

# Strong and Sustainable Children's Cabinets

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A DISCUSSION GUIDE  
FOR STATE LEADERS

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## Across the United States, state leaders have made admirable commitments to improving the lives of children, addressing a wide range of needs—from education and mentorship to healthcare and nutrition, to access to recreation and technology, and more.

However, the increasing specialization of government services has led to silos and disconnected services that can be inefficient or ineffective. Moreover, the distribution of responsibility and the specialization within agencies often means that no one entity is responsible for listening to and holistically responding to the needs and aspirations of children and families, the intended beneficiaries of the public investments. Children’s cabinets are formal structures for convening public officials with shared responsibility for supporting children’s well-being; they can highlight inequities across different communities, creating awareness and accountability to solve problems that might otherwise go unaddressed. By improving coordination, collaboration, and coherence across agencies, Children’s Cabinets can deliver more effective services and supports to children and families.

This discussion guide is for state leaders who embrace the responsibility of improving the responsiveness and effectiveness of services to children and families. It is aimed at addressing the unique issues related to designing children’s cabinets or helping existing cabinets function more coherently

and strategically to better serve the needs of the state and its residents.

The coronavirus pandemic dramatically increased exposure to adverse childhood experiences (known as “ACES”), especially among youth who are most reliant on social services.<sup>1</sup> The strain of responding to these acute needs is putting a premium on cross-agency collaboration and illuminating opportunities to strengthen coordination across programs and services. Leaders in government need to seize this moment to marshal collective resources and make government more efficient, effective, and equitable.

To get there, governments need to set up systems that ensure strong communication across agencies and within teams, build relationships that foster trust and help identify interrelated goals, and embrace innovation to solve problems.<sup>2</sup> The Collaboration Continuum, developed by The Coherence Lab Fellowship (CLF)<sup>3</sup> identifies hallmarks of effective, sustainable interagency collaboration: shared vision, collaborative planning routines, and collective responsibility for outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Children’s cabinets are a promising approach

for creating clear coordinating structures, processes, roles, and protocols that enable this type of collaboration.

Nationwide, state leaders pursue collaboration and efficiency within widely varying historical and political contexts, funding levels, and staff capacity. With that in mind, leaders in each state need to use their best judgment to determine appropriate roles, structures, policies, and actions to meet the goal of greater efficiency and better, more equitable outcomes for children.

This document is intended to help state government leaders (governor's office staff, state agency leaders, legislators, judges, etc.) identify the most appropriate actions for children's cabinets *for their context*. It does not offer one-size-fits-all recommendations and is not the only tool state leaders should use to help guide their work. This discussion guide recognizes that collaboration isn't only about formal structures and reporting lines. The human dimensions of leadership are also crucial to collaboration: developing relationships and trust, building cultures of candor and performance orientation, and the ongoing work of responding to changing conditions that is adaptive and not overly bureaucratic or inflexible.

## WHAT ARE CHILDREN'S CABINETS?

Children's cabinets are formal, sustained coordinating structures composed of government leaders (and sometimes external community stakeholders) working together to advance more effective, equitable, and efficient services for children and families.<sup>5</sup> While children's cabinets vary in structure, size, and authority, their purpose is to break down silos across government agencies and/or service providers to improve outcomes for children and families. Administering government services necessarily entails some expertise and specialization; children's cabinets can advance a coherent vision for orienting all child-and-family serving programs. Fully understanding and addressing the needs of children and youth who interact with multiple government agencies requires shared information, goals, and progress metrics.

As of 2020 children's cabinets exist in some form at the state level in more than thirty states<sup>6</sup> and a number of local communities.<sup>7</sup> Children's cabinets are as diverse as the states that sponsor them; some have dedicated funding and staffing, others rely on resources from the participating agencies. State-level children's cabinets are often established by legislation or executive order and housed in an independent agency or the governor's office. At the local level, some cabinets are run by the mayor's offices or by non-profit organizations in collaboration with local government.<sup>8</sup>

# Discussion Guide for Children's Cabinet Leaders

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When considering the most appropriate roles and actions for children's cabinets, state government leaders should come together to address key considerations, tensions, and trade-offs. The questions that follow are intended to help public officials and those who support them in improving the design and delivery of services to children and families. Whether you are deciding whether to launch a children's cabinet for the first time or refining an existing structure, these prompts can help surface issues and provide ideas, examples, and innovations that can optimize the children's cabinet structure for your state context. These questions are illustrative and meant to invite active deliberation; you may prioritize just a few especially relevant queries for your situation and may also think of additional pertinent questions.

## Vision, Mission, and Goals

- **What are the vision, mission, purpose, and goals of the children's cabinet?**

Who should be engaged in co-creating this vision? What stakeholders should be engaged?

- **What lessons can be learned from prior efforts at cross-agency coordination and collaboration and what are the implications for a children's cabinet?**

- **Should the cabinet develop goals and priorities, advance an existing statewide policy agenda, or work to bring coherence to related but disconnected priorities to serve youth that already exist at the state level?**

- **What does success look like?**

How many goals are realistic? How are they tracked? How frequently should goals be updated or modified?

# Structure and Authority

- **How are the mission, charge, and authority of the children’s cabinet formalized?**

It may help to put the cabinet into formal statute, but depending on the specificity in the law, this might also make it more challenging to adapt to lessons learned and changed conditions.

- **Where should the children’s cabinet be hosted/housed?**

There are trade-offs to any structure: Housing the children’s cabinet or connecting it to the judicial branch might buffer its work from political cycles and support continuity over changes in administration; housing it in the governor’s office might create a greater connection to current policy priorities and strengthen accountability, but also make the cabinet appear more of a political body; housing in an agency might ensure access to deep expertise but could discourage joint ownership among other agencies. The best fit for the mission and goals will depend on context.

- **How will the cabinet operationalize its work?**

There can be a tension between "big table" comprehensiveness and the ability to connect the dots, while also needing smaller tables to focus on managing the process and digging into specific issues. Is there an executive committee that steers the cabinet? Are there topical committees and/or ad hoc working groups to leverage expertise on particular topics?

- **Will the state require and fund the establishment of complementary local children’s cabinets?**

What function should they play? How will they connect with each other and to the state cabinet?

- **What is the formal role of civil servants vs. political appointees/ agency leaders?**

If the cabinet is led by staff, how are elected and politically appointed leaders engaged?

- **How frequently should the children’s cabinet meet?**

Is there a regular schedule for working sessions and public meetings?

- **What formal authority does the children’s cabinet exercise, and how are decisions made?**

- **Does the cabinet have the appropriate legal and statutory authority to take on specific functions?**

Who can grant the authority and are any changes in policies needed?

# Engagement and Communication

- **How do you ensure that all participants and the public know and understand the vision, mission, purpose, and goals of the cabinet?**

Are these documented and shared publicly?

- **How frequently should the children’s cabinet publicly report on its progress in improving outcomes for children?**

What formats are most useful for reporting on progress and engaging stakeholders in setting new plans?

- **How does the cabinet keep key political leaders aware of its progress and work?**

- **What is the appropriate role for stakeholder voice (families, youth, service providers, etc.)?**

How are community leaders and direct beneficiaries involved in grounding the work of the children’s cabinet in the lived experiences of those the cabinet is intended to serve? Should there be a formal advisory structure to include community stakeholders’ perspectives in the work of the cabinet?

- **How will the cabinet be accountable for improving outcomes for children, youth, and families across lines of difference, including by race and ethnicity, sex and gender, ability status, and urban and rural regions?**

- **How will the cabinet ensure equitable engagement of stakeholders so that the state’s diversity is represented?**

# Resources

## PEOPLE

### — Who staffs the cabinet?

What competencies and authority do they need? Are there any employees of the children's cabinet or is all staff capacity contributed from participating agencies/offices?

### — What are the incentives for agency heads to actively contribute?

What mechanisms support the engagement of each agency that is implicated in the work of the children's cabinet?

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## DATA

### — What data and information does the children's cabinet need to advance its work?

Who owns the data? What data-sharing agreements exist or are needed for cross-agency data sharing and analysis? How are data security and privacy maintained and protected?

### — What infrastructure and technology are needed to track data over time, including indicators that rely on data from multiple public agencies?

### — Are there resources and partners in the state, for instance research centers within the state public higher education system, that are well-positioned to support the data collection and reporting that children's cabinets need?

### — What groups need to be disaggregated in the data to address disparities/inequities in services and outcomes?

How can this be standardized across participating agencies to promote equity?

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## MONEY

### — What is the budget of the children's cabinet?

How does the cabinet leverage other funds to foster streamlining and efficiency?

### — How can funding structures enable and incentivize cross-agency collaboration?

# Promising Examples

## INDIANA

A 2013 Indiana statute established the state's Commission on Improving the Status of Children (CISC), initially as a coordinating entity with no staffing and budget, but it now has more than 300 people involved across committees and task forces.<sup>10</sup> With the exception of the director of the cabinet, these are liaisons with full-time roles in participating agencies, not dedicated positions. The CISC has a publicly available strategic plan<sup>11</sup> and submits an annual report to the governor, legislative council, and chief justice, creating transparency and enabling accountability for action.<sup>12</sup> The commission has recommended several successful changes to state law affecting children, including expanding developmental screening for young children, ensuring every alleged child victim of human trafficking has an attorney, and creating a new Juvenile Justice Reform Task Force.<sup>13</sup>

- Indiana's CISC is notable for its high level of political support and stability. This largely comes from the three-branch structure, where it is sponsored jointly by the executive, legislative, and judicial systems.<sup>9</sup> The commission was initially driven by the chief justice, and judicial involvement is especially important because there is less frequent turnover.
- The commission's strategic plan includes priorities, goals, and a committee structure all of which focus on policy change within the state. The commission has done extensive needs assessments and built the capacity of cabinet members to better understand the issues affecting children in the state, not just through the lens of their own agency or area of expertise. Through this process, the commission secured deep bipartisan buy-in, developing strong relationships that result in long-standing commitments and a high level of information sharing across teams and levels.
- The Indiana CISC has also committed to making clear process documents. For example, there is a template that anyone from the subcommittees bringing a policy recommendation to the full commission must fill out to make sure it is clear and actionable and has a reasonable timeline.



## MARYLAND

Another promising state example is Maryland, where the legislature created and provided significant funding for a state children's cabinet in the 1990s, concluding that ending the impacts of poverty and racism requires a cross-system, holistic, and multi-generational approach.

For an example of how the Maryland structure works at the local level, consider the work happening in Anne Arundel County, home to the state capital, Annapolis. The county's local management board is called the Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families. Its staff of more than 20 operate a range of programs and initiatives, making selections based on evidence of effectiveness and responsiveness to constituent feedback. These include a local system of care that features a service hotline that connects constituents to services and "communities of hope," brick-and-mortar drop-in centers where families and youth can receive wraparound services. Across the county, the services include providing housing to homeless families, alleviating hunger through food pantries, establishing community gardens, training police in trauma-informed practices, and more.

There is a high level of buy-in at the state level for the model. For example, enthusiastic support from state legislators has sustained the children's cabinet construct, even when the governor collapsed agencies and moved the state children's cabinet to the Office of Crime Prevention, where it lost resources and leadership.<sup>14</sup>

- Maryland law requires state agency heads to participate<sup>15</sup> and develop state-level strategic goals for the children's cabinet,<sup>16</sup> in which the secretaries of each department set the indicators for the eight Results of Child Well-being that Maryland has established as its goals.<sup>17</sup>
- The legislation requires the establishment of local management boards (LMBs) within each county that mirror the state-level structure, also including local agency heads as members.<sup>18</sup> These LMBs identify community needs through a needs assessment, create a community plan, and then allocate funding to run programs and initiatives that fill the identified gaps in services.<sup>19</sup>
- The Maryland legislation also established an office and staff, called the Governor's Office for Children (GOC), to coordinate the statewide children's cabinet and the local management boards. The staff of GOC supports the LMBs to come up with plans and funding requests aligned to the goals set by the statewide children's cabinet and then monitor implementation of the plans.

# Conclusion

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**Establishing and refining children's cabinets is imperative to better respond to the needs of young people and their families.**

There is no single approach that will serve all states and all possible purposes; every children's cabinet needs to match the context for which it was created—the resources available and the challenges to be addressed. State leaders can use this resource to guide important conversations, align on the most important topics for cross-agency collaboration, reflect on current structures and systems as well as the most acute needs for improvement, and chart a course toward stronger cross-agency collaboration.

# Appendix A

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## METHODS

The Aspen Institute met with policymakers and practitioners in state-level children’s cabinets, as well as external partners. To understand the realities involved in making children’s cabinets work, the Aspen Institute asked about challenges, successes, and outcomes. These interviews included leaders of other types of interagency collaboration, but because a new model of governance related to children’s welfare is the topic of interest for this brief, only those focused on children’s cabinets are included below. Interviews with the following individuals informed this brief:

- Jordan Pineda, policy manager for children’s cabinets at Forum for Youth Investment
- Stephanie Hogenson, policy director for the Minnesota Governor’s Children’s Cabinet
- Rob Watson, director for partnerships and community impact at the Education Redesign Lab and co-founder of Poughkeepsie Children’s Cabinet
- Chris Hosman, director of SomerPromise
- Seth Gerson, program director of National Governor’s Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices; Shelby Hockenberry, program director of Healthcare Delivery at NGA; Catherine Van Ness, senior policy analyst at NGA; Jordan Hynes, director of children and families’ programs
- Pamela Brown, executive director of the Anne Arundel County Partnership for Children, Youth and Families
- Julie Whitman, executive director of Indiana’s Children Commission
- Alex Mays, senior national program director at the Healthy Schools Campaign
- Christy McGill, director of the Office of Safe and Respectful Learning Environment at the Nevada State Department of Education; Dana Walburn, clinical program planner at Nevada Division of Public and Behavioral Health; Gladys Cook, health program specialist at Nevada Department of Health and Human Services; Rossana Dagdagan, social services program specialist at Nevada Department of Health and Human Services
- Ana Hicks, children’s cabinet coordinator in the Maine Governor’s Office of Policy Innovation and the Future; Beth Lambert, director of innovative teaching and learning at the Maine Department of Education

Participants of an Aspen Institute hosted Roundtable on Children’s cabinets also informed this brief. They include:

- Emilie Amundson, Wisconsin Department of Children and Families
- Anne Bowles, Council of Chief State School Officers
- Pamela Brown, Anne Arundel County MD Partnership for Children, Youth and Families
- Abe Fernandez, National Center for Community Schools
- Elizabeth Gaines, Children’s Funding Project
- Chris Hosman, SomerPromise
- David Jacobson, First10
- Kristie Kauerz, National P-3 Center
- Lawrence Klemin, North Dakota State Representative
- Teri Lawler, Delaware Department of Education and Delaware Compassionate Schools Learning Collaborative
- Joshua Ogburn, Nemours Health
- Patti Oya, Nevada Department of Education
- Mariana Padilla, New Mexico Governor’s Office
- Jordan Pineda, Forum for Youth Investment
- Karen Pittman, Forum for Youth Investment
- Paul Reville, EdRedesign
- Bridget Rodriguez, EdRedesign
- Dana Walburn, Nevada Department of Education
- Natalie Walrond, WestEd
- Julie Whitman, Indiana Children Commission
- Mary Ellen Wiggins, Forum for Youth Investment

# Appendix B

The following is a template the template used by the Indiana Commission on Improving the Status of Children for subcommittees bringing a policy recommendation:



## Commission on Improving the Status of Children in Indiana

Recommendation to the Commission

**Party Submitting Recommendation:** Click or tap here to enter text.

**Date of Submission:** Click or tap to enter a date.

**Type of Action Requested:**

Legislation    Administrative Rule or Policy    Resolution of Support or Endorsement    Professional/skills development

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Which of the Commission's Strategic Priorities does this Recommendation help advance (check all that apply):**

Child Health and Safety    Juvenile Justice and Cross-system Youth  
 Mental Health and Substance Abuse    Educational Outcomes

**Summary of Recommendation:**

Click or tap here to enter text.

**Background of Recommendation:**

What is the need or problem, and how does it impact disparate populations?

Click or tap here to enter text.

What data, research or other information did the recommender consult to formulate this proposal?

Click or tap here to enter text.

What disproportionality did the data reveal?

Click or tap here to enter text.

What is the current response to the problem by the State of Indiana?

Click or tap here to enter text.

What solution is the recommender proposing, and how does it affect disparate populations?

Click or tap here to enter text.

How does the solution address the disproportionality in the data?

Click or tap here to enter text.

**Implementation:**

Who is responsible for implementing the recommendation?

Click or tap here to enter text.

Has the recommendation been discussed with the implementer?

Yes       No

What is the recommended timeframe for the Commission to review implementation?

6 months     12 months     18 months   

Other \_\_\_\_\_

**If a legislative request, cite the current relevant code and specify what change is being recommended.**

Click or tap here to enter text.

**If a policy request, cite the current relevant policy and specify what change is being recommended.**

Click or tap here to enter text.

**If the recommendation involves an endorsement or public promotion of a specific initiative or statement, attach the document of which you are seeking the Commission's support/endorsement/promotion.**

# Endnotes

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- 1 <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/covid-is-driving-a-childrens-mental-health-emergency/>; Adverse Childhood Experiences, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>; Bhushan D, Kotz K, McCall J, Wirtz S, Gilgoff R, Dube SR, Powers C, Olson-Morgan J, Galeste M, Patterson K, Harris L, Mills A, Bethell C, Burke Harris N, "Roadmap for Resilience: The California Surgeon General's Report on Adverse Childhood Experiences, Toxic Stress, and Health," Office of the California Surgeon General, 2020, (offering extensive practical advice for cross-agency collaboration to address ACES), [https://osg.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/266/2020/12/Roadmap-For-Resilience\\_CA-Surgeon-Generals-Report-on-ACES-Toxic-Stress-and-Health\\_12092020.pdf](https://osg.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/266/2020/12/Roadmap-For-Resilience_CA-Surgeon-Generals-Report-on-ACES-Toxic-Stress-and-Health_12092020.pdf).
- 2 Heifetz, Ronald, Linsky, Marty, and Grashow, Alexander, "The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World," Boston: *Harvard Business Press*, 2009.
- 3 The Coherence Lab Fellowship was a professional-development initiative co-led by The Aspen Institute Education & Society Program, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and Education First, focused on fostering coherence and continuous improvement in state and district systems. Education First and the Council of Chief State School Officers now sponsor the Coherence Lab, which curates tools for building coherence, cultivating trusting relationships, changing behaviors at scale and thinking and working in equitable ways. For more, see: <https://education-first.com/clf/home/>
- 4 Peltzman, Alissa and Vranek, Jennier, "Collaboration Continuum," Coherence Lab Fellowship, 2019, [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SSZUM\\_luqXPQbkOtOKOfRYZVLby5Cz\\_j/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SSZUM_luqXPQbkOtOKOfRYZVLby5Cz_j/view).
- 5 "Local Children's Cabinet Network." Harvard Graduate School of Education EdRedesign, The Education Redesign Lab, <https://edredesign.org/local-childrens-cabinet-network>
- 6 Pineda, "2020 State Policy Survey: Child & Youth Policy Coordinating Bodies in the United States." *The Forum for Youth Investment*, <https://forumfyi.org/knowledgecenter/2020-state-policy-survey-child-youth-policy-coordinating-bodies-in-the-united-states>, June 2020.
- 7 "Children's Cabinet Network 2020 Year-End Report." *EdRedesign, Forum for Youth Investment, and Children's Funding Project*, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/b40fd81624934295ad8394065de7e591>, December 2020.
- 8 "Resources." Education Redesign Lab, [https://edredesign.org/browse/links?f%5B0%5D=sm\\_og\\_vocabulary%3Ataxonomy\\_term%3A170590](https://edredesign.org/browse/links?f%5B0%5D=sm_og_vocabulary%3Ataxonomy_term%3A170590)
- 9 Pineda, "Continuity Through Crisis: How Cabinets Meet the Needs of Young People During a Pandemic," *Forum for Youth Investment*, December, 2020 (crediting the three-branch sponsorship of Indiana's children's cabinet with increasing commitment and accountability), <https://forumfyi.org/knowledge-center/cabinetization/>.

- 10 Julie Whitman (executive director of Indiana’s Children Commission) in discussion with the author, August 2021.
- 11 “Strategic Plan: 2020-2022.” *Commission on Improving the Status of Children in Indiana*, <https://www.in.gov/children/files/Strategic-Plan.Adopted.12182019.pdf>.
- 12 “2020 Annual Report.” *Commission on Improving the Status of Children in Indiana*, July 2020, <https://www.in.gov/children/files/2020-ciscar.pdf>.
- 13 “2020 Annual Report.” *Commission on Improving the Status of Children in Indiana*, July 2020, <https://www.in.gov/children/files/2020-ciscar.pdf>.
- 14 “Children’s Cabinets.” *Maryland Governor’s Office for Children*, <https://goc.maryland.gov/cc/>.
- 15 “Overview.” *Maryland Governor’s Office for Children*, <https://goc.maryland.gov/overview/>.
- 16 “Maryland’s Results for Child Well-Being.” *Maryland’s Children’s Cabinet and Maryland Governor’s Office for Children*, December 2013. [2012\\_Results\\_Book1.pdf](#) (maryland.gov)
- 17 “Local Management Boards.” *Maryland Governor’s Office for Children*, <https://goc.maryland.gov/lmb/>.
- 18 Pamela Brown (Executive Director, Anne Arundel County Partnership for Children, Youth and Families) in discussion with the author, August 2021.
- 19 Pamela Brown (Executive Director, Anne Arundel County Partnership for Children, Youth and Families) in discussion with the author, August 2021.