

EARLY CHILDHOOD SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS:

A NEW MODEL

for cross-sector collaboration

After a five-year partnership between New Profit and the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC), Massachusetts has committed \$18.25 million to fully fund Early Childhood Support Organizations (ECSO) over six years.

Launched in 2020 after two years of co-development, the ECSO initiative, supported by New Profit and EEC, has provided professional development and quality improvement for hundreds of early education leaders representing over 100 programs across Massachusetts. In 2025, Abt Global, a research, monitoring, and evaluation firm, published its impact evaluation of the initiative. Abt Global's study found improvements in positive leader practices, leader confidence and educators' engagement in continuous quality improvement.

Generating this impact required intentional partnerships, sensitivity to the evolving state of education pre-and post-pandemic, and rigorous external evaluation to ensure effectiveness. **The ECSO initiative demonstrates the power of cross-sector collaboration and serves as a model for how other states and communities can activate similar partnerships to better support educators, help to close the achievement gap, and shift systems.**

The ECSO initiative began as an idea generated and cultivated by philanthropy. It persists as a cornerstone of the early education quality improvement approach of a state agency. Over the intervening years, multiple commissioners of the agency have continued to support the approach, giving time and resources to allow for the programming to develop and take root. Collaborative and supportive relationships now exist between organizations that may typically act as competitors. Support for the importance of leadership in early education programs is integrated throughout the state agency.

As New Profit has learned over the years, and as is exemplified here, systems change requires deeper work to shift the way in which people relate to one another and frame challenges and their solutions. So how did we get here?

About New Profit

New Profit is a venture philanthropy organization that catalyzes the impact of social entrepreneurs who are expanding access and opportunity in America.

We provide capital, capacity, and community to a portfolio of organizations to increase their impact, scale, and sustainability. And we partner with social entrepreneurs, philanthropists, and cross-sector leaders to shift how the philanthropic sector pursues social change and ensures that everyone in America can thrive.

Since 1998, New Profit has invested over \$350M in 275+ high-impact organizations serving more than 35 million people in all 50 states.

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MEETING THE NEED

The Genesis of the ECSO Initiative



ECSOs are organizations that deliver proven models to support educational leadership, curriculum and assessment. In 2015, New Profit's Aaron Lieberman, whose startup Acelero (founded in 2002) was a pioneer in closing the achievement gap for Head Start children and families, worked in collaboration with New Profit colleagues to develop the idea behind the Early Childhood Support Organization (ECSO) Initiative. The initiative responded to a critical need: improving the experience of children at the earliest moment of their educational lives. It's a time when opportunity and achievement gaps form quickly—but these gaps, which can be very difficult to close, are the result of long-broken educational systems that hinder the ability of Early Education Programs (EEPs) to deliver high-quality educational experiences and prepare children to thrive in their learning.

The New Profit team approached the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) in Massachusetts—New Profit's home state and one of seven state governments that support such a state-level department. James Peyser, then State of Massachusetts Secretary of Education, was quick to recognize the potential of the ECSO initiative. "New Profit [had] a willingness to meet the bureaucracy where it is," Peyser says, "as opposed to coming forward with demands and impatience. It was very collaborative on both sides of the table." Once formally partnered, EEC and New Profit co-designed the details of a request for responses (RFR) that laid out a new model of program improvement and professional development.





COLLECTIVE EFFORT

Our Collaborative Approach

- 1 Build Learning Communities
- 2 Engage In Cross-Sector Partnership
- 3 Support Leaders

To Rebuild Systems, Build Learning Communities

New Profit conceived of the ECSO initiative not only to solve immediate problems but to rebuild the systems that cause those problems—and that takes time. EEC and New Profit designed the ECSO initiative as a four-year pilot to drive lasting, systemic change by taking a cross-sector approach. The project brought together the resources and brilliance of diverse stakeholders: both public and private educational programs and leaders, government funding and philanthropic support, and a range of experts in the education space.

“We wanted to build a learning community like New Profit has done historically with its grantees,” says Aaron Lieberman. “I haven’t seen that in any other public funding. And we raised significant money from individuals who are very experienced philanthropists. I think this cross-sectoral approach was super appealing to them. They saw the incredible leverage cross-sectoral collaboration could have.”

“This was funded for at least initially (four) years. You were baking in rounds of cycle iteration. And that is very unique. I think there is this emphasis on doing things quickly, [but] it takes time. And so to really acknowledge that and provide the resources for that, I think, is really fundamental.”

MELISSA RIVARD

Director of Engagement Strategies
Harvard Center for the Developing Child

Activating The "C" In The M.I.C.[™]: Cross-Sector Entrepreneurship

Multiracial, Intergenerational, Cross-sector. New Profit developed the M.I.C.[™] method for diversifying and expanding our approach to entrepreneurial leadership. The Multiracial and Intergenerational aspects of the M.I.C. invite diversity in race and age. Cross-sectorality can be harder to visualize and grasp—but it is critical to changing systems.

The Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR) offers a clear and inspiring definition of cross-sector collaboration:

“The striking challenges of our time are complex, yet all too often we approach these issues with piecemeal and even siloed solutions.” Cross-sector collaboration creates what the SSIR calls “alliances of individuals and organizations from the nonprofit, government, philanthropic, and business sectors that use their diverse perspectives and resources to jointly solve a societal problem and achieve a shared goal.”

Working across sectors allows us to leverage those unique strengths and act in ways we may not on our own. As Tom Weber, then Commissioner, Department of Early Education and Care, points out, “Being able to have (New Profit) resources upfront was essential to elevating the risk tolerance from the agency to go forward with something that had flexibility, and to treat it as an experiment. It was really that ability to be experimental, by virtue of a public-private partnership, that enabled those kinds of flexibilities and the ability to test, and to then go forward and measure outcomes without feeling the same level of pressure that you usually do around pure state investment.”

The Importance Of Supporting Leaders

Leader-focused support is relatively scarce in the early education space. Initiatives and professional development tend to tilt support toward front-line educators—those who have the most direct engagement with children. This is a very understandable priority, but New Profit’s team recognized that educational leaders carry the most responsibility for driving the culture of their programs and enabling the conditions to support educator practice improvement. Leaders provide supervision and support to educators; and with high educator turnover in the field, their steady presence can lead to sustainability of change in the longer term. In order to help programs address systemic challenges and build sustainable change, the ECSO initiative focused its social impact model on the leaders of EEPs.

Our Goals

There were several key goals in the initiative’s work with EEP leaders, helping them to:

- 1 Strengthen their organizational climate**
- 2 Provide job-embedded professional learning (JEPL) opportunities for educators**
- 3 Support the use of instructional curriculum and child assessments in their programs**
- 4 Use continuous quality improvement to improve their programs.**



ECSO IN ACTION:

Partner, Collaborate, Adapt, Evaluate

Partner

To bring in the right ECSOs for the initiative, New Profit leaned into our commitment to entrepreneurial creativity. In the project's early stages of development, we hosted an innovation summit.

“We invited innovators from across the US to present their ideas on leadership development and curricular innovation,” says Julie Asher, who directed the ECSO initiative for New Profit. “We were looking for partners who weren’t just dropping in their model,” Asher says, adding that “two presenters actually applied to the project and became ECSO partners.”

The co-designed RFR launched a competitive public procurement process. An important selection criterion for our initiative was the ECSO applicant's openness to learning and adapting. We wanted to work with ECSOs who were willing, even eager, to examine their models and question their approach to be sure it is meeting the needs of the local context and that they are able to scale with quality. After thorough interviewing and consideration, three ECSOs were selected to contract with EEC and to receive unrestricted grant dollars from New Profit. The contract with EEC had the three ECSOs scaling to partner with approximately 30 new EEPs per year, and supporting each EEP intensively for two years. Like the ECSOs, the EEPs were mindfully chosen based on their demonstrated readiness for an intensive professional development intervention. The ECSO initiative sought EEPs whose leaders were keen to shift mindsets away from compliance and habituation and toward creativity, adaptation, and innovation.



ECSOs

Children's Literacy Initiative has been a recognized leader in improving education, driving significant improvements in educational outcomes across the United States since 1998.

Early Education Leaders, an Institute at the University of Massachusetts Boston, partnered with Start Early to provide the leadership development opportunities and infrastructure that early educators need to support thriving children and families.

The University of Florida Lastinger Center for Learning delivers a comprehensive professional development system for early childhood educators and leaders.

Collaborate

To maintain a deep focus on continuous improvement and shared learning, New Profit and EEC brought in partners from the Harvard Center for the Developing Child (HCDC). The HCDC's facilitation of a common theory of change helped our ECSO community of practice develop a collective sensibility of what the initiative might achieve long-term. "By virtue of developing a shared theory of change, what the initiative was asking us to do was really different," says HCDC's Melanie Berry.

"[For ECSOs], it's a competitive landscape. You're competing for funding and visibility. New Profit (and EEC) didn't want ECSOs to compete with each other. They wanted ECSOs to work together."

Developing a shared theory of change also helped us to maintain focus on our intended outcomes throughout the initiative - everything we did together was in service of creating the best early learning opportunities for young children.

HCDC also helped us to establish routines for continuous learning and improvement that helped us to collectively interpret the data we would collect and refine the Theory of Change over time. Important, we all brought learning mindsets to the partnership. EEC's lead for the initiative, Sarah Volkenant, Massachusetts EEC's Associate Commissioner of Program Innovation and Support, exemplifies this mindset: "I think the State saw the opportunity to be seen and valued as a support partner, versus just being a compliance-driven entity by creating that trust and coherency and vision. We were able to set up a very collaborative structure: always listening, always iterating, always encouraging change toward having greater impact."

"This was an authentic learning community. There is almost nothing like this that happens in the Early Education space, at scale, in a statewide context. It is so rare that anyone would invest in this type of innovation and building a culture, a community in a state system, that allowed for authentic learning, improvement, iteration, and innovation."

ANNE DOUGLASS

Director, Early Education Leaders Institute at UMass Boston



Adapt

Our partners' enthusiasm for working collaboratively and adaptively became acutely important when the initiative rolled out in March 2020—virtually the same week that the COVID-19 pandemic struck. “It turned out to be germane to our relationship building that we had to adapt and manage all the change that the pandemic brought,” Julie Asher says. Pivoting quickly, the initiative convened a regular virtual learning community. Together, we thought through and acted on the challenges of the pandemic as they manifested specifically in Massachusetts, and always with the voices and needs of practitioners at the forefront of our decisions.

“The cross-sector collaboration between EEC, New Profit, and the other organizations allowed us to be adaptable and nimble with our particular intervention and our services, so that we could continuously grow and improve and tweak and tinker, to be able to meet the needs of not only the individual centers, but the community at large.”

MICHELE LACOURSIERE-FERRER

Managing Director of Strategic Partnerships,
Children's Literacy Initiative

Evaluate

An essential project partner was Abt Global, a research, monitoring, and evaluation firm contracted by New Profit to provide continuous data collection, reporting and feedback over the course of the ECSO initiative's four years. Abt was an active partner and essential voice contributing to continuous learning, discovery, iteration, and improvement.

Abt's evaluative work itself evolved over the course of the project based on what we wanted to know at the time and a continually developing "understanding about what changes in participants the initiative was designed to target," points out Dr. Kerry Hofer, Principal Associate at Abt. In Year One, they gathered and reported qualitatively:

- **What was the nature of the program we developed?**
- **What were its characteristics and approach?**
- **What did it look like in the environments where our ECSOs were working with early education program leaders?**

By mirroring back to us what we were building together, Abt allowed us to see the initiative very clearly and to continuously iterate, rethink, and remodel pieces where our community of practice saw fit.

In subsequent years of the initiative, Abt's evaluation approach expanded to incorporate not just implementation but also impact, reporting on the results of our work:

- **What change was occurring as a result of the ECSO intervention, and how did that change compare to what was occurring in similar non-supported programs at the same time?**
- **Was the initiative improving the experience of children, their families, and educators—and if so, how?**

This quantitative analysis allowed for further adjustment:

"A key aspect of the ECSO initiative is a focus on continuous quality improvement (CQI) of the model's implementation, based on what the evaluation is saying," says Hofer. "It's really cyclical, which is fitting, right? It would be disingenuous of us to encourage CQI in programs and not be engaging in it ourselves."



CHANGING THE SYSTEM:

Build Relationships, Build Trust

In the spring of 2021, our three ECSOs launched virtual services in their partnered early education programs. There was continuous data-gathering by both the ECSOs and Abt Global. Abt's semi-annual reports helped our community of practice keep adjusting and iterating. We held quarterly online meetings of our collaborative, and the ECSOs themselves conducted regular meetings across their teams, independent of New Profit and the Massachusetts EEC—sharing their learnings and ideas, evolving their theory of change and modes of practice.

Theories and data were essential to the progress of the ECSO initiative, but they weren't ultimately why it was so successful. "It's relationships," says Philip Poekert, of University of Florida's Lastinger Center for Learning, one of the three ECSO partners.

"It's years of connectedness that develop a sense of trust where, in a moment of challenge, you can take a risk that will create ultimate benefit. If you don't have that kind of connection and trust, then people shield themselves, and it limits the good things that can happen. An important lesson for us to take away is the power of relationships between individuals, between organizations."

"People were incredibly vulnerable and asked us really hard questions, and we asked them really hard questions," says Sarah Volkenant, "We encouraged this, and it just became part of the climate of how we worked."





DRIVING CHANGE

Impact

New Profit's stewardship and funding of the ECSO initiative in Massachusetts reached its scheduled conclusion at the end of 2025—but the initiative continues, having grown self-sustaining roots. Massachusetts' EEC has committed to another contract and hired a staff person dedicated to leadership development. "They've integrated leadership into their definition of quality in the programs," Asher says. That's a powerful indicator that the initiative has accomplished both its highest goal and its deepest success: it has reimaged both the theory of change and the attention to field leadership in a government agency.

EEC also now regularly facilitates ECSO partners in continuous learning and improvement. In the 2025-26 school year, the ECSOs will work with their sixth cohort of EEPs. Proofs of the ECSO initiative's positive impact were magnified by another crucial finding:

"Importantly," Abt's 2024 report observed, "the ECSO initiative evolved over the [four] years of its life, and we saw larger gains in important outcomes with each subsequent cohort of Early Education Programs." The initiative not only improved the experience of leaders, educators, and the children in their programs, but the initiative itself also adapted and improved, resulting in **"a program that was increasingly more effective at impacting desired outcomes,"** the Abt report found.

The ECSO initiative was conceived as more than a pilot program or a strictly Massachusetts-based intervention. It was also an incubator: an experimental and experiential model for educational leaders across the US to drive scalable, community-based change in early education. Every state has government mechanisms designed to funnel federal support to state-level early education programs, and the ECSO model is adjustable to any of those mechanisms. "I really think there was something truly special about the setup of this initiative that I would love to see replicated more," says HCDC's Melanie Berry, "because it's what the early childhood field actually needs: a more collaborative shared learning approach. You're not just inviting us to do what we do better. You're inviting us to rethink what we do."

"I would encourage other states to think critically about what we know about what works in supporting and improving quality in early childhood settings, and challenge our traditional views of what we think it takes to improve and sustain quality, acknowledge what we don't know, and seek out partners, including philanthropic private partners that can support good thinking about what the evidence base is."

SARAH VOLKENANT

Massachusetts EEC's Associate Commissioner
of Program Innovation and Support

"Philanthropy has an opportunity to work hand-in-hand with public agencies to shift systems to more equitable outcomes. By bringing the best of what we both have to offer, our distinct strengths can come together in fantastic ways."

JULIE ASHER

Founder & Principal, Spark Impact Strategies
and former ECSO Director at New Profit

The project also encourages philanthropies to rethink what is possible in a public-private partnership. By bringing together leaders from different sectors with complementary areas of expertise and engagement, our model developed organically and collectively, allowing for change and growth that adapted to the specific needs of the programs and communities served. Although we knew going in what we hoped to achieve, we did not know the path to that achievement, and we trusted our community of practice to find their way together.

“A key is having an open mind and heart,” says Michele LaCoursiere-Ferrer, Managing Director of Strategic Partnerships at Children's Literacy Initiative. “Open to learning, open to thinking. Without that, you can't create the magic that we were able to do.”

Key Takeaways And Recommendations

The ECSO initiative has created better growth and development systems for educators. For those seeking to develop their own partnerships in support of stronger early childhood support systems, we hope this initiative can serve as a model. We recommend the following:

- **Prioritize proximity to ensure what you are building is useful for and relevant to those closest to the challenges you're addressing.**
- **Foreground trust to establish that you are acting in good faith, that you respect those involved in this work and to bring transparency to your improvement efforts.**
- **Gather and allocate joint private and public funding resources to accelerate and sustain change.**
- **Bring together thought leaders and practicing professionals from multiple sectors to harness diverse perspectives that can generate the strongest, multifaceted solutions.**
- **Build continuous evaluation into the project to feed data into your learning and evolve your program.**
- **Create communities of practice to facilitate connection, learning, and improvement.**

ECSO Report

A New Model For Cross-Sector Collaboration