



Bridging The Data Gap: Diverse Delivery Requires 21st Century Technology

By Louise Stoney

Early childhood education research, practice, and most recently, the experience of families living in a pandemic, have underscored that care and learning are inextricably linked. Yet in the public policy arena preschool and child care are often treated as separate entities. Indeed, the Build Back Better Act, an ambitious plan designed to ensure that millions of American children and families have access to affordable early care and education (ECE), allocates separate funding for child care and preschool. Leaders are clear however that successfully scaling ECE hinges on what the field calls diverse delivery—tapping services available in a wide range of locations, including schools, community-based settings, workplaces and private homes. Implementing this important goal will require a fresh look at supply and demand, as well as creation of linked, 21st century data systems that include an online marketplace to enable families to search for, and enroll in, programs that are delivered in diverse settings. Regardless of when, or in what format, the Build Back Better framework is enacted, careful consideration of linked data is essential to attaining scaled early care and education services.

A new [issue brief](#) from [Opportunities Exchange](#) describes the challenges of our current approach to ECE data collection and underscores that siloed data hurts everyone. Parents seeking an early childhood program must often search multiple on-line systems and make myriad phone calls to find and secure appropriate and affordable ECE. Child care providers often struggle financially due to low enrollment—despite strong demand for care—in part because they cannot easily share data on open seats or fill them quickly. And without comprehensive, up-to-date supply and demand data that includes all ECE settings, states cannot accurately allocate resources, establish rates, identify under-resourced communities or address the real needs of children and families. In short, siloed data hinders effective policy and practice and often leads to decisions that unintentionally weaken the field.

The good news is that this problem has a solution. Modern technology can enable collaborative data on all available ECE seats, sorted by age of child, location, auspice, cultural and linguistic characteristics, and much more. Electronic marketplaces can include information on seats in public schools, community-based settings, workplaces, public and private schools—anywhere that early care and education is delivered. These technology marketplaces also create an opportunity to aggregate demand by encouraging all families to seek available seats and enroll via one electronic door.

Forging a new approach to strategic, comprehensive, and linked data has never been more important or possible. The pandemic has focused attention on the need for a strong early care and education system and also demonstrated myriad ways that the field can use and benefit from technology. The secret sauce is harnessing the power of software-as-a-service (SaaS) technology. Modern SaaS systems with capacity to generate real-time data, support data-driven decisions and enable streamlined program administration should be an early-stage investment in recovery. The time to build these systems is now.

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