

SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES: HOW INDIANA CONTINUES TO MEET THE NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Ask yourself when the last time was that you listened to a young person? I mean really listened. Listened in a way that you could imagine them when they were born into a old, one-bedroom apartment with its burgundy shag carpet from 1974 worn dull – and you could hear them crying when they were hungry and you can see from the lamp above the linoleum table in the kitchen the silhouette a young mother who doesn't know what to do. When you listen, you could see their eyes filled with anticipation the moment a new foster family opened the front door to their home. When you listen, your heart breaks when they talk about the bullies in the sixth grade and – before critical community interventions – you begin to understand why they were considering whether to sell drugs their freshman year in high school.

Listening to young people is essential to creating impactful and equitable policy. Implemented by the Commission on Improving the Status of Children (CISC) in Indiana, in partnership with Indianapolis non-profit VOICES Corp, the Virtual Youth Engagement Summit (YES!) allowed hundreds of Indiana policy makers, educators and youth service providers to hear from system impacted youth and young adults across the state. CISC shows how children's cabinets can provide the venue to connect a wide spectrum of policymakers directly to young people to hear their stories and their experiences, and to co-construct better futures for young people. Partner organizations like VOICES can play an essential role in training young people in how government works, sharing strategies to advocate for themselves, and providing emotionally safe ways to share their stories.

While successful children's cabinets can take different forms, the Commission on Improving the Status of Children in Indiana (CISC) exemplifies one way a well-structured, effective and efficient cabinet can look. As highlighted in our recent brief on cabinets during the COVID-19 pandemic, CISC has been able to adapt while maintaining an unwavering focus on the objectives laid out in its strategic plan, established months before the virus began to spread. So how was CISC also able to host the Virtual Youth Engagement Summit (or, YES! Summit) committed to reframing what power sharing looks like between youth and decision- makers?

As an answer, this brief offers a glimpse into the way that CISC's structure, strategic plans, focus on equity, and its role as facilitator help create the conditions for events like the Yes! Summit as well as other tools and efforts it uses to improve the status of children in Indiana.

STRUCTURE – A BIG TENT

CISC is a unique coordinating body because it is written into legislation, housed within the Indiana Supreme Court and its chair rotates annually among the three branches of government: the judge or justice appointed by the Chief Justice of Indiana, a legislative member appointed by the council (rotating between the House and the Senate), and a member of the Governor's staff.



Being written into legislation, housed in the most stable branch of government and co-managed across branches provides the CISC stability and continuity and reinforces accountability. Being written into legislation, housed in the most stable branch of government and co-managed across branches provides the CISC stability and continuity and reinforces accountability. Turnover is a regular challenge across cabinets and, in some circumstances, can even threaten the existence of a cabinet. Cabinets can be strong and active for a cycle and be disabled when a new administration is elected. When longevity is the key to lasting change, a cabinet's sustainability is critical. CISC — established in 2013 — has set itself up for longevity.

STRATEGIC PLANS — SHARED LONG-TERM VISION

Since the CISC was established in 2013, each of its strategic plans have presented four goals layered with secondary objectives, with qualitative and quantitative benchmarks set to track progress. Additionally, as of 2020, each plan is grounded in the cabinet's five overarching principals: Equity, Two Generations, Do No Harm, Trauma-Informed, and Youth & Family Voice. Ensuring that its goals and objectives are measurable enables CISC and its stakeholders to see these objectives as not only realistic but attainable within varying scopes of work.

Strategic plans create a framework with clear priorities to produce an integrated set of results, through both expected and unexpected circumstances. For example, CISC's 2017 plan aimed to "promote interagency communication and collaboration to improve prevention and outcomes, and address the unique and complex needs of Juvenile Justice and/or cross-system involved youth."* Multi-agency efforts led to a 30% reduction in youth committed to the Department of Correction from 2014 to 2018, supported the creation of a human trafficking coordinating role within the Department of Child Services, and led to legislative proposals to make child trafficking responses more trauma informed. In responding to COVID-19, CISC's platform enabled leaders to more fluidly adopt new approaches in line with strategic priorities, like shifting juvenile court hearings to virtual.

EQUITY — GUIDING DECISION MAKING

While equity is a guiding principle for CISC, putting "equity" into action can be amorphous. As a best practice, CISC developed the Guide for Equity Consideration to address the unintended consequences of implicit bias that may influence the development and application of policies, practices and decisions on disparate populations. Part of this framework requires incorporating the voices of those most impacted by a decision to be present in the decision-making process—the YES! Virtual Summit is a great example of what this can look like at scale. However, this framework is also a tool that is utilized in every decision the CISC makes regardless of the scale, scope, or reach. For example, at the October 2020 convening, CISC used the equity tool to guide its position statement on the Appropriate Use of ACE Scores — a less prominent use than the virtual summit, but one that can have broad implications for the treatment of Indiana youth as a population and as individuals.

The commission's framework serves as a model across the country. For example, South Carolina's Early Childhood Advocacy Council (SCECAC) has begun developing its first statewide strategic plan and consulted with the CISC to develop a similar equity framework applicable to children and families in South Carolina. Indiana's Birth-to-Five Strategic Plan is also serving



as an inspiration piece to SCECAC as they work to prioritize the repair and expansion of a more equitable childcare infrastructure to address the expansion of childcare deserts created by pandemic- related closures.

FACILITATION – CREATING COHERENCE ACROSS SILOS

Being the nerve center for child and youth policy is a tall order – there can be conflicting theories of change, funding discrepancies, communication challenges, and more. Written into CISC’s enabling legislation is the inclusion of 18 commission members who coordinate over 200 volunteers that serve on various task forces and committees. These stakeholders are committed to achieving the overarching goals put forth in the strategic plan, but they also work to achieve the objectives they have set themselves. With 10 active committees and task forces working with numerous other entities across the state, coordinating and facilitating these moving parts is one of CISC’s essential roles.

The CISC’s critical role in facilitating progress across a complex policy environment isn’t always visible. When an opportunity arose for the state of Indiana to send a cohort of juvenile justice stakeholders to be trained by Northwestern University in child trauma, it most likely would not have been taken up if it had not been brought to the attention of the Child Trauma and Resilience Committee. This committee immediately mobilized to send a list of candidates for this train-the-trainer opportunity, communicated with the project coordinators and then arranged to host the first training event in Indiana. The event included participants from several Midwestern states, and is sure to pay dividends for approaches to youth trauma. This is an excellent example of how CISC has developed a strong network and brought a broader framework to multiple agencies over the years.

The CISC has proved an example of consistency since its activation in 2013, demonstrating accountability and engagement from its stakeholders while centering short- and long-term objectives. The YES! Virtual Summit is a strong example of that engagement and the event has already galvanized Indiana stakeholders to reevaluate practices to ensure the incorporation of youth voice. Children’s cabinet structures, objectives and capabilities vary. While not every state can, or should, model Indiana exactly, the CISC’s stable structures and practical tools offer an excellent reference point for cabinets looking to energize their own work.

*Commission on Improving the Status of Children in Indiana: Strategic Plan 2017-2019. Available at: <https://www.in.gov/children/files/cisc-strategic-plan-2017.pdf>

