the Early Childhood Systems

Organization	Number of Representatives Within Sample	Early Childhood System Role
Agency of Education (AOE)	3	Responsible for overseeing the pre-K through 12 education system. Note that their Early Education division is responsible for joint oversight of pre-K (shared with AHS-CDD) and early childhood special education.
Building Bright Futures (BBF)	4	Responsible for monitoring the early childhood system and advising public officials.
Child Development Division (CDD; when relevant may be referred to as Agency of Human Services-Child Development Division or AHS-CDD)	5	Responsible for overseeing the child care, summer care, and afterschool care systems. Responsibilities include administration of the following systems: child care subsidy, child care licensing, child care quality ratings, early intervention, and Children's Integrated Services (CIS).
Department of Mental Health (DMH)	1	Responsible for overseeing the state's mental health agencies and provision of mental health services. Note that DMH partners with CDD through Children's Integrated Services (CIS) on the delivery of early childhood and family mental health services.
Office of Racial Equity (ORE)	1	Responsible for examining issues of racial equity across multiple state systems.
Vermont Department of Health (VDH)	3	Responsible for overseeing public health initiatives, including family and child health. Note that their Family and Child Health Division leads the state's home visiting work and Help Me Grow.
Total:	17	Sample included 17 individuals representing these six organizations.

Survey Framework and Questions

To collect information on the questions, BBF adapted materials from the Collaboration Spectrum. The Collaboration Spectrum is a tool developed by the Tamarack Institute of Canada and was revised in 2021 to “provide clarity to collaborative conveners, leaders and partners about engaging in the work of collaboration” (p. 1). The tool is designed to guide thinking and discussions about the practice of collaboration, highlighting that the term “collaboration” can mean different things to different partners. The tool is designed to illuminate similarities and differences in approaches to collaboration among partner organizations by breaking the term “collaboration” down into seven different categories across a spectrum.

While the categories can be thought of as a linear progression, it's important to note that no one category is inherently “better” than another. Each category serves a purpose and can be an appropriate strategy under the right circumstances. The key is identifying what the current state

of collaboration is and making strategic decisions that move an organization toward the desired state of collaboration. The categories and their definitions are as follows (see Table 2):

Table 2: The Collaboration Spectrum Categories and Definitions

Collaboration Stage	Definition
Compete	Competition for clients, resources, partners, and public attention
Co-Exist	No systematic connection between agencies
Communicate	Interagency information sharing (e.g. networking)
Cooperate	As needed, often informal, interaction, on discrete activities or projects
Coordinate	Organizations systematically adjust and align work with each other for greater outcomes
Collaborate	Longer-term interaction based on shared mission or goals; shared decision-making and resources
Integrate	Fully integrated programs, planning, and funding

BBF presented an overview of the Collaboration Spectrum Framework to PDG Directors, including an overview of the seven different stages of Collaboration defined above, and shared a preview of the questions in the live survey instrument. Those who couldn't be present to participate in the exercise were given an opportunity to answer the survey questions via email invitation. The survey contained eight questions of interest and collected both quantitative and qualitative information. The specific questions and the kind of data collected from each question are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Survey Questions and Answer Types

Question	Question Shorthand	Answer Type
As a leader in Vermont's early childhood system, where would you rank your organization's cross-agency efforts on the Collaboration Spectrum?	Current State	Categorical Rating ranging from 1 to 7 on the Collaboration Scale
What is the evidence for your answer (to the above)?	Current State Evidence	Qualitative Response
As a leader in Vermont's early childhood system, what do you see as the ideal level of cross-agency efforts for your organization?	Desired Future State	Categorical Rating ranging from 1 to 7 on the Collaboration Scale
What is your reasoning for your ranking of the ideal state of cross-agency collaboration?	Future State Evidence	Qualitative Response

Table 3, Continued: Survey Questions and Answer Types

Question	Question Shorthand	Answer Type
How confident do you feel that your organization will be able to collaborate more effectively by the end of the VIP B-5 [PDG] grant?	Confidence	Rating from 1 to 5, with 1 = not at all confident and 5 = very confident
To what extent do you feel that it is your responsibility to lead system change efforts related to collaboration at your organization?	Responsibility	Rating from 1 to 5, with 1 = not at all and 5 = very much
What would it take to move from the current level of cross-agency collaboration to the ideal level of cross-agency collaboration?	Resources Needed	Qualitative Response
What are the potential barriers that you are aware of or concerned about that could prevent your organization from engaging in the ideal level of cross-agency collaboration?	Barriers	Qualitative Response

Participant Validation

After each PDG Director had a chance to participate in the exercise or complete the survey via email, preliminary results were examined, including a preliminary thematic analysis of the qualitative data. The initial results were shared with the PDG Directors group for discussion. The group was asked to reflect on what they heard during the results to reaffirm the findings. The group agreed that the responses reflected their understanding of the current early childhood system, including its strengths, complexities, and challenges. Participants were also provided with a draft of this brief prior to publication and given the opportunity to provide feedback on this written summary.

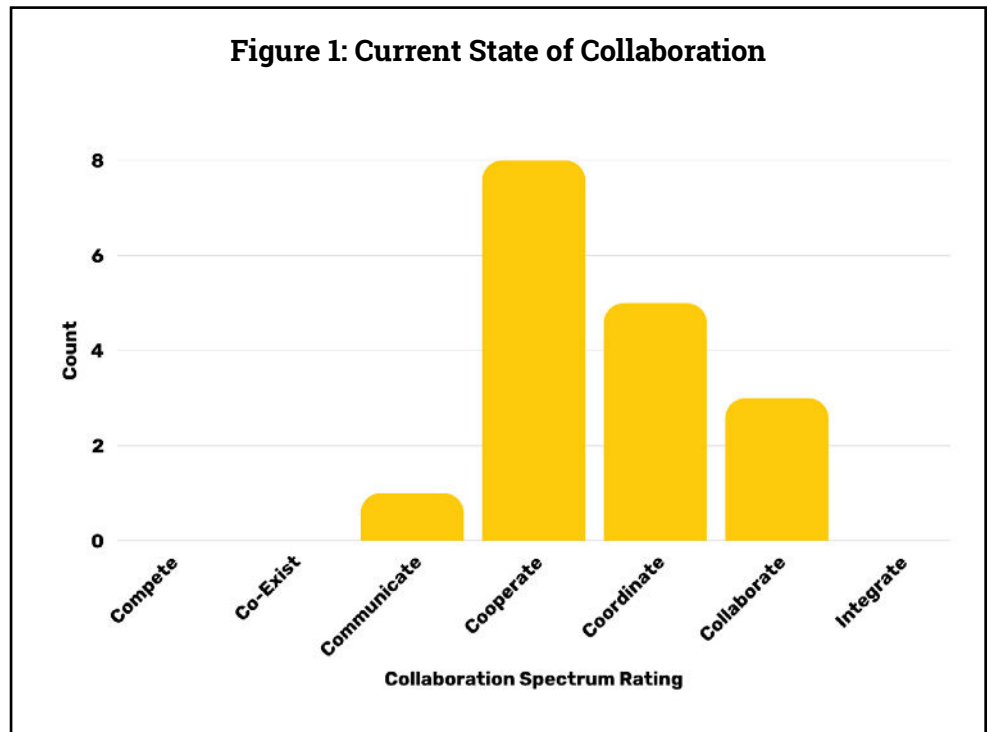


Results

Current State of Interagency Collaboration

Using the seven categories of the Collaboration Spectrum exercise, PDG Directors rated the current state of interagency collaboration as somewhere between “communicate” (third stage out of seven) to “collaborate” (sixth stage out of seven).

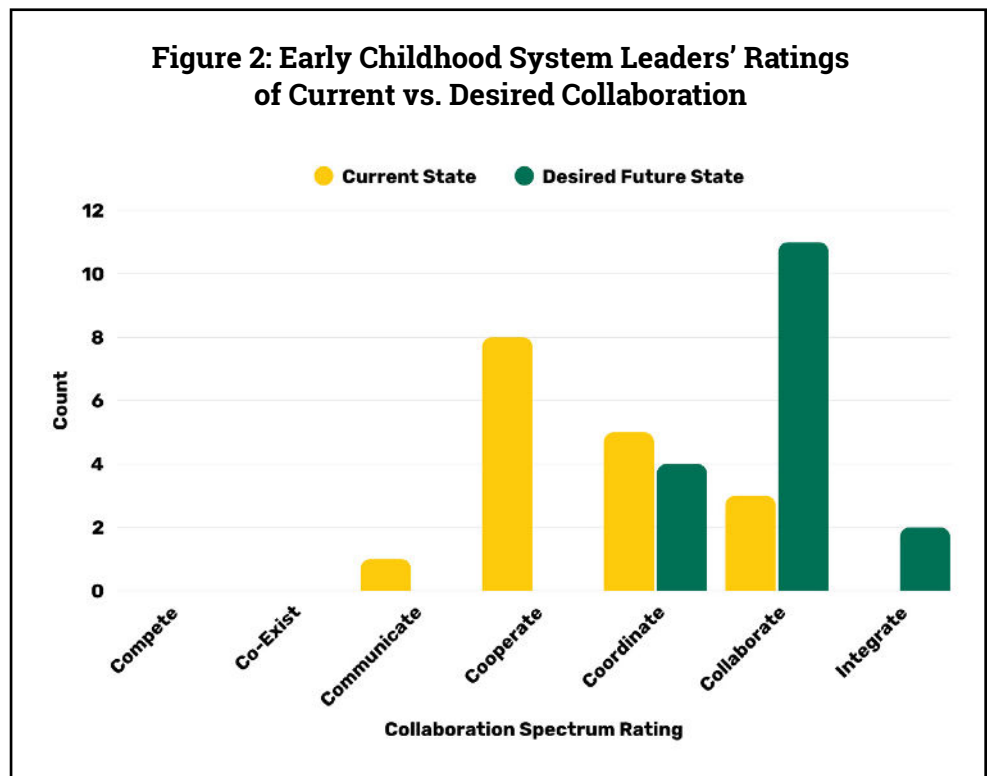
See Figure 1 for the distribution of responses.



Comparison of Current State to Desired Future State

While the ratings of the current state of collaboration are useful indicators in and of themselves, it's even more informative to compare the ratings of the current state to the ratings of the desired future state. This helps shed light on the extent to which there is a shared vision and goal to increase the level of interagency collaboration.

See Figure 2 for the comparison of ratings.



The comparison indicates that there is a general consensus on and desire to increase interagency collaboration among the PDG Directors. This is illustrated by the fact that the current state includes ratings of being at the communication or cooperation stages of collaboration, but these categories had no endorsement in the ratings for the desired future state of collaboration. Furthermore, there was a noticeable increase of ratings for the Collaboration Spectrum categories at the higher end of the spectrum. Specifically, the collaboration stage was frequently endorsed as the desired future state. Lastly, two PDG Directors indicated that integration was the desired future state.

At the same time, it is notable that there is not perfect alignment among the 17 PDG Directors on which collaboration level is ideal or the goal. Directors ranged across three different levels of the Collaboration Spectrum when they identified their preferred future state of collaboration. It's also important to note that full integration, or the creation of a singular entity responsible for all services, programs, and outcomes related to early childhood, is not an agreed-upon goal. While two PDG Directors named integration as the desired future state, the majority of PDG Directors indicated that collaboration is the utmost ideal future state.

Qualitative Evidence on Current State of Collaboration

In addition to the categorical rankings of the current state of interagency collaboration, this exercise asked the PDG Directors to provide qualitative evidence to support their rankings. The qualitative data was reviewed for themes by two trained qualitative coders. Evidence that indicates positive aspects of the current state of collaboration are presented first, followed by evidence that discusses barriers to increased collaboration.

Positive Aspects of Current State

Positive evidence supporting rankings of the current state of interagency collaboration included themes like “the grant has created opportunities for collaboration” (12 quotes) and “there’s a desire to collaborate” (five quotes). The following quotes are illustrative of these themes:

The grant has created opportunities for collaboration:

“The collaboration is evidenced by partnerships and MOUs for federal grant work/shared goals.”

“This project [PDG] has created more opportunities for interagency collaboration.”

The desire to collaborate:

“Striving for collaboration and integration, but not there with all partners.”

“The focus of the collaboration has been to improve what we communicate about and how we engage in that communication.”

Barriers to Current Collaboration

PDG Directors also provided evidence for why they didn’t rate the current state of collaboration higher. Generally, these statements mentioned barriers that are preventing higher levels of interagency collaboration. Predominate themes that emerged were that the ability to coordinate is dependent on the receptivity of each agency and its leadership (six quotes), that there is a lack of a systemic approach to adjusting and aligning the vision and work (six quotes), and that the work has happened and continues to happen in silos (six quotes). The following quotes are

illustrative of these themes:

The ability to coordinate is dependent on the receptivity of each agency:

“We do want to coordinate and collaborate but much of it is also determined by capacity of folks and if other issues/legislation etc. are more pressing.”

“As leadership transitions have occurred, the level of collaboration has increased or decreased over time.”

Lack of a systemic approach to adjusting and aligning the vision and work:

“Work is happening based on discrete activities, not a broader aligned vision.”

“I think most of our partner interactions revolve around sharing information on an ‘as needed’ and ‘ad hoc’ basis. Ideally, that information sharing would happen during the planning processes rather than after decisions, plans, and goals have been made.”

Work continues to happen in silos:

“Agencies still working in silos.”

“Also still a degree of silo-ness in state government.”

Qualitative Evidence on Desired Future State of Collaboration

PDG Directors also shared qualitative data on their perspectives on the desired future state of collaboration that the partner organizations should work toward. Paired coders reviewed the qualitative material and identified key themes. Themes for this question varied by whether or not respondents were providing supportive, neutral, or negative evidence regarding the likelihood that collaboration will improve.

Positive evidence that collaboration could improve included the sentiment, from PDG Directors, that increased collaboration was a shared goal (nine quotes). The following quotes are indicative of this category:

“I see collaboration as the future ideal state.”

“Within the PDG timeline, I believe collaboration is a strong goal.”

However, leaders also shared information that pointed to uncertainty about the desired future state. Two key themes that emerged were that “integration is too much” (10 quotes) and that “there is a need for building trust and shared vision” (six quotes). The following quotes illustrate these two categories:

“In order to be fully integrated, there would need to be major systemic change across agencies.”

“The work ahead will be done through relationship building, trust building, and articulating a shared vision.”

Lastly, some leaders shared information that pointed to major systemic barriers to additional collaboration. The major theme here was that budget concerns and the grant time frame are a limiting factor. The following quotes illustrate this:

“The word funding held me back from choosing integrated.”

“We still operate in scarcity mode and historical issues and siloing take a long time to break down.”

Qualitative Evidence on Barriers to Collaboration

While many PDG Directors mentioned barriers to collaboration in their answers about the evidence for the current state and desired future state of collaboration, they were given the opportunity to provide additional detail in an open-ended follow-up question on barriers to interagency collaboration. Using the same thematic analysis procedure, paired coders identified the following three key themes on barriers: 1) competition, conflict, and tensions between organizations (23 quotes), 2) a lack of leadership and shared vision (12 quotes), and 3) a lack of resources (11 quotes).

Competition, Conflict, and Tensions

The PDG Directors provided 23 quotes that spoke to competition, conflict, and tensions between organizations as barriers to increased collaboration. Quotes that provide insight into this category include the following:

“A lack of willingness to collaborate due to entrenched organizational cultures and traditions.”

“Being mired in frustrations about the past is a real thing, and has already derailed our collaboration on one activity.”

“Competing priorities make it challenging to align efforts towards a common objective.”

Lack of Leadership and Shared Vision

The PDG Directors provided evidence that a lack of leadership and shared vision (12 quotes) is another barrier to the desired level of collaboration. Example quotes are provided below:

“Lack of consistent and aligned leadership.”

“Lack of shared goals, disagreement on priorities.”

“A focus on short-term goals and outcomes rather than long-term, sustainable collaborative efforts.”

Lack of Resources

Another challenge identified is a lack of resources (11 quotes). The following quotes are examples of key ideas that were shared in this category:

“Part of this is that the grant has a time limit...”

“Lack of resources (e.g. time, money, staff capacity)”

“Scarcity mindset”

Qualitative Evidence on Resources Needed

PDG Directors also provided evidence of what resources they or their organization would need to make progress on goals related to increased collaboration. Key themes that emerged from their answers included: 1) needing aligned vision, goals, and strategic planning (18 quotes), 2) needing to use time and resources strategically (nine quotes), and 3) needing help with facilitation, communication, and navigating conflict (seven quotes). Quotes that are illustrative of each category are provided below.

Aligned Vision, Goals, and Strategic Planning

PDG Directors' statements to this effect included the following:

"Coming together to define a new shared vision for how to partner and execute work."

"Buy-in at all levels from people working in the field to the highest level of leadership."

"Focus on communicating openly/from a goals-oriented perspective about our current work."

Strategic Use of Time and Resources

PDG Directors also mentioned strategic use of time and resources, including strategic use of meetings, as a needed resource. Examples of quotes include:

"Intentional meetings established that also have agreed upon goals that everyone is working towards."

"Strategic use of our time together and how we spend grant funds."

"Establish regular interagency meetings, standards, and strategic plans that are not tied to a specific funding source."

Facilitation, Communication, and Navigating Conflict

Statements that fell into this category included:

"Putting past differences behind us."

"We also need to have the courage to openly discuss areas of disagreement in ways that are respectful and foster understanding, even if we won't get to agreement."

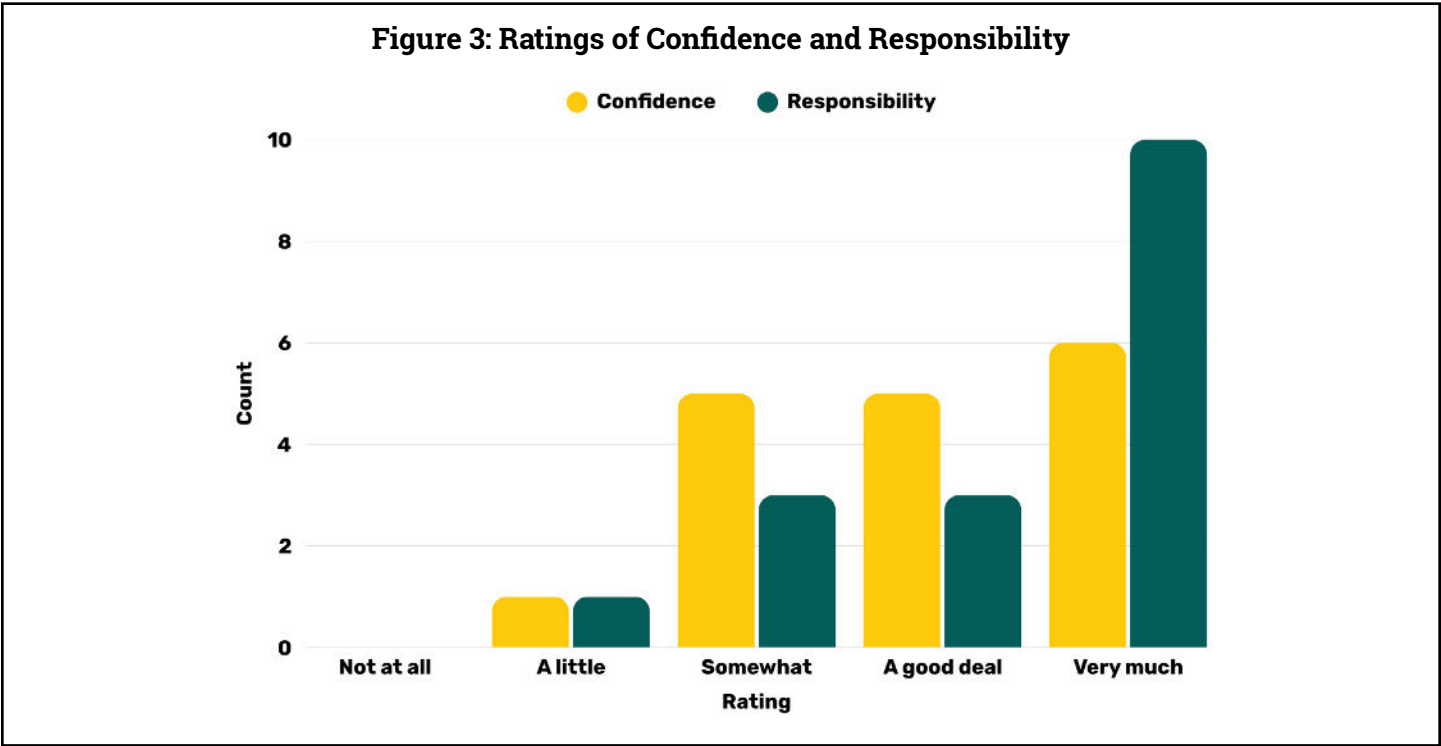
"It may mean stepping up as a leader to create positive change."

Ratings of Confidence and Responsibility

This exercise asked PDG Directors to rate their confidence in their organization's ability to collaborate more effectively by the end of the Preschool Development Grant and to rate the extent to which they felt it was their responsibility to lead system change efforts related to collaboration. Both of these questions were answered using a five-point scale, with one indicating no confidence/no responsibility and five indicating very confident/very responsible.

In general, PDG Directors felt some degree of responsibility for increasing interagency collaboration. And while the majority also felt somewhat to very confident that the goal of increased collaboration could be achieved, their confidence ratings were lower than their

responsibility ratings. See Figure 3 for the distribution of responsibility and confidence ratings.



Discussion

Summary and Interpretation of Findings

The State of Vermont continues to explore questions related to the administration and organization of our early childhood systems. Our early childhood systems are complex and represent the efforts of many public and private partners. In order to understand how well these systems are functioning together, BBF collected qualitative and quantitative information from a select sample of early childhood leaders on the topic of interagency collaboration. The sample of early childhood leaders selected for participation included a cross-section of 17 agency leaders, representing the six organizations that are collaborating on the Preschool Development Grant (AOE, BBF, CDD, DMH, ORE, and VDH).

BBF adapted an exercise called the Collaboration Spectrum¹ in order to investigate the current state of interagency collaboration, the desired future state of interagency collaboration, barriers to increased collaboration, resources needed to increase collaboration, and ratings of confidence and responsibility for leading systems level change related to collaboration.

Using the framing of the Collaboration Spectrum exercise, the early childhood leaders known as the PDG Directors provided both qualitative and quantitative evidence on these topics. The general consensus was that there is a moderate amount of interagency collaboration currently occurring and that a higher level of collaboration is desirable. However, early childhood

leaders cautioned that full integration should not be the goal and that some level of continued separation of roles, resources, and responsibilities is important. Qualitative evidence about what it would take to reach the desired future state pointed to strategies such as aligning vision, goals, and strategic planning; making strategic use of time and resources; and supporting facilitation, communication, and navigation of conflict. Participants also cautioned that the following barriers tend to get in the way of progress on interagency collaboration: competition, conflict, and tensions; a lack of leadership and shared vision; and a lack of resources.

The early childhood leaders who participated also felt confident that some progress would be made on interagency collaboration by the end of the three-year Preschool Development Grant, and felt responsible for leading system change efforts related to collaboration at their organization. This is promising, as early childhood leaders seem to have a shared goal of improving interagency collaboration, are confident that the goal can be achieved, and have a sense of personal responsibility for leading the necessary change efforts to reach that goal. As partners on the Preschool Development Grant, we look forward to utilizing the Collaboration Spectrum exercise again at the conclusion of the grant to measure our progress on the shared goal of increased interagency collaboration.

Implications of the Findings

The results of the Collaboration Spectrum exercise point to the following:

- + The PDG Directors, as a subset of early childhood leaders, can point to some current efforts and evidence of cross-agency collaboration.
- + In general, the PDG Directors agree that increasing cross-agency collaboration would be beneficial.
- + To make progress on the goal of increasing cross-agency collaboration, agency leaders and their staff need additional resources and assistance in strategizing how to overcome barriers.
- + Key resources or assistance needed include:
 - + Assistance navigating competition, conflict, and tensions
 - + Commitment from early childhood leaders and decision makers to align goals and priorities to promote positive change
 - + Commitment from early childhood leaders and their staff to sustain efforts at collaboration
 - + Discussing sustainability of efforts and exploring funding sources
 - + Assistance aligning vision, goals, and strategic planning
 - + Assistance with meeting facilitation
 - + Assistance increasing or improving cross-agency communication
 - + Strategic use of existing time and resources, including current cross-agency meetings
- + The PDG Directors agreed that they have a good deal of responsibility for improving cross-agency collaboration and felt confident that cross-agency collaboration would improve by the end of the Preschool Development Grant.

Based on the thematic analysis, some suggestions for increasing cross-agency collaboration come to mind. Under the Preschool Development Grant, BBF is working with early childhood partners to update Vermont's Early Childhood Strategic Plan. This process is an opportunity for

early childhood leaders across sectors and organizations to provide input and create additional alignment on goals and priorities. The thematic analysis also suggests leveraging existing cross-agency meetings, such as the Early Childhood Interagency Coordinating Team, as structures for improving cross-agency communication; discussing and aligning vision, goals, and strategic planning; and considering funding sources and sustainability planning. Furthermore, early childhood partners should examine what structures and processes put in place through the Preschool Development Grant can be maintained or expanded to help agencies meet the identified goal of increased collaboration.

Limitations

As with any research, there are limitations to these findings. The results represent a small sample of early childhood leaders purposely chosen based on their connection to the PDG work. The sample is not representative of all early childhood leaders or partners across the state, and it is unknown how the results might change if data had been collected from a larger, random sample of early childhood leaders. Another limitation is that the data collection protocol centered the questions around the work of the Preschool Development Grant. There are other interagency collaborations occurring across the early childhood landscape in Vermont, but we intentionally kept the focus on how interagency collaboration might change as a result of the PDG efforts. Again, the results would have differed if a wider view of interagency collaboration efforts had been examined.

Conclusion and Next Steps

While these limitations should be considered, it should also be noted that the framing of the PDG work helped focus the thinking and responses of the PDG Directors by providing a concrete time frame and example of the work of interagency collaboration. Furthermore, this data provides the first documented evidence at the early childhood systems level of how well the systems are functioning. Lastly, these findings represent baseline documentation on the current and desired future state of interagency collaboration. This exercise will be replicated with the PDG Directors group near the conclusion of the grant in order to conduct a pre/post comparison and evaluate the extent to which the group achieved their stated goal of increased interagency collaboration. Until we have that data available, early childhood leaders can use these results to consider their own perspectives on interagency collaboration, their vision for the desired future state, and their role, responsibility, and available resources to help lead us closer to that desired state.





The mission of Building Bright Futures (BBF) is to improve the well-being of children and families in Vermont by using evidence to inform policy and by bringing voices together across sectors and within regions to discuss critical challenges and problem-solve. BBF is Vermont's early childhood public-private partnership, charged under Vermont Title 33 § Chapter 46 and the Federal Head Start Act (Public Law 110-

134) as Vermont's Early Childhood State Advisory Council (SAC). The SAC advises Vermont's Governor and Legislature on the well-being of children in the prenatal period through age 8 and their families. BBF's network includes 12 Regional Councils, seven VECAP Committees, and the State Advisory Council. BBF maintains Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan (VECAP), the vision and strategic plan for Vermont's early childhood system. BBF is responsible for ensuring accountability and measuring the success of the VECAP and Vermont's Act 76, a child care law passed in 2023. BBF supports accountability through Vermont's Early Childhood Data & Policy Center, which serves as a nonpartisan, independent source of data, research, and publications for policymakers, researchers, and the public. Learn more at buildingbrightfutures.org.

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