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CHILDREN'S CABINETS

Coordinating Cross-Agency Collaboration to Advance Child Well-Being

Child-Centered Governance Research-to-Policy Brief Series



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When government agencies work together, children and families benefit. Children's cabinets break down silos by creating a powerful structure for collaboration — aligning policies and resources across systems to deliver stronger results. This brief highlights how children's cabinets drive child-centered governance and offers key considerations for cities, counties and states seeking to build on this proven approach to drive positive outcomes for children.

CHILDREN'S CABINETS AT A GLANCE

Across the U. S., children and youth interact with multiple government systems, health, education, social services and more, yet these systems often operate in isolation. Intentional coordination and collaboration can ensure efficiencies and yield innovative solutions to support child well-being.

Children's cabinets are formal, cross-agency bodies led or facilitated by government that bring together government leaders — and sometimes community partners — to coordinate planning, programming and investments for children and youth. Typically consisting of senior leadership from agencies such as education, public health, mental health, human services, child welfare and juvenile justice, cabinets provide a structured way for government leaders to collaborate, align policies and resources, and advance coordinated strategies that improve services and outcomes for children, youth, and families.

IMPACTS AND OUTCOMES

Research indicates that formal collaborative groups like children's cabinets strengthen coordination across agencies, foster innovative solutions, improve responsiveness to complex challenges and use resources efficiently and effectively to advance child well-being.[1,2] By creating a dedicated space for collaboration, cabinets reduce silos, align policies and promote shared responsibility. For local leaders, this can mean programs that work more seamlessly for families, policies that address complex challenges more effectively and resources that are used strategically.[2,3]

Existing evidence suggests that children's cabinets have broader positive impacts.

- Long-Term Gains in Child Well-Being: Case studies show that the cross-sector nature of children's cabinets allows for innovative solutions that can have holistic long-term impacts.[1] Several states have reported measurable improvements in key priority areas, including health, education and child safety, as a direct result of collaborative, cabinet-led efforts.[1,4,5]
- Enhanced Responsiveness: Collaborative decision-making bodies can act quickly during crises, reducing red tape and coordinating responses. Case studies show how cabinets can help communities address urgent issues like youth violence, public health emergencies or childcare shortages without the delays and duplication that fragmented systems often produce.[2,3]
- Greater Efficiency and Accountability: Reviews of children's cabinets suggest that their streamlined planning and aligning resources reduces redundancy, closes services gaps and directs investments where they are most needed, ensuring that even in uncertain funding environments, children and families can access consistent and effective support.[2,6,7]

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Children's cabinets create infrastructure that allows cities to be nimble and responsive during crises. For example, during COVID-19, cabinets helped local and statewide governments adapt to changing circumstances, allocating resources and programming where they were most needed.[2]

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Preliminary case studies suggest several promising practices to strengthen children's cabinets. Dedicated staffing, clear mandates, authentic community engagement, shared metrics, and operating with a formal mandate help create the foundation for effective collaboration.[8,9,10] Together, these elements can help cabinets move from well-meaning gatherings to sustainable structures that can drive lasting impact for children.

Dedicated Staff and Capacity: A review of several successful collaborative interagency initiatives points to the importance of dedicated staff to maintain momentum between meetings.[8] Sustained coordination across agencies and consistent follow-through on shared priorities is key to long-term effectiveness.[1]

Intentional Interagency Collaboration: Interviews with cabinet leaders from across the country emphasize the importance of intentional trust building between agencies. Facilitated dialogue, clear communication, clear roles and responsibilities and transparent information sharing can help foster trust, reduce silos and support stronger coordination.[8]

Meaningful Community and Youth Engagement: It is critical that children, youth, caregivers and youth-serving organizations have structured and meaningful opportunities to support child-focused initiatives. Cabinet leaders interviewed note that youth advisory councils, community forums, town halls or other regular feedback mechanisms can help ensure that goals and policy priorities reflect lived experiences.[12]

Clearly Defining and Tracking Shared Indicators: Research suggests that cabinets are most successful when they establish mechanisms for shared, disaggregated data to drive decisions and monitor progress.[7,8] Even when leaders agree on broad priorities, explicitly defining and tracking success helps align agency efforts and sustains momentum. This requires developing holistic, cross-agency indicators of child well-being to guide decisions. Collecting and analyzing disaggregated data on a regular basis supports accountability, helps track progress and enables more coordinated action.

Formal Mandate: Children's cabinets are strongest when backed by clear authority. Case studies indicate that those established through legislation or executive orders tend to have greater legitimacy and staying power.[8] Formal authority can elevate cabinets beyond ad hoc committees and strengthen long-term impact.

CHILDREN'S CABINETS IN PRACTICE

Across the country, states and cities have created children's cabinets and similar coordinating bodies to align policies, programs and budgets in support of children and youth.[3,11] While the structure and leadership of each cabinet may vary, effective models share a focus on cross-agency collaboration, high-level leadership and accountability for measurable outcomes.[9] Below are examples of cabinets that demonstrate how this approach can drive progress for children.

Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board (YCB): Created in 1984 by state statute, the YCB is one of the longest-standing youth-focused intergovernmental coordinating bodies in the country. Represented and jointly funded by the City of Minneapolis, Hennepin County, Minneapolis Public Schools and the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, the YCB functions independently to coordinate efforts across government agencies, nonprofits and community partners. The YCB regularly consults with the Minneapolis Youth Congress, ensuring that young people are meaningfully guiding priorities and decision-making. Learn more here.

Louisiana Children's Cabinet: Established by law, the Cabinet is chaired by the Governor and includes representation from state departments as well as the legislature. The Cabinet is responsible for developing a statewide Children's Budget and has led the development of a statewide strategic plan for early childhood education. Learn more here.

New Mexico Children's Cabinet: A statewide cross-agency governance body chaired by the Governor, the Cabinet coordinates policies, programs and budgets for children. Through its coordinating function, the Cabinet has played a critical role in supporting universal childcare, access to early learning, improved health outcomes and economic support for childcare providers. Learn more and read the annual Children's Cabinet Report Cards here.

GETTING STARTED

Interested in establishing or strengthening collaborative spaces for children in your community? A good first step is to **map the collaborative spaces that already exist** in your city. These might not all be focused on children or youth; health, housing, public safety or other cross-agency initiatives can offer valuable lessons about what works and what doesn't when different departments come together. From there, consider which government agencies, community leaders and youth representatives are needed to shape local priorities for children and youth.

Every municipality will need to examine its own circumstances, including local structures, resources and community needs, to determine the right approach. The most important step, however, is simply getting started by **creating a meaningful cross-agency space where leaders and staff can come together, build trust and begin the work of coordinating action for children and youth.** Effective cabinets start with achievable goals and grow stronger over time as trust, data and shared accountability deepen.

For more tips on how to get started, including additional information and practical tools, review the Children's Cabinet Toolkit: A Roadmap for Getting Started in Your Community, created by The EdRedesign Lab, Children's Funding Project, and Forum for Youth Investment.

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WHAT TO EXPECT FROM UNICEF USA

UNICEF USA partners with government leaders, youth and key stakeholders to advance child-centered governance—supporting communities to strengthen how decisions affecting children are made so that policies and systems consistently uphold children's rights and improve their well-being.

What's next: UNICEF USA will continue to roll out additional tools, guidance, research, and peer learning opportunities to support municipalities at different stages of their journey.

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