

Executive Summary

Delaware has articulated a clear vision for early childhood care and education as a public good, one in which every child has the opportunity to thrive and every family can access affordable, high-quality early learning. Governor Matt Meyer elevated early childhood as a state priority in his 2026 State of the State address, and Senate Bill 169 positioned the Interagency Resource Management Committee (IRMC), under the leadership of Lieutenant Governor Kyle Evans Gay, to help align strategy and advance implementation.

Today, Delaware's early childhood system is not yet structured to fully deliver on that vision. Fragmented governance, siloed funding streams, uneven quality expectations, and limited integrated data constrain the state's ability to expand access, stabilize providers, and sustain long-term progress. While meaningful investments have been made, incremental reforms layered onto a fragmented foundation are not sufficient to build a coherent, investable system.

The year 2026 presents a critical opportunity. Delaware secured \$11.3 million in one-time Preschool Development Grant Birth-to-Five (PDG B-5) funding. These resources are not intended to sustain programs, but to strengthen the underlying system infrastructure required to deliver early childhood care and education as a public good. Used strategically, PDG B-5 can accelerate durable system-building rather than temporary expansion.

Over the course of 2025, the IRMC assessed Delaware's current early childhood landscape. Across agencies and partners, four foundational priorities consistently emerged: governance, funding alignment, quality, and data. Together, these pillars form the basis of a roadmap for system transformation.

What Delaware Seeks to Make True

Governance:

Delaware operates with clear system-level authority and accountability, enabling coordinated decision-making across funding streams and a seamless experience for families and providers statewide.

Funding Alignment:

Public dollars are transparent, predictable, and strategically aligned to shared outcomes, with the state able to model total system costs, assess tradeoffs, and sustain long-term investments.

Quality:

All early childhood settings are guided by a common north star for quality, supported by aligned standards, professional pathways, and meaningful supports for educators across the mixed-delivery system.

2025 Interagency Resource Management Committee Report

Data:

Integrated, cross-agency data systems provide a clear and unduplicated view of children served, costs, quality, and outcomes—enabling informed policy decisions and continuous improvement.

The 2026 PDG B-5 investment offers a catalyst to operationalize this roadmap. By aligning PDG B-5 resources to advance governance refinement, financing strategies, quality infrastructure, and integrated data systems, Delaware can lay the foundation for a more coherent and investable early childhood system.

Delaware is at a pivotal moment. With executive leadership, a revitalized IRMC, and a defined window for strategic action, the state is positioned to move from incremental progress to coordinated system-building, ensuring that early childhood care and education are managed as a durable public good for generations to come.

Introduction: Early Childhood in Delaware

Delaware envisions an early childhood care and education system that is a public good, where every child, from birth through age five, has the opportunity to thrive, and every family can access affordable, high-quality care and early learning. Governor Matt Meyer, in his 2026 State of the State address, elevated early childhood as a state priority, alongside Lieutenant Governor Kyle Evans Gay's leadership of the IRMC. Addressing existing structural conditions now is essential to Delaware's workforce growth, fiscal health, and children's outcomes.

Delaware's current early childhood system, however, is not yet structured to fully deliver on this vision. Early childhood leaders across the state work every day to improve outcomes for children and families, and meaningful progress has been made. However, both funding limitations and the fragmentation across governance, funding, and accountability continue to produce instability and complexity for families, providers, and policymakers. This complexity prevents Delaware from building an early childhood care and education system that is coherent, scalable, and investable over time.

In June 2025, Governor Meyer signed Senate Bill 169, positioning the Interagency Resource Management Committee (IRMC) under the leadership of Lieutenant Governor Gay to help define the state's direction, align cross-agency strategy, and drive implementation of a more coherent early childhood roadmap.

2026 will be a crucial year for Delaware's early childhood system. Delaware successfully secured an \$11.3 million Preschool Development Grant (PDG B-5) that must be spent in 2026. This funding provides a critical opportunity to accelerate the state's vision of early childhood care and education as a public good. This grant is unique in that it is not intended to fund ongoing initiatives. Instead, it should be realized as a one-time investment leveraged to advance the state's collective, shared goals for early childhood. **Delaware is well-positioned to make good on this investment in 2026, but realizing its full value will require coordinated, cross-agency leadership to ensure that PDG B-5 activities reinforce—rather than further fragment—the system.**

This report reflects the IRMC's work in 2025 to establish a shared vision for early care and education as a public good and to assess the structural conditions that must be strengthened to achieve it. Building on presentations from state agencies and partners, the IRMC identified four foundational priorities for the next phase of system building: governance, funding alignment, quality, and data. Together, these priorities will guide Delaware's efforts in 2026 to build an early childhood system that is coherent, investable, and capable of delivering sustained outcomes for children, families, and providers statewide.

Early Care and Education as a Public Good in Delaware

State leadership on the IRMC articulated a long-term vision for early childhood care and education in Delaware as a public good:

Delaware envisions an early childhood care and education system that is a public good, where every child, from birth through age five, has the opportunity to thrive. Each and every family will

2025 Interagency Resource Management Committee Report

experience choice through a universal, publicly-subsidized mixed-delivery system, with clear and transparent pathways for families to access affordable, voluntary, developmentally appropriate and high-quality early childhood education.

Together with families, educators, and communities, Delaware state leaders will work to create conditions and build an ideal system, rooted in collaboration and possibility that secures a thriving future and school readiness for all of Delaware's youngest learners. Delaware state leaders will continue to center the voices of families and early childhood educators and honor the field of early childhood education as a respected and highly skilled profession. Guided by equity, quality, affordability, and access, the state is committed to bold decision-making with the courage to change what is not working and the vision to grow what is.

Delaware is at a critical juncture in making this vision a reality. For years, Delaware leaders have grappled with the challenge of making high-quality early childhood care more affordable and accessible; this moment offers an opportunity to move from incremental progress to coordinated system-building. New executive leadership and a reenergized IRMC created momentum for greater alignment and shared direction across Delaware's early childhood system. In addition, receiving PDG B-5 funds can act as a catalyst to build a system that delivers on the promises of early care and education. While one-time funds won't solve for everything, they will help to create a stronger, better coordinated early care and education system. With such a foundation, future state investments in childcare will help more children and families and demonstrate clear returns on investment.

"Delaware can't afford to wait to build a stronger early education system. If we are serious about making the First State the best place to live, work and raise a family, access to early education is essential." - Lieutenant Governor Kyle Evans Gay

About the Interagency Resource Management Committee (IRMC)

The IRMC, led by the Lieutenant Governor and comprised of state agency, legislative, and early childhood leaders, works together to establish a comprehensive early childhood education system and thus created this bold vision for early childhood as a public good. To help the IRMC meet its charge in 2025, membership expanded to include the Governor-appointed Chair of the Delaware Early Childhood Council (DECC) as a voting member to ensure community perspectives are represented, and two non-voting members of the General Assembly to strengthen collaboration with the Legislature. With public meetings open to advocates and community members, the goal of the IRMC is to establish a vision and associated recommendations to create the conditions necessary to build an ideal early childhood system.

During the four public meetings held in 2025, IRMC focused on:

- Establishing a vision for Delaware's birth-to-5 system that enables parents to work and that provides children with safe, trauma-free enrichment environments.

2025 Interagency Resource Management Committee Report

- Developing a set of recommendations on how to achieve this vision for the Governor and the General Assembly, including identifying appropriate infrastructure and investments needed to meet established goals.
- Building a shared understanding of Delaware’s early childhood system by sharing systems information, surfacing gaps and tradeoffs, and establishing a common knowledge base to support consensus-building and coordinated action.

With the Lt. Governor, state agency heads, DECC, and General Assembly membership, the IRMC is strongly positioned to lead and set the direction for early care and education in Delaware in 2026.

The IRMC is chaired by the Lt. Governor and [membership](#) includes:

IRMC Member	Department
Lt. Governor Kyle Evans Gay Chair, IRMC	Lieutenant Governor
Secretary Cindy Marten	Delaware Department of Education
Secretary Christen Linke Young	Delaware Department of Health and Social Services
Secretary Steven Yeatman	Delaware Department of Services for Children, Youth, & Their Families
Director Brian Maxwell	Office of Budget and Management
Controller General Ruth Ann Miller	Office of the Controller General
Madeleine Bayard	Chair, Delaware Early Childhood Council
Representative Kamala Smith	Delaware General Assembly
Senator Elizabeth “Tizzy” Lockman	Delaware General Assembly

Alignment: IRMC and Delaware’s Preschool Development Grant (PDG B-5) Goals

Building on ongoing investments and work underway to create a more coherent early childhood system, Delaware’s application for PDG B-5 outlines a bold vision for what this one-time investment can allow the state to achieve:

- **Data-informed decisions:** New, embedded systems for data collection that drive innovative planning, continuous improvement to policies, and the efficient allocation of resources by a system-wide state entity
- **Path to coherent governance and investments:** Expert-led plans for the state’s next step on streamlined governance and financing for sustainable state investments

2025 Interagency Resource Management Committee Report

- **Resources and choice for families:** Improved resources and information for families to support their children’s growth at home and to navigate choices online and through resource and referral partners
- **Improved quality through ECE workforce investments:** Child care professionals are on a career trajectory within regional networks; child care employers can easily recruit and retain those licensed individuals

Delaware’s PDG B-5 application is intentionally well aligned to the charge and goals of the IRMC. The outcomes outlined in the PDG B-5 application firmly align with IRMC’s focus on the four foundational pillars of a healthy early childhood system, positioning PDG B-5 funding to be the launch point to advance Delaware’s vision for a more cohesive ECE system that better serves children, families, and providers.

In 2025, the IRMC had members from the following agencies and partners present their current state: Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), Department of Education (DOE), Office of the Controller General (OCG), and Delaware Early Childhood Council (DECC). Each presentation focused on different aspects of early childhood care and education and consistently surfaced four cross-cutting themes that shape the system today: **governance, funding structures, quality, and data.**

Through these presentations, the IRMC recognized that without intentional action to address these foundational conditions, Delaware will continue to layer reforms onto a fragmented base, producing incremental gains without sustained system change. Inaction will perpetuate instability for families and providers, constrain access to high-quality care, and limit the state’s ability to forecast costs, assess tradeoffs, and sustain progress over time. The IRMC began the conversations necessary to direct the state’s efforts toward strengthening its early childhood system in the next year and working collectively towards the shared vision of early care and education as a public good.

Current State of Delaware’s Early Childhood System

Delaware’s early childhood system reflects challenges seen in many states across the country: multiple agencies working in parallel, complex and siloed funding streams, incoherent approaches to quality, and limited systemwide data. Together, these conditions create a fragmented landscape that is difficult for families to navigate, challenging for providers to operate in, and limiting for state leaders who aim to improve access, quality, and affordability. Even system leaders don’t always share a common understanding of programs across agencies.

Through four presentations from IRMC leadership, the IRMC gained an understanding of the current state and system conditions under which agencies are operating in Delaware. Each touched on the themes of governance, funding structures, quality, and data.

Delaware Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), “[Purchase of Care](#)”

The Department of Health and Social Services is a primary administrator of early childhood services focused on child care access, health, and family support. Through its Divisions—including Social Services and Public Health—DHSS administers the Purchase of Care (POC) program, Delaware’s child care subsidy program, which helps eligible low-income families afford child care. POC is primarily funded by the federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), with state matching funds. Subsidy payments are made directly to participating child care providers on behalf of families. In addition to child care subsidies, DHSS oversees early intervention services for infants and toddlers under IDEA Part C, home visiting programs, and other health-related early childhood supports, making it a key agency in both service delivery and system regulation.

DHSS’s presentation highlighted a core structural challenge facing Delaware’s early childhood system: recent improvements in access, affordability, and provider stability were achieved with short-term federal investments and lack a durable financing structure. At the same time, DHSS described new federal requirements and related policy shifts that strengthen continuity and affordability but increase per-child costs and long-term funding obligations. In the absence of structural changes to governance and financing, these reforms risk being layered onto an unstable foundation making it more difficult to reliably model per-child costs, forecast future obligations, or assess the return on additional investments. This dynamic underscores a fundamental mismatch between how the system is currently funded and what it is expected to deliver, limiting Delaware’s ability to sustain early childhood care and education as a public good over time.

Federal rule alignment, policy and operational shifts

In alignment with the 2024 federal rule “[Improving Child Care Access, Affordability, and Stability in the Child Care and Development Fund \(CCDF\)](#)”, DHSS described a set of policy and operational changes intended to strengthen affordability and continuity, including capped family copays, adjusted eligibility and phase-out parameters, and a planned transition to prospective, enrollment-based provider reimbursements in Spring 2026. These policies, which will likely be rolled back by the current federal administration, increase per-child costs and long-term program obligations.

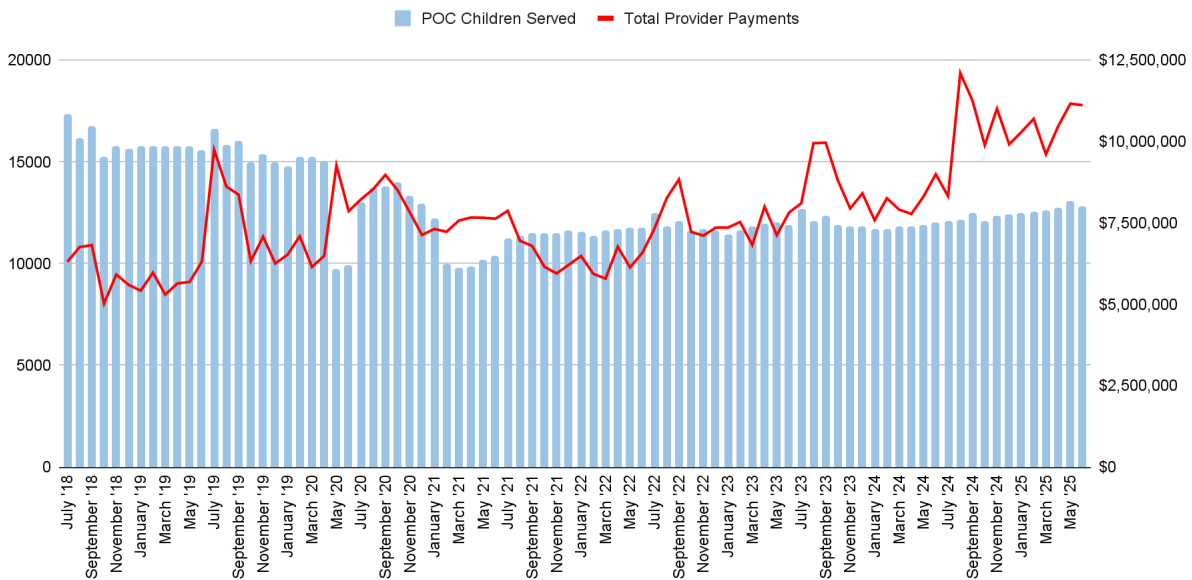
Current funding environment

DHSS presented data on provider payments and children served primarily with CCDF, displayed in the table below. The blue lines reflect the number of children paid for each month and show variation over the last 7 years. The fluctuation likely reflects differences in enrollment patterns in part time and full time care, utilization of the program, and full year and school year needs.

IRMC members noted an overall increase in monthly spending on provider payments (red line) from \$6,302,535 in July 2018 to \$11,117,912 in June 2025. Some of the variation over time reflects fluctuations in federal pandemic relief funding as well as policy changes including the [April 2023 guidance on provider payment rates from the Office of Child Care](#) and the [2024 CCDF final rule](#).

During the discussion, IRMC members identified the lack of a clear understanding of how many children can be served under current funding levels and how priorities are reflected in policies that determine per-child funding, potential waitlist implementation, and other key program decisions.

Children Served & Provider Payments



Stated implementation constraints

DHSS identified key challenges that affect implementation and system performance, including staffing; administrative burden for parents, providers, and DSS; and child care provider capacity.

System implications for governance, funding, quality, and data

DHSS’s presentation highlighted a core challenge facing Delaware’s early childhood funding structures: even well-administered programs cannot deliver stable, equitable results when they operate within

fragmented governance and unstable financing. POC's connections to licensing, quality initiatives, and early learning programs further underscore the need for cross-agency governance and shared data and have implications for provider supply and quality. Without an integrated view of children served, costs, and outcomes across programs, the state lacks the information necessary to align investments, assess tradeoffs, or scale access responsibly. Until Delaware addresses these structural conditions, POC will continue to operate as a critical support program, but it will not be able to anchor a stable, scalable system that delivers early childhood care and education as a public good.

Delaware Department of Education (DOE), "[Early Childhood Excellence Team](#)"

The Department of Education plays a central role in Delaware's early childhood education (ECE) system through policy leadership, licensing and program oversight, and funding administration. DOE oversees publicly funded early learning programs, including state-funded prekindergarten (Early Childhood Assistance Program - ECAP), child care licensing, and early childhood special education services under IDEA Part B. The agency manages multiple state and federal funding sources serving children birth-to-five—such as state general funds, federal IDEA funds, and other targeted grants—that support early learning standards, curriculum guidance, workforce initiatives, and program quality. Through these functions, DOE is responsible for advancing school readiness, aligning early learning with K–12 systems, and supporting local education agencies and early childhood providers across the state.

DOE's presentation articulated progress towards an aspirational, outcomes-focused vision for Delaware's early childhood system, the [2020-2025 Strengthening Early Success Plan](#). The presentation also highlighted the state's investments in governance, quality, workforce development, and data infrastructure across birth through age five. DOE emphasized a long-term approach centered on family navigation, access to high-quality programs, and professionalized early childhood careers, supported by standards, monitoring, and continuous quality improvement efforts. At the same time, the presentation surfaced a system that has grown through a series of targeted investments and programmatic expansions, rather than through a unified financing and governance framework capable of sustaining those elements at scale.

Outcomes-focused vision

DOE articulated a long-term vision for an equitable, inclusive birth through age five system as defined in [Senate Bill 136](#) that families can navigate easily, grounded in access to holistic services, high-quality programs, and a professionalized workforce. This vision provides a common direction, but its implementation currently spans multiple programs, funding streams, and state agencies.

State investments across programs, professionals, and families

DOE highlighted existing system elements, including child-level outcomes frameworks, health and safety and licensing standards, quality indicators, translation services, and multiple data platforms that are being expanded and improved over time. These components strengthen individual functions but are not yet fully integrated across agencies or programs.

Tools and prototypes for the next phase

DOE described scalable models and emerging structures intended to move the system toward greater coherence, including new licensing processes, family child care networks, contracts for non-traditional hours, shared service agreements, and new approaches to paying for enrollment and blending and braiding funds.

System implications for governance, funding, quality, and data

DOE's presentation illustrates how progress toward a unified birth through age five system is occurring through program-level investments and pilots rather than through a single, aligned governance and financing structure. DOE has articulated a strong vision and invested in quality supports and child-level data within specific programs, yet assets are not consistently connected across agencies, funding streams, or service settings. As a result, decision making around investments, quality expectations, and outcomes remains fragmented, limiting the state's ability to develop a shared view of children served, align funding with system-wide priorities, or scale effective approaches beyond individual programs. Until these structural conditions are addressed, DOE-led initiatives will continue to advance quality within discrete programs but will not be able to anchor a coherent, scalable early childhood system that delivers equitable access and outcomes statewide.

Office of the Controller General, "[IRMC – Budget Presentation](#)"

The Office provides nonpartisan fiscal analysis to the General Assembly. The presentation situated early childhood funding within the broader operating and capital budgets and current revenue outlook. Early childhood state funds for FY26 span 17 programs across multiple agencies including DHSS, DOE, and DSCYF, and supports a wide range of functions such as child care subsidies, early intervention, home visiting, licensing, quality improvement, and preschool programs. These investments are appropriated through separate budget lines and program structures, reflecting historical and program-specific decisions rather than an integrated system design.

The Office of the Controller General presented an overview of Delaware's current budget structure, revenue outlook, and annual appropriations relevant to early childhood care and education. The presentation highlighted how early childhood funding is distributed across multiple agencies, budget lines, and fund types, including General Funds, Appropriated Special Funds, federal match and maintenance-of-effort requirements, and tax expenditures. While the state makes substantial annual investments in early childhood programs and services, the budget presentation underscored that these investments are not organized within a unified financing framework aligned to shared system goals or outcomes.

Heavy reliance on federal funds and complex funding structures

Many early childhood programs rely on federal funding sources that require state match, maintenance of effort, or adherence to federal rules, including CCDF, IDEA Part C, Medicaid, TANF, and Preschool Development Grants. State dollars are often used to leverage or maintain access to these federal funds,

limiting flexibility and increasing complexity when considering system changes or reallocation of resources.

Significant investment without a consolidated view of total system cost

The presentation detailed substantial annual appropriations for early childhood programs across agencies, along with additional indirect investments such as the state child and dependent care tax credit. However, these expenditures are not presented as part of a single, consolidated early childhood budget, making it difficult to understand total system spending, per-child investment levels, or how resources align with intended outcomes

System implications for governance, funding, quality, and data

The budget presentation reinforces that Delaware’s early childhood system is financed through a collection of program-specific appropriations rather than through a coordinated funding strategy aligned to shared governance, quality expectations, and outcomes. Because funding decisions are made agency by agency and program by program, the state lacks a comprehensive view of total early childhood spending, per-child costs, and tradeoffs across investments. This fragmentation constrains coordinated decision making, complicates efforts to align quality standards and accountability across settings, and limits the state’s ability to plan for sustainability or scale effective approaches. Without greater structural alignment across governance, funding, and data, Delaware will continue to invest significant resources in early childhood care and education without the transparency, predictability, or coherence required for an investable system that delivers early childhood care and education as a public good.

“It is hard to change to a system that looks at funding by function, but we have to do the hard thing.”

DECC, “[Expansion of Early Care and Education](#)”

The Delaware Early Childhood Council (DECC) presentation focused on the expansion of state-funded early care and education as a strategy to increase access to high-quality programs, stabilize providers and families, and strengthen compensation for early childhood professionals. Drawing on comparisons with other states, the presentation emphasized that Delaware’s current level of investment and eligibility thresholds lag behind peers and limit access for families. While the presentation articulated a clear case for expansion, it also highlighted that Delaware’s early childhood system remains constrained by funding levels, eligibility rules, and capacity that are not aligned with the state’s stated goals.

Limited access relative to need and national peers

The presentation showed that Delaware currently serves approximately 1,800 children through state-funded early care and education (ECAP) and reaches only about one in five children across all publicly funded early childhood programs combined. Delaware ranks near the bottom nationally in access to state pre-K and in income eligibility for child care subsidies compared to other states.

Program design supports quality and stability but is constrained by scale

ECAP is designed as mixed-delivery programs with no family copayments and rates tied to the cost of care, including professional compensation. However, the number of children served is limited by available funding, restricting the system's ability to deliver these benefits broadly.

Evidence from other states underscores the role of dedicated revenue

The presentation highlighted examples from other states and localities that have expanded early childhood access through dedicated and sustainable revenue sources, including trust funds, tax policy changes, and earmarked revenues. These examples illustrate that expanded access and improved outcomes are linked to long-term financing commitments rather than one-time investments.

System implications for governance, funding, quality, and data

The DECC presentation reinforces that Delaware's highest-quality early childhood models are operating as limited-access programs rather than as systemwide building blocks. While ECAP demonstrates what is possible when programs are funded at the cost of care and designed around quality and workforce stability, their impact is constrained by fragmented funding decisions and the absence of a coordinated expansion strategy. Without aligned governance and a durable financing framework that connects eligibility, rates, capacity building, and outcomes across programs, Delaware lacks a mechanism to translate proven models into scalable system design. Until these structural conditions change, the state will continue to operate a two-tier system in which access to high-quality early childhood care and education is determined by funding availability rather than driven by a shared commitment to early childhood as a public good.

“The IRMC has been putting the dollar amount on everything, but ‘you can’t shop in the clearance rack, we have to stay in the front of the store’ and give our children the best possible opportunities to succeed.” - Representative Kamala Smith

Cross-Cutting System Implications

Taken together, the presentations underscore that Delaware's early childhood system is attempting to advance through individual programs, reforms, and investments rather than through a deliberately designed system architecture. Across agencies, progress is evident, but it is uneven and constrained by fragmented governance, distributed and unstable funding structures, inconsistent approaches to quality, and limited systemwide data integration. These conditions make it difficult to align decisions across programs, understand the full cost of delivering high-quality early childhood care and education, or assess the impact of investments on children and families over time.

The analysis makes clear that incremental improvements within individual programs, while necessary, are not sufficient to achieve Delaware's goal of early childhood care and education as a public good. Without intentional focus on shared governance structures, durable and aligned financing, a common

definition of quality across settings, and integrated data that supports cross-agency decision making, the system will continue to rely on temporary solutions and program-level fixes. Addressing these foundational elements is essential for Delaware to move beyond fragmentation and build an early childhood system that is coherent, scalable, and capable of delivering sustained outcomes for children, families, and the state's economy.

A Roadmap: Building the Conditions for Early Childhood as a Public Good

Delaware has articulated a clear vision for early childhood care and education as a public good, grounded in universal access, family choice, high-quality mixed delivery, and a respected, well-supported workforce. The IRMC presentations underscored that while many programs are well designed and effectively administered, the system as a whole is not yet structured to deliver that vision at scale. Instead, early childhood functions today as a set of parallel programs and funding streams with distributed authority, uneven quality approaches, and limited shared data. These conditions make it difficult to align decisions across agencies, understand full system costs, scale what works, or ensure that improvements in one area reinforce progress in another.

Without intentional action to address these foundational conditions, Delaware will continue to layer reforms onto a fragmented base, producing incremental gains without sustained system change. Inaction will perpetuate instability for families and providers, constrain access to high-quality care, and limit the state's ability to forecast costs, assess tradeoffs, and sustain progress over time. The roadmap therefore focuses on four interdependent priorities: **governance, funding alignment, quality, and data**, as the core conditions Delaware must strengthen to build a coherent, investable early childhood system that delivers on its public good commitment.

1. Governance: What governance structure is required to scale an investable system?

IRMC members have consistently noted that Delaware's current governance structure is complex and distributed across multiple agencies, limiting the state's ability to operate as a unified system. Further work and conversations are needed to assess which structural refinements or consolidation will be necessary to achieve coherence, strengthen accountability, and ensure that families and providers experience a seamless statewide system. The work likely will include clarifying roles, identifying appropriate authority for system-level decision making, and ensuring that governance structures align with the state's vision and long-term goals.

Consequences of Inaction: Without clearer system-level governance, Delaware will continue to manage early childhood through individual programs rather than as an integrated system. This fragmentation limits accountability for outcomes, slows decision making, and makes it difficult to align funding, quality expectations, and access across settings. Families and providers will continue to navigate multiple systems with no clear entry point, and state leaders will lack the authority and coordination needed to make durable, statewide improvements.

2. Funding Alignment: How do we ensure that every public dollar is used to its highest potential?

Delaware's vision of early childhood care and education as a public good requires funding structures that are transparent, predictable, and aligned to system needs. State leaders should further explore how federal, state, and local funds can be better coordinated; how rate structures and payment mechanisms can support stability; and how funding flows can advance access, quality, and equity across the mixed-delivery system. The IRMC is committed to defining the principles of an investable funding model, one in which public dollars are used strategically to support defined outcomes.

Consequences of Inaction: Without aligned and predictable funding structures, Delaware will remain unable to model system costs, assess tradeoffs, or understand the impact of policy changes. Even well-intentioned investments will continue to be absorbed unevenly across programs rather than advancing shared goals. In this environment, expanding access or improving quality at scale will remain fiscally risky and operationally difficult, limiting the state's ability to make sustained, strategic investments.

3. Quality: How do we orient the entire system toward a clear north star on quality?

IRMC discussions highlighted the need for a unified approach to quality that applies across all settings and programs. The IRMC will work to define what high-quality early learning experiences should look like statewide, identify the variety of supports educators need to deliver them, and align quality measurement and improvement systems across the mixed delivery landscape.

Consequences of Inaction: Without a single north star for quality and aligned expectations across programs and settings, Delaware will continue to approach quality through multiple, uncoordinated lenses. While individual initiatives may strengthen specific programs, the system as a whole will struggle to produce consistent improvements in children's experiences and outcomes. Quality improvement efforts risk remaining episodic rather than systemic, limiting their long-term impact.

4. Data: What data infrastructure is required to manage early childhood care and education as a public good?

IRMC members emphasized that Delaware cannot operate early childhood care and education as a unified system without reliable, connected data. The state currently lacks an unduplicated count of children served across publicly funded programs and a clear picture of who is being served, at what level of quality, and at what cost. State leaders should identify the data systems and practices needed to support planning, fiscal modeling, continuous improvement, and accountability, including how agencies can share data more effectively and build toward a comprehensive, cross-agency early childhood data system.

Consequences of Inaction: In the absence of integrated data, Delaware will continue to make high-stakes policy and budget decisions without a full understanding of system performance or return on investment. Limited visibility across programs constrains planning, weakens accountability, and makes it

difficult to assess whether public dollars are advancing access, quality, and equity. Without improved data infrastructure, Delaware cannot effectively manage early childhood care and education as a public good.

Plan for 2026

Funding awarded through the PDG B-5 provides Delaware with a critical opportunity to advance a coherent roadmap toward an investable early childhood care and education system that treats child care as a public good. In 2026, PDG B-5 investments can be intentionally aligned to move beyond discrete initiatives and instead operationalize the system changes identified in this report: strengthening governance, improving access and quality, and building the infrastructure required for sustained progress. The IRMC under the leadership of the Lieutenant Governor and guided by the wisdom of leaders from across the early childhood system, is uniquely positioned to steward this work.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Delaware has reached a pivotal moment. The state has articulated a clear vision for early childhood care and education as a public good, but the analysis and work of the IRMC make clear that the current system is still defined by fragmented governance, distributed funding, uneven approaches to quality, and limited integrated data. Continuing to operate this way is not a neutral choice. It increases the risk that public dollars will be spent in ways that are difficult to track, compare, or evaluate, and it limits Delaware's ability to forecast costs, manage tradeoffs, and scale what works.

This report serves as a roadmap and guides the PDG B-5 application. Looking to 2026, the IRMC will use this stewardship agenda to take steps towards building an investable early childhood system. By strengthening governance, aligning funding, establishing a clear quality framework, and building integrated data infrastructure, Delaware can improve transparency and accountability for investments, reduce avoidable complexity for families and providers, and create the conditions for sustained improvement in outcomes. Without these structural changes, Delaware will continue to make significant investments in early childhood without the coherence and predictability required to ensure those investments reliably translate into better access, quality, and equity statewide.

The IRMC looks forward to partnering with state leaders, families, providers, and communities to advance this work and to ensure Delaware's early childhood investments are managed as a durable public good.

Appendix A: Vision of Early Childhood Education as a Public Good

Delaware envisions an early childhood care and education system that is a public good, where every child, from birth through age five, has the opportunity to thrive. Each and every family will experience choice through a universal, publicly-subsidized mixed-delivery system, with clear and transparent pathways for families to access affordable, voluntary, developmentally appropriate and high-quality early childhood education.

Together with families, educators, and communities, Delaware state leaders will work to create conditions and build an ideal system, rooted in collaboration and possibility that secures a thriving future and school readiness for all of Delaware’s youngest learners. Delaware state leaders will continue to center the voices of families and early childhood educators and honor the field of early childhood education as a respected and highly skilled profession. Guided by equity, quality, affordability, and access, the state is committed to bold decision-making with the courage to change what is not working and the vision to grow what is.

Appendix B: Glossary of Terms

The following glossary of terms helps to clarify the public good statement for a variety of audiences.

These are some commonly used terms in early childhood with finalized definitions:

Public Good: A system or service for which the benefit is available to all citizens, and for which the use by one citizen does not diminish another citizen’s ability to use it.

Setting: Early childhood care and education is offered in a mix of formal and informal settings, including schools, licensed child care centers, and family child care homes—each subject to its own set of regulations, oversight structures, and workforce requirements.

Funding source: Early childhood care and education is funded through a combination of federal, state, local, and private dollars—each with its own goals, eligibility rules, timelines, and compliance requirements.

Mixed-Delivery System: Early childhood care and education is offered in a mix of formal and informal settings, including Head Start, licensed family- and center-based child care programs, public schools, and other community-based organizations—each subject to its own set of regulations, oversight structures, and workforce requirements.

Universal: Available without limitations on eligibility. In the context of early childhood care and education, the limitations of public funding can be applied to a universal definition in several ways, including:

- Universal eligibility for the same financial benefit, with funding limiting the number of available spots
- Universal entitlement to the same financial benefit, with funding limiting the funding available to everyone
- Universal accessibility, with funding limitations differentiating the benefit available to families based on their ability to pay

Affordability: Accessibility of early childhood care and education without financial hardship for families, typically determined by income, family size, and cost of living.

Equity: Ensuring that each and every child and family, especially those who have historically faced barriers, have fair opportunities and access to supports to thrive through the early care and education system. Equity is different from equality—it focuses on meeting diverse needs, as opposed to providing the exact same thing to everyone.

Accessibility: Availability of early childhood care and education for families. Access can be constrained by multiple factors, including:

- Limited number of spots available
- Complicated processes to apply, enroll, or use subsidizing funds that make spots affordable
- Constraints on available options such as location or hours

Publicly-Subsidized: Refers to a program or service that is fully or partially supported by public investment— including federal, state, and local funding—and that may also be complemented by private or philanthropic sources.