



## The Build Initiative's Theory of Change

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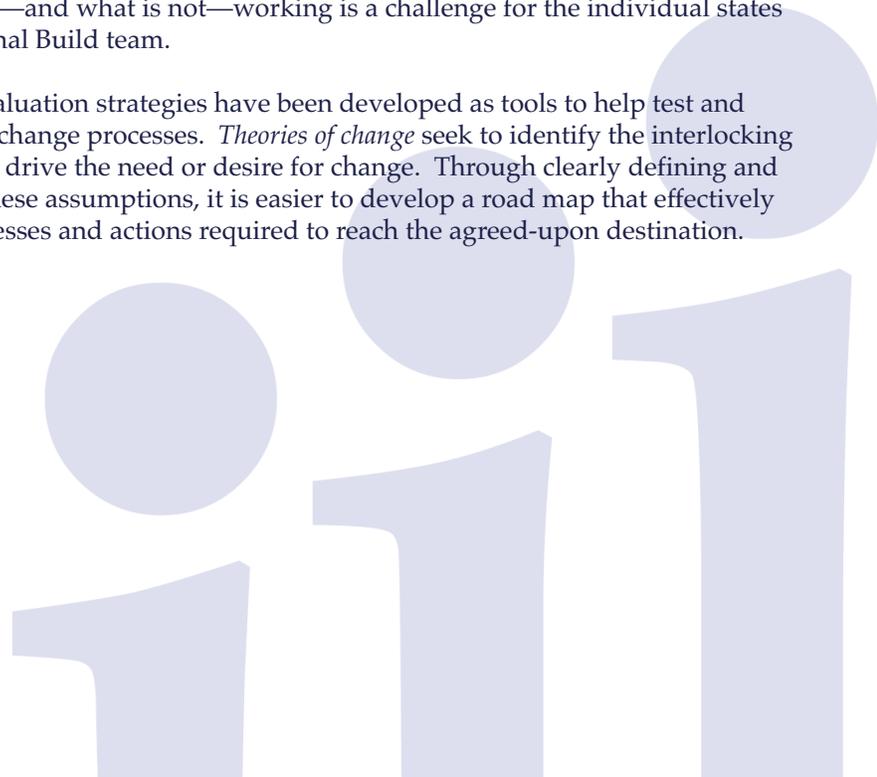
*The following is a summary of a paper written by Charles Bruner entitled  
Toward a Theory of Change for the Build Initiative: A Discussion Paper.*

The Build Initiative is a multi-state, multi-foundation effort focused on young children and their development. The mission of the Build Initiative is to help participating states build a coordinated system of programs, policies and services—an early learning system—that is responsive to the needs of families, careful in the use of private and public resources and effective in preparing our youngest children for a successful future.

The initiative is working with nine states to build early learning systems, providing both financial support and technical assistance to a group of state and community early childhood leaders, including individuals from the public and private sectors. This is a complex undertaking. Tracking progress, identifying best next steps, and assessing what is—and what is not—working is a challenge for the individual states and for the national Build team.

Theory-based evaluation strategies have been developed as tools to help test and explain complex change processes. *Theories of change* seek to identify the interlocking assumptions that drive the need or desire for change. Through clearly defining and understanding these assumptions, it is easier to develop a road map that effectively lays out the processes and actions required to reach the agreed-upon destination.

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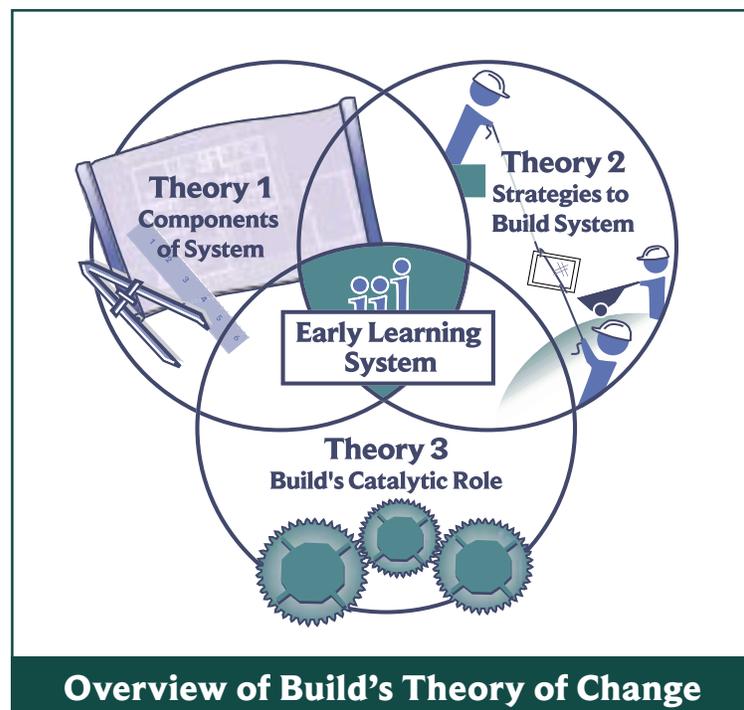
There are at least three distinct “theories of change” that are emerging within the work of the Build Initiative. These may be more easily understood by comparing the creation of an early learning system to the analogy of a complex building project, like the renovation and expansion of a community’s historic district.

*Theory One: A wide array of core components is necessary for the development of an effective early learning system. Before a system can be built, these components must be identified, a ‘system’ must be defined, and there must be agreement on what an early learning system is designed to achieve. In the building-project analogy, this would be similar to creating the overall construction and renovation plan, together with blueprints for each building and details on mixed usage and overall landscaping. This is the master plan, which may be refined as the project moves forward, but which provides the unifying vision, based on the project’s unique opportunities and requirements.*

*Theory Two: Planning, mobilization and action strategies must be developed and implemented. This includes efforts directed toward building and developing political leadership, public support, knowledge, programmatic and infrastructure bases, and adequate financing. In the building-project analogy, this would involve obtaining financing, ensuring that users and inhabitants support the project plans, and coordinating and managing the work of developers, architects and myriad construction and utilities crews.*

*Theory Three: Build Initiative resources serve as a catalyst for constructing the early learning system, making strategic financial and technical investments to help each state move forward in its own individual way. In the historic building project analogy, this would be similar to obtaining dispensations from government to treat the historic district in a unique way, consulting with historic preservationists, or adapting specialized techniques developed at another site. It also could be graphically represented by a grouping of gears, with the Build Initiative gear both propelling and supporting the other gears’ movements.*

Each of these three theories is supported by underlying assumptions, which are explained below. (There are, of course, alternative or competing theories, which are discussed in the lengthier *Toward a Theory of Change for the Build Initiative: A Discussion Paper*, upon which this brief is based. See [www.buildinitiative.org/docs/TowardTheoryofChange.doc](http://www.buildinitiative.org/docs/TowardTheoryofChange.doc).)



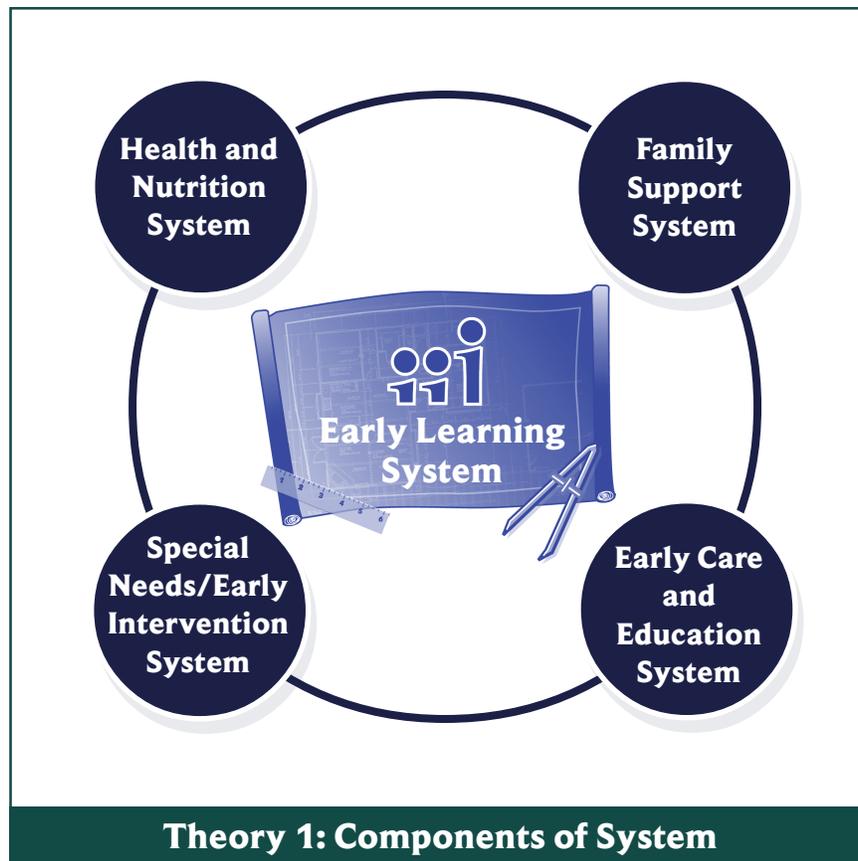


## Theory of Change One: The Core Components of an Early Learning System

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The first theory of change defines an early learning system and its component parts. The system includes programs and strategies to ensure that young children’s developmental needs are addressed, including health and nutrition, parenting, supervision and guidance and nurturing needs. This theory is based on the following assumptions:

- Significant numbers of children are not being prepared for a successful future. They start school substantially behind their peers and they remain behind, with their future jeopardized as a result. An early learning system, with effective and coordinated programs and policies, could help these children to succeed in school and in life.
- Building an early learning system requires public effort and will not be fully developed through private actions and the marketplace. The public sector will have to finance and oversee much of the system building and maintenance, as it does in the public education system.
- Developing an early learning *system*, rather than simply expanding an array of program options, is key to achieving success. A system incorporates more than a set of independently operating programs and services. It requires an effective and seamless set of referrals and follow-ups across many fields — health, nutrition, family support, early care and education, early intervention and preschool services. It also implies referrals and follow-ups to child welfare, housing, and adult/child mental health and substance abuse services, when needed. Although there is a need to better coordinate services, the primary emphasis should be placed on ensuring a sufficient supply of high quality, affordable services.

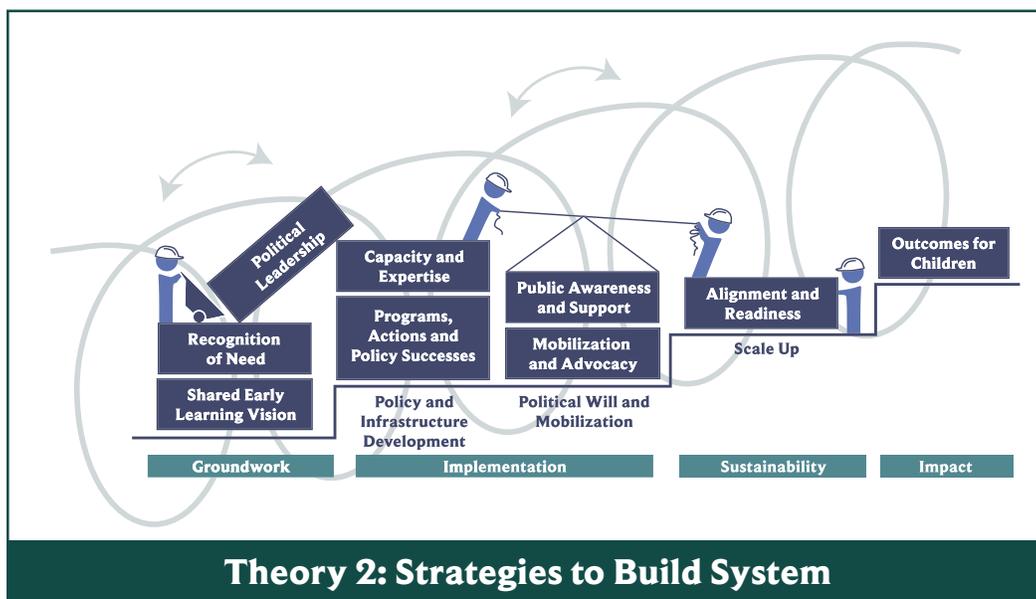




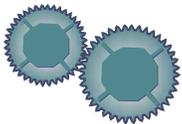
## Theory of Change Two: The Critical Strategies Needed to Build an Early Learning System

The second theory of change describes how the system will be built and what strategies are required to build it. System building requires specific elements that together will produce systems change in a political environment. This theory is based on eight critical elements:

- **Recognition of need:** Gaps in the current system (or non-system)—and the consequences of those gaps on child outcomes—must be recognized before change will happen. Good data can build this awareness, illustrate the magnitude of the issues that need to be addressed, and track progress toward correcting them.
- **Shared early learning vision:** The establishment of a broadly shared vision for the early learning system is needed to make sure there is alignment and collaboration in system development and that attention is not deflected or co-opted by narrow or tangential agendas. This process also helps to establish a group identity and build trust and understanding. The vision needs to be concrete enough to avoid ambiguity and different interpretations.
- **Political leadership:** Leadership is needed at multiple levels, with the Governor’s support key to making policy and financing changes. As chief executive officer, the Governor can keep the system building agenda moving and use executive authority to overcome cross-agency obstacles. Legislative leadership also is important to support a Governor’s actions and proposals, or provide pressure and direction if gubernatorial leadership is lacking.
- **Capacity and expertise:** To increase effectiveness, build credibility and avoid costly mistakes, capacity and expertise must be developed. Mid-level managers within state systems should be engaged throughout the effort, so that when opportunities arise, action can be taken quickly.
- **Programs, actions and policy successes:** It is important to take actions when opportunities present themselves, and early successes are important for maintaining momentum. As long as the actions play a role in overall system building, they do not necessarily have to be undertaken in a particular sequence.
- **Public awareness and support:** Public awareness and broad support are needed, both to initiate and sustain system building, and to create the impetus for supportive policy. Framing early childhood issues in ways that resonate with the public is essential to gaining the broad public buy-in that will move agendas forward.



- Mobilization and advocacy: Gaining political support for early learning system building requires political mobilization and advocacy, with leadership coming from outside government. Pressure groups must be mobilized to support change, using lobbying and legislative strategies. Different political spheres of influence must be drawn into the effort, including the business community, corporate leaders, the faith community, law enforcement and others.
- Alignment and readiness: Major leaps forward in system building usually result from an alignment of multiple factors. Most state advancement is made through major new initiatives or emphases with focused attention from many constituencies within a short timeframe. In most states, there are one or two major policy pushes in a year, where there is concentrated energy and attention on obtaining a particular action. This is most likely to occur if the elements above have been developed and put into place.

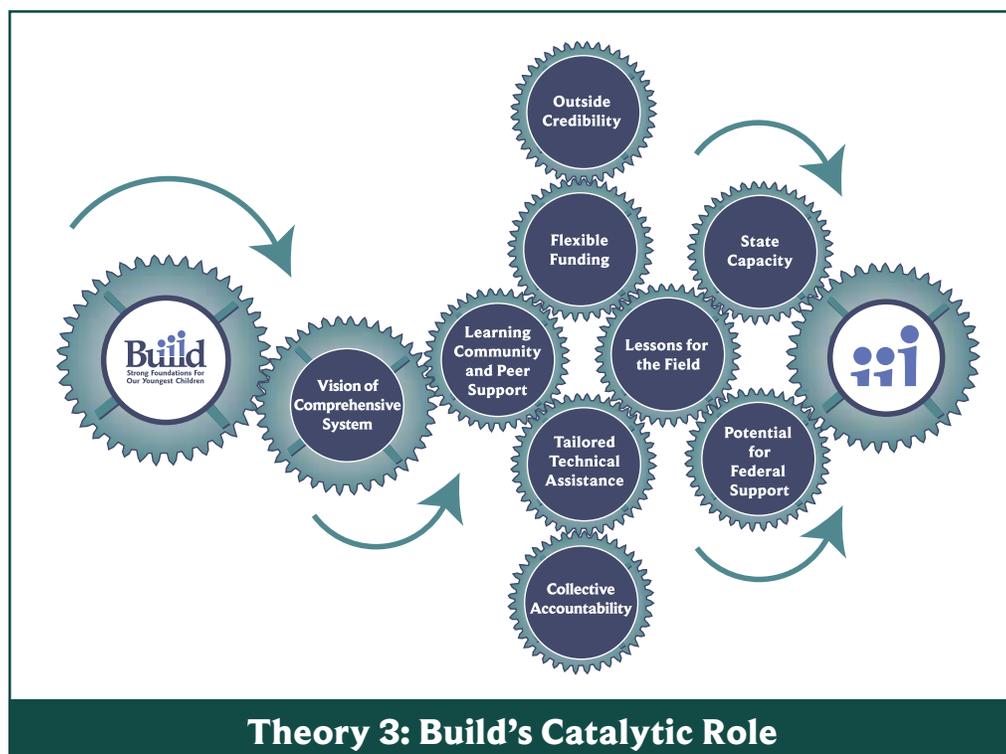


### Theory of Change Three: Build’s Catalytic Role in Supporting States in System Building

The third theory of change addresses the role that Build plays in supporting system building in the states. The funding provided to the states each year by Build leverages much larger public investments in early learning system building. This theory is based on seven assumptions:

- States that have advanced far enough in developing and aligning the elements described in Theory Two assumptions have reached a stage of “readiness” to move forward substantially. One of Build’s major roles has been to identify those states most ready to move forward and where Build’s resources are most likely to be an inertia-breaking final investment. In states that have not quite reached this point, Build’s investment can contribute to advances and to identifying important lessons for other states.
- A team of committed leaders, from inside and outside government, can be a driving force for system building. Build can play a unique and catalytic role by creating the space and opportunity for this team to work together.

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- The state teams can effectively use technical assistance, peer-to-peer learning and support, and access to flexible funds. Rather than imposing a specific structure, Build relies on the state leaders to develop the core components of an early learning system and strategies necessary to build it. The cross-site exchanges and learning opportunities provided by Build will produce greater gains than if the states worked separately.
- Feedback is essential to continuous improvement and development. Incorporating a state evaluation partner and a national evaluation structure will facilitate learning and improvement. An interactive evaluation approach helps each state learn through doing.
- Being designated as a Build state provides credibility and legitimacy to a state’s early learning system building work. On a national level, Build can serve as an effective voice to help bring early learning issues to the attention of national policymakers.
- No state currently has fully established an early learning system that is an effective, well-developed public system of support. Even if none of the Build states creates a fully-realized early learning system any time soon, Build’s work makes a critical contribution. Build brings together leading thinkers and doers within the most active or “ready” states and provides them with resources to foster innovations. Build is essentially investing in innovation, charting new territory and moving the field forward.
- As work progresses, a “tipping point” is reached, when actions accelerate and become sustainable without ongoing and additional outside support. As that point comes closer, the roles of federal, state, community and the private sector in system building and sustainability will become clearer. If this does not happen, then the current approach to early learning system building needs to end, and new approaches need to be developed and implemented.

## Conclusion

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Theories of change help to sort out when actions are—or are not—contributing to meeting overall goals. They also help to identify which actions are essential to moving forward. Articulating a theory of change encourages asking the “so what?” questions and increases focus and productivity. It also helps to highlight mistakes and lessons learned, which can lead to improvement and be shared with others.

The assumptions enumerated in this paper, which are the underpinning for Build’s three theories of change, may need to be adjusted or modified along the way, but they still can lead to significant progress in early learning system building.

The full paper, *Toward a Theory of Change for the Build Initiative: A Discussion Paper*, is available online at [www.buildinitiative.org/docs/TowardaTheoryofChange.doc](http://www.buildinitiative.org/docs/TowardaTheoryofChange.doc).

*A project of the Early Childhood Funders’ Collaborative supporting state efforts to prepare our youngest children for a successful future.*