

NCEDL Spotlights



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Decision Matrix

Excerpts from “Policy Options for Early Childhood: A Model for Decision Making” in the January 1999 issue of *Early Education & Development*. Authors of the paper are Jim Gallagher & Robin Rooney of the National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL) at UNC-CH.

Matrix offered to help decision-makers, policy analysts

This decision-making model is designed to let decision-makers/policy analysts weigh the pros and cons of various policy options for a public issue such as child care quality. The matrix allows users to compare strategies in terms of desirability and feasibility factors such as cost, personnel needs, track record, and so on. Users enter “pluses” and “minuses” per strategy across the continuum of considerations related to policy implementation. The purpose of using such a tool is to slow and inform the “rush to judgment” so often associated with policy change.

Options	Criteria for Choice						
	Cost Cost	Personnel Needs	Track Record	Public Acceptance	Administrative Feasibility	Agency Acceptance	Other Other
Subsidy to qualified programs							
Vouchers—Direct support to families							
Support to infrastructure							
Subsidy for comprehensive planning							
Direct payments to teachers							
Industry child care							
Status quo							

Discussion of “Options” using child care quality as examples

- 1. Subsidy to quality programs:** The federal government now provides block grants to states for child care subsidy. This option would include a subsidy earmarked for quality assurance. States would be responsible for determining which programs would receive support and how this money would be allocated between state and local needs.
- 2. Parental vouchers:** Payments could be made directly to families, to increase access to quality care. An example: The state could provide a type of credit card with a fixed yearly limit that would be restricted to the purchase of child care services in approved settings. Objective: Enhance child development, not provide a family subsidy.
- 3. Infrastructure:** State grants could provide more personnel preparation, help establish technical assistance centers, and help create a system of consultants to support professional development for child care providers.
- 4. Comprehensive state planning:** At least five major federal funding streams now flow to the states for early childhood programs. But programs tend to remain separate at the state level. One option might be to offer federal grants for states to develop a single state plan for comprehensive services to young children that blend state and federal support across funding streams.

5. **Direct subsidy for teachers:** Salary supplements could reward child care workers who meet certification requirements and continue to upgrade their education in child development areas.
6. **Industry child care:** Federal and state government could offer grants or tax relief to industries that provide quality care for employees' children and the larger community.
7. **Status quo:** The advantages and disadvantages of maintaining current policy must be considered as part of the menu of choices.

Discussion, examples of “Criteria for choice”

1. **Cost:** The options listed in this table present two quite different levels of costs. “Program Support” and “Vouchers” represent universal application of policy which means their cost can be estimated by multiplying the number of children involved by the individual cost per child. The other three options (“Strengthening infrastructure,” “Direct support for teachers,” and “Subsidies for planning”) provide fiscal support for strengthening the system of child care. Here the costs might range between \$10 million and \$30 million for a given state, but are not of the same order of cost as the “universal application” options.
2. **Personnel needs:** Various policy options present different implications for personnel. Subsidies underwriting child care programs might require more child care workers/teachers, while a subsidy for direct payment to those teachers who complete additional training might well reduce attrition. There is the additional problem as to whether there are sufficient people available, even with increased salaries, to fill the positions needed.
3. **Track record:** This criterion takes into account past experience with the option. Matrix users may consult research, or gather information from program personnel who have used a similar approach to judge advantages and disadvantages of various strategies.
4. **Public acceptance:** Polling or election results to reveal public attitude. While policy options may not generate overt hostility, a particular aspect of the option, such as the proposed extra costs, might. Another issue is this: By providing a more extensive child care network, are we encouraging mothers to go to work and turn their child care responsibilities to a stranger?
5. **Administrative feasibility:** This can be rated by many experienced people who have tried to implement versions of these strategies.
6. **Agency acceptance:** In some of these options there is a real possibility that existing programs and agencies would lose power and/or resources. Individuals with such programs may be suspicious of options that could reduce their particular agency's influence. For example, a comprehensive planning model has the potential for upsetting existing programs/agencies.

Considerations

Any final decision would be much more complex than merely synthesizing the information in the matrix. It might depend upon which criteria are most important to key decision makers. If cost is the most important then how the options fare versus the other criteria might not be terribly relevant to such a decision maker. For others, public acceptance is the key and any option that did not have obvious public appeal would suffer regardless of the positives they received in other parts of the matrix. These ratings merely give us some initial guidance about the potential positive and negative factors surrounding particular options.

Policy actions may well depend on the choice between two quite different approaches: 1) a gradual buildup of resources or 2) an attempt to request large sums or “strike while the iron is hot” strategy. In the case of early childhood resources, some mix of the two strategies might seem to be most effective.

If you want more information

- Rooney, R., & Gallagher, J. (1998, February). *Child Care Policy Options*. Paper presented at the Early Childhood Policy Meeting in Atlanta, GA.
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- Galinsky, E., Howes, C., Kontos, S., & Shinn, M. (1994). *The study of children in family child care and relative care: Highlights of findings*. New York: Families and Work Institute.

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