

Frequently Asked Questions about Sustainability Planning and Implementation

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This resource focuses on how early childhood leaders and coalitions are designing and implementing plans to sustain progress and achieve goals developed through Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) as Federal funding ends. Although each State is unique, and State approaches will vary, some sustainability themes and processes are relevant to all States. Examining these themes and processes can guide State sustainability work.

This document addresses core questions and issues regarding sustainability planning and implementation. The questions and issues were recently identified by State leaders, and the answers are culled from recent resources on sustainability planning and implementation.



The Sustainability Planning and Implementation FAQ is designed to answer key questions related to sustainability but does not need to be read from beginning to end. The electronic version of the report allows you to jump to any of the sections by clicking on that topic below or on the next page.

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DEFINING SUSTAINABILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING

WHAT IS SUSTAINABILITY?

For this report, **sustainability** is defined as the continuation and adaptation over time of early learning services, initiatives, policies, and systems, to achieve specific outcomes and goals. The focus of sustainability might be on a particular initiative, a program or set of programs, financing, a policy, an organization, or a system. Sustainability depends on the willingness and commitment of everyone involved to work together toward specific outcomes and goals.

WHAT IS SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING?

Sustainability planning is the process by which interested stakeholders and partners create a road map for decision making in regard to what to sustain, why, and how, so that policy, initiatives, and programs are continuously improved, adapted, or discontinued to achieve intended outcomes and goals.

Creating a sustainability plan strengthens buy-in and stakeholders' understanding of the efforts needed to keep the work operating and improving. A sustainability plan can be used to share the progress of the early learning work with potential funders and partners. It can also be used as a guide to support ongoing management of the work.

Sustainability planning is particularly helpful in addressing both predictable and unpredictable changes in a State's leadership, budget, and policy environment.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING, STRATEGIC PLANNING, AND SUCCESSION PLANNING?

Sustainability planning is the process by which stakeholders determine which existing efforts should be continued, modified, or eliminated, based on a set of criteria or guiding principles. (For a more detailed definition, see the preceding section.)

Strategic planning is the process by which stakeholders determine the future of an organization or effort, based on what has happened in the past, and the organization's vision and mission. Sustainability planning is an essential part of the development and execution of a strategic plan.

Succession planning is a process by which an organization identifies and develops potential successors for key positions, so that when personnel changes occur—whether expected or unexpected—individuals are prepared to assume those key positions.

THE SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

WHAT ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS OF THE SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS?

States can follow best practices by engaging in a sustainability planning and implementation process that is

- based on a vision, mission, and set of guiding principles mutually established by stakeholders;
- dedicated to a thorough analysis of current programs, policies, and systems; and
- grounded in data and evidence that can assist in determining what to continue, modify, or eliminate.

Sustainability planning and implementation should always be connected to a common set of clearly stated early learning goals. States commonly use the following seven steps for their sustainability planning and implementation efforts.

1. *Assemble a balanced sustainability planning team.* For early learning, such a team should include key staff from each involved public early learning agency. In the case of the RTT-ELC grant, the team will include key staff from multiple early learning agencies.
2. *Clarify your vision, mission, and guiding principles.* Confirming a shared understanding of a purpose and goals is the foundation for sustainability planning.
3. *Establish your top priorities; identify specific goals related to those priorities; and determine which existing efforts you will continue, modify, or eliminate to reach the goals you have set.* States usually establish no more than five top priority areas. During this step, the stakeholders analyze all current programs, policies, and systems and use data to inform their work.
4. *Create options for implementing the decisions you made in step #3* based on the State's vision, mission, and guiding principles—as well as on the results of the analyses and data collected.
5. *Identify and contact key leaders and organizations that are needed to support and execute the sustainability strategies.* Share the early learning sustainability plan with essential people and organizations in order to secure their buy-in, cooperation, and collaboration.
6. *Develop and implement action steps.* The stakeholders develop concrete and realistic action steps and carry them out.
7. *Monitor and evaluate the implementation of your sustainability plan, in cooperation with your collaborators and partners.* Stakeholders modify the sustainability plan as needed. They document what they do as they do it. They communicate often.

According to the research literature, an effective statewide sustainability plan includes

- a careful articulation of the goals for, and purpose of, what is being sustained;
- an evaluation of the current context and the criteria that informed the decision making;
- an identification of all the options that were considered and those that were selected;
- regular engagement with stakeholders; and
- an ongoing mechanism for reviewing the progress of the sustainability implementation and for making modifications to the plan as needed.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IN THE SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS?

Communication and stakeholder engagement are critical to successful sustainability planning, including the development and execution of the sustainability plan.

In every State, many stakeholders have an investment in current and future early learning work and should be an integral part of the sustainability planning and implementation process. When stakeholders are not well informed or included in the planning process, they may fill the void with misinformation, which can be counterproductive and result in duplicative, or even contradictory, plans.

Honest, intentional communication and the inclusion of key stakeholders throughout planning and implementation processes are essential, particularly if there are disparate views on the State's

sustainability goals and methods. When everyone works together, shares a common vision, and buys into a common plan, the sustainability process runs more smoothly.

WHAT ROLE DO DATA PLAY IN SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION?

Data are invaluable in the development and implementation of a sustainability plan for early learning. First, using data allows for an objective focus on which efforts to continue, modify, or eliminate. Data provide the basis for a rigorous analysis of key questions regarding existing programs and policies.

Second, data are useful for supporting the implementation of the sustainability plan. When the data show progress toward the desired results and goals, this helps the State make the case to sustain programs.

Third, reliable data are an effective communication tool. States can use data to objectively communicate information on continuing policies, programs, and systems. When the data are communicated effectively, it becomes harder for others to dismiss the sustainability efforts or to propose policies, programs, and systems that will eliminate or dismantle programs. The sustainability team should use data to inform communications and other actions such as bringing other unexpected allies on board.

States can use data in the following key ways:

- Collect and analyze baseline data, including information on issues and gaps
- Establish shared metrics among the stakeholders
- Track the trends and report on the progress to inform stakeholders' decisions

States can benefit from using some of the existing frameworks and approaches as part of their sustainability planning and implementation:

- Results-Based Accountability
- Performance measurement metrics
- Implementation science
- Financial dashboards

Collecting, analyzing, and using data in the regular course of policy, program, and systems implementation work helps to build sustainability into ongoing, day-to-day work. It is more efficient to collect, analyze, and use data regularly than to wait until sustainability efforts are needed before taking action.

TIMING

WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO START SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING?

If sustaining is important, do not wait. Act now to begin the planning phase of the sustainability process.

Planning for sustainability takes time and careful consideration and cannot be undertaken successfully if external funding is about to end. Sustainability should be planned from the beginning of the early learning work.

Ideally, sustainability planning should be (1) included in a sustainability plan as a key component of the State's initial strategic plan, and then (2) addressed in an ongoing manner during the implementation of that strategic plan.

(For information on the difference between a sustainability plan and a strategic plan, refer to the question [What is the difference between sustainability planning, strategic planning, and succession planning?](#) on page 1 of this document.)

IS SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING STILL A GOOD USE OF TIME, REGARDLESS OF WHEN IT GETS STARTED?

It is never too late to begin the process of sustainability planning, as long as there is sufficient stakeholder engagement and commitment to the process. However, the comprehensive nature of the planning phase means that a late start may impact the smoothness of the plan's implementation. Even with a late start, the effort is still worthwhile.

THE PEOPLE: PARTICIPANTS, PARTNERS, AND CONSULTANTS

WHO SHOULD CREATE THE SUSTAINABILITY PLAN AND GUIDE ITS IMPLEMENTATION?

When building a planning and implementation team, consider all potential partners and then decide when and how these individuals can be included so that they can be most helpful in moving the effort forward.

Ask the following key questions when identifying potential participants:

- Which key early childhood partners know the work and are critical to the day-to-day efforts under consideration? Consider individuals from the public sector, as well as early childhood stakeholders throughout your State.
- Who are the key individuals of influence—both internal and external?
- What are the key organizations of influence—both internal and external?
- Who understands the complexity and the details?
- Who will be able to successfully convey information externally?

If the size of the team seems unwieldy, consider breaking the group into smaller subgroups so that all members have the opportunity to be fully engaged.

Remember that communication is vital when working with sustainability partners. Share new developments, challenges, and successes during the planning and implementation phases of the sustainability process.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF CHAMPIONS IN SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION?

Champions are knowledgeable persons who are instrumental in promoting an initiative and in helping others to learn more about it. Champions can be effective in planning and making the case for sustainability. Champions may include local and State elected officials; business leaders; and leaders from foundations, communities of faith, law enforcement, the military, and unions.

Champions can uniquely contribute to the sustainability process due to their political understanding and influence, monetary and leadership resources, access to multiple external networks, and recognition by the broader community.

When identifying stakeholders and team participants for the sustainability process, think about who might be positioned—and inclined—to become a champion. Regular and honest communication with stakeholders tends to produce more champions than would emerge otherwise.

HOW CAN OUTSIDE ENTITIES SUPPORT THIS WORK?

Keeping outside entities—such as professional associations, foundations, and businesses—informed and engaged is instrumental in gaining their support and buy-in. Include these members in the

sustainability planning team, as they can contribute an important voice in the process. This will also allow them to learn more about the complexities of the State's early learning system. Outside entities may even be in the best position to convene and lead the sustainability effort and to conduct invaluable outreach and marketing to their constituents as well.

It is important to ensure that outside entities have accurate information about the sustainability plan to share with their networks and that the plan reflects their experiences and commitments.

CHALLENGES

HOW CAN STATES FIND THE RESOURCES TO DEVELOP, MAINTAIN, AND IMPLEMENT THEIR SUSTAINABILITY PLAN, GIVEN THE REALITIES AND CONSTRAINTS OF DAY-TO-DAY OPERATIONS?

States may struggle to find the time, energy, and discipline to engage in sustainability planning and implementation. However, finding the time—and protecting that time—is essential to moving forward effectively and can even save time in the long run.

It is helpful to have a plan and align day-to-day operations with that plan. A thoughtful sustainability plan can serve to

- provide stakeholders with a shared sense of direction;
- clarify what support is needed to continue improving programs and policies;
- help stakeholders identify what further planning is needed; and
- afford the sustainability team with timely information and necessary data, so they are able to make hard decisions, set clear goals, and secure essential stakeholder engagement and buy-in.

Strategies for making time for this work—and staying focused on the work—may include allocating dedicated staff time to the process. It may also include ensuring that key themes and priorities from the plan are a regular part of established meeting agendas.

WHAT IF STAKEHOLDERS DO NOT AGREE ON WHAT SHOULD BE SUSTAINED?

Stakeholder disagreement is one of the most significant obstacles in sustainability planning. The key to building a consensus is using a process that

- builds trust and commitment to common principles and goals;
- uses data to inform how those goals will be achieved; and
- communicates progress regularly to both internal and external stakeholders.

Consensus building can be time consuming, and it may help to involve a neutral or trusted facilitator to ensure that all stakeholders feel heard and represented.

HOW CAN STAKEHOLDERS STAY THE COURSE THROUGH CHANGES IN GOVERNORS, AGENCY HEADS, AND GOVERNANCE POLICIES?

A sustainability plan that was created with meaningful stakeholder commitment and engagement and that is well grounded in data and progress measurement can help a State and stakeholders weather changes that may occur in leadership or policies.

The following strategies may help mitigate the effects of an unsupportive climate:

1. Test your assumptions about the State’s environment to ensure that they are accurate.
2. If they are accurate, form the best leadership team possible, so as to convene and facilitate the sustainability planning and implementation process.
3. Consider developing a public engagement and awareness campaign. External stakeholders who come together to promote and implement an important effort can foster a more conducive climate.

DOES SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION MEAN MAINTAINING THE STATUS QUO?

No. A fundamental part of sustainability planning and implementation is helping all stakeholders understand that sustainability means remaining open to adaptation and modification, as well as to the continuation or discontinuation of programs and policies to reach common goals. This work should be guided by an established vision, mission, and set of guiding principles for the early childhood effort.

WHAT IF STAFF ROLES LIMIT OPPORTUNITIES TO CONVENE OR OTHERWISE FACILITATE THE SUSTAINABILITY WORK?

State staff may not be the people best situated to facilitate the sustainability planning process due to issues outside of their control. It may be more effective to let other stakeholder groups take the lead while State staff play key supporting roles by providing objective information and data.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES

WHAT TOOLS AND RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE TO HELP GUIDE THE SUSTAINABILITY PROCESS?

A diverse range of tools and resources are available in the form of frameworks, articles, hands-on activities, assessment tools, planning guides, etc. Resources are available for a wide range of stakeholders—organizational, community, State, and Federal. Many of the resources have emerged from fields other than early childhood, such as business and organizational management, public health, and community development. They are based on similar core concepts that can be useful across domains. Many of the resources can be used in their current form, while others may require adaptation to be applied to the early childhood field.

The ELC TA team worked with the Child Care State Systems Specialist Network to compile an extensive list of resources that focus on sustainability. This list is publicly available through the Sustainability Topical Page on the ELC TA website:

<https://elc.grads360.org/#communities/sustainability>.

Here are some featured examples:

- *Office of Child Care: Early Care and Education Systems Building Resource Guide* (Child Care State Systems Specialist Network)
<https://elc.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/7103>
- *Summary of Resources on Sustaining Early Care and Education Financing* (ELC TA)
<https://elc.grads360.org/#communities/sustainability/publications/5769>

- *Early Childhood System-Building: A Tool to Inform Discussions on Collaborative, Cross-Sector Planning* (Early Childhood Systems Working Group)
<https://elc.grads360.org/#communities/sustainability/publications/5331>
- *The Reform Support Network's Sustainability Planning Tools* (Reform Support Network)
<https://elc.grads360.org/#communities/sustainability/publications/6924>
- *Statewide Longitudinal Data System Sustainability Planning Tools* (Education Data Technical Assistance Program)
<https://elc.grads360.org/#communities/sustainability/publications/6937>

Resources from other organizations and field are also available, such as these:

- *A Sustainability Planning Guide for Healthy Communities* (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
<https://elc.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/6929>
- *The Active Implementation Hub* (State Implementation and Scaling-up of Evidence-based Practices Center and National Implementation Research Network)
<https://elc.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/7102>
- *Results-Based Accountability Implementation Guide* (Fiscal Policy Studies Institute)
<https://elc.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/6953>
- *Good Collaboration Toolkit: An Approach to Building, Sustaining, and Carrying Out Successful Collaboration* (The Good Project)
<https://elc.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/6959>
- *Leadership Skills Module* (Mind Tools)
<https://elc.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/7030>

Additional resources on sustainability are available through the ELC TA Public Domain Clearinghouse <https://elc.grads360.org/#p=19>. Use the Topic(s) filter to access specific resources relating to sustainability or one of 50 other subtopics.

HOW CAN STATES GET TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE SUPPORT FOR SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING?

State leaders are advised to contact the technical assistance organization(s) they work with regularly to determine whether the organization(s) can provide TA support for sustainability planning efforts.

A complete list of technical assistance organizations supporting or providing technical assistance related to early learning can be found on the ELC TA Collaboration Partners page:

<https://elc.grads360.org/#program/collaboration-partners>.

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