

## CONTINUITY THROUGH CRISIS: HOW CABINETS MEET THE NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE DURING A PANDEMIC

In August, when the country was heading into the six-month mark of the pandemic, the Forum for Youth Investment conducted a “COVID-19 Listening Tour” to understand how state children’s cabinets had been responding to the pandemic in real time. These conversations provided the opportunity to highlight the structures and systems that cabinets use to ensure that they are prepared to meet the needs of children – whether in reaction to a crisis or proactively for the future.

### CHILDREN’S CABINETS – A HEAD START IN RISING TO CRISIS

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the ways that all systems work to serve young people. Unforeseen funding deficits have put strains on budgets, broadband deserts have tested virtual systems from school to healthcare, childcare capacities have shrunk exactly at the time we have needed them to expand – and more complications and obstacles loom as the nation faces a second wave of the virus as we head into colder months. States and communities alike have had to work across the sectors and silos that support families’ lives, from the basic needs of food and housing to work and childcare to education and broader learning. What is important is that many states and localities are always working to be prepared and ready to adapt and respond to whatever needs arise for young people because they have established efficient, effective and durable systems that enable them to do so. We refer to these coordinating bodies as Children’s Cabinets—and they have been essential to supporting children and youth throughout the years, but especially during the coronavirus pandemic.

### WHAT IS A CHILDREN’S CABINET?

Children’s cabinets—many of which have been operating for years — are coordinating bodies composed of agencies and stakeholders inside and often outside of government that have responsibilities in creating equitable opportunities for children and youth to thrive in learning, development, and in life.

They operate at both the state and local levels to develop a shared vision, goals, and strategies, systematically changing the fragmented ways that state and local governments attempt to serve children and families by working to streamline communications, resources and priorities. Children’s cabinets go by many names and have diverse operating structures — but they share a commitment to better outcomes. Below are a few examples:

- The Hamilton County Children’s Cabinet, supported through [Chattanooga 2.0](#), is a cradle-to-career cabinet dedicated to transforming educational and workforce development outcomes for all children. As a new entity, the cabinet quickly became the hub of coordination to meet the needs of children and families during the pandemic. This function included weekly



- calls among members including from the City of Chattanooga, Hamilton County, and members of the business and non-profit communities – to identify real-time needs, gaps, and resources across the community, from meals to internet to school to health. For example, they quickly stood up the [Hamilton County Digital Fund](#) to provide hotspots, public WIFI, devices and more to counter digital learning loss.
- At the state level, the [Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund](#) launched their five-year [Kansas Can School Redesign Project](#) which, in committing to create a more community-centric learning “ecosystem” for children, has paved the way for facing student and family needs during the pandemic. The Cabinet has continued this work by distributing over \$600,000 to ensure that [1,700 families are provided connectivity](#) support to enable them to participate in distant engagement outside of that provided by K-12.

## WHAT MAKES CHILDREN'S CABINETS EFFECTIVE?

The products and ambitious initiatives of state and local cabinets would not be possible without underlying commitment to establishing and maintaining internal systems and structures that enable success – during “normal” times as well as crisis. During this summer’s listening tour, state cabinets explicitly acknowledged that their ability to effectively pivot and respond to the needs of children and youth was contingent upon those very systems and structures. Insights from our cabinets, and from members of the Local Children's Cabinet Network\*, underscored four factors that many successful cabinets have in common and that have helped to navigate the pandemic.

### [Structures that Increase Accountability](#)

Though the specifics vary, effective children’s cabinets have clearly established structure, roles, and systems that ensure they work effectively with stakeholders inside and outside of government to achieve their greatest impact.

- [The Commission for Improving the Status of Children in Indiana](#) (CISC) is a coordinating body whose commission chair rotates annually among the three branches of government – a judge or justice appointed by the Chief Justice of Indiana, a member of the legislative council (rotating between the House and the Senate) and a member of the Governor’s staff appointed by the governor. This rotating responsibility fosters deep commitment from all bodies as they must be prepared to smoothly transition each year’s work over to the next without losing efficacy. Explicitly dictating the expectations of involved parties and bodies along with the CISC’s processes, goals and its purposes, fosters an accountability that enables their cabinet to efficiently and effectively collaborate. As the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated equity problems, the CISC was already working on a [Guide for Equity Consideration](#) to help decision-makers consider how proposed action might affect different groups of people.

### [Stakeholder Communication Matters](#)

It is critical to understand the needs of a community and stakeholders so that cabinets can reactively and proactively pivot to address their needs. To do this, open lines of communication between cabinets and communities must be developed and maintained – this looks different



based on the locations, resources, reach and size of each cabinet.

- The Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund developed a tool called Our Tomorrows that enables them to hear from stakeholders about their lived experiences in real time. Families, children and other stakeholders share personal stories that are analyzed and aggregated into “story maps” showing common themes and concerns. The hot spots that these story maps generate are then presented to decision makers at all levels to ensure they have real-time information on the issues Kansans are facing so that they can address them early. Kansas adapted their existing tool to seek residents' experiences around COVID, making families' concerns visible to decision-makers early and quickly.
- The Minnesota Children's Cabinet shows the power of executive orders to engage dozens of officials across levels of government, multiple agencies and hundreds of stakeholders across the state. Governor Tim Waltz's 2019 executive order did just that by tasking the state Children's Cabinet to focus on a clear set of priorities and to promote equity through its everyday work. As the pandemic spread, the Governor followed up with a March 2020 executive order tasking the Cabinet with coordinating strategies to share information specific to school and childcare setting during the pandemic. Already positioned to think holistically about both families' and providers' perspectives, the Cabinet quickly erected a real-time hub for comprehensive information, including live maps across the state of childcare capacity to meet emergency workers' needs.

### For Established Cabinets, Well Designed Strategic Plans Provide Steadiness through Crisis

The unpredictable happens. Developing a coordinated approach to strategic objectives that can accommodate surprise events and crises is critical. Effective cabinets develop strategic plans that are narrow enough to be clear and specific but broad enough that unforeseen variables don't derail the original objectives. CISC Executive Director Julie Whitman put it well: “We're no longer pivoting to put out fires being created by COVID-19. We're still committed to the objectives in our strategic plan – now we just consider COVID-19 as another variable in the calculus.” Due to the access challenges posed by quarantining, SNAP benefits are now being delivered through a virtual program. The CISC noticed that this pivot was enabling more families who were previously unable to commute to apply in person to enroll and decided to continue the virtual SNAP – program indefinitely due to its ability to increase access for families. Additionally, the CISC is supporting the Family & Social Services Administration (FSSA) in its pivot to virtual appointments for check-ins and in providing virtual mental health resources to youth via Medicaid. These changes will also be extended indefinitely due to their ability to reach young people and permanently expand the capacity of FSSA workers. Both of the indefinite extensions represent the CISC's ability to be adaptable yet still be fully committed to their strategic plans – of which mental and family health and access to health resources for young people are major priorities.

### People Power

These successes – both planned and in response to the COVID-19 pandemic – are possible because of ongoing investments in the capacity of the children's cabinets themselves, specifically by having at least one fully dedicated staff person. Cabinet leaders will be the first to say that their systems and processes are not one-size-fits-all. What is important is that cabinets adopt structures and engage stakeholders that will enable them to succeed in their own state or locality – and put people in place to lead and manage the work. Communicating with stakeholders,





developing strong strategic plans and maintaining accountability for executing their strategic plans is a critical job that requires a strong and dedicated leader. Delivering for children, youth, and families deserves nothing less.

*\*Harvard's Education Redesign Lab, the Forum for Youth Investment and the Children's Funding Project jointly launched the Local Children's Cabinet Network in 2019 as a forum for increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of government efforts to improve children and youth outcomes.*

