

**Early Childhood Iowa State Board: Meeting Minutes**

**March 6, 2026; 9:00am to 12:00pm**

**Attendance:**

Mr. Dave Arens	x	<del>Director Beth Townsend (IWD)-</del>	
<del>Ms. Angela Anderson-</del>		Kathy Leggett (IWD) - designee (joined at 8:39am)	x
Ms. Jennifer Banta (left at 11:55am)	x	<del>Mr. Dave Muhtbauer-</del>	
<del>Director Debbie Durham (IEDA)-</del>		Ms. Melissa Miller (resigned on 11/7/25)	
Ms. Nicole Hansen (IEDA) (designee)	x	<del>Ms. Mary Peterson--</del>	
<del>Director Larry Johnson (HHS)-</del>		Mr. Brook Rosenberg	x
Janee Harvey (HHS designee)	x	<del>Director Mckenzie Snow (DE)---</del>	
Ms. Paige Berg	x	Dr. Kimberly Villotti, Designee (DE) (left at 10am)	x
Ms. Unity Stevens	x	Mr. Aaron Johnson	x
Ms. Emily Westergaard	x	<b>Non-Voting</b>	
		Rep. Michael Bergan	x
<b>Staff</b>		Rep. Tracey Ehlert	
Amanda Winslow	x	Sen. Cindy Winckler	x
Amanda McKee	x	Sen. Lynn Evans	
Liz Ernst	x		

**Guests (names captured from the electronic listing per individual sign-in for Zoom meeting):** Amy McGinn, Kevin Grieme, Jillian Herink Iowa AEYC, Lisa Hilsenbeck, [dlero@iastate.edu](mailto:dlero@iastate.edu), Mallory Berkenpas, Dawn Sickelka, Mary Wirth, Sherri Hunt, Tonya Blasen, Angel Smith, LW, Cyndi Mears, Amy Grunewaldt, Salena Siefken, Sheila Hansen, Witt. Harberts, Amy Glade, Jenny Robinson, Kristy Roosa, Annette Koster, Lindsey Ingraham, Kristen Peyton, Melissa Tucker, Tammy Wetjen-Kesterson, Erin Harrison, Jacki McCracken, Pat McReynolds, Louie Hoehle, Amy McLaughlin, Sheri Penney, Kim Warren, PJ West, Cass Des Moines, Sarah Vanwyk, McKinley Baliey, Ashley Otte, Carrie Sodders, Elizabeth Stanek, Shawna Lebeck, Brenda Loop, Abigail Degenhardt, Ginger Knisley, Claire Carlson, Deb Schrader, Carrie Kube, Angel Amith, tfrein, Merry Dudley, Wendy Hoogeveen, Heather Rouse, Floyd County, Darnell Austin, Beth Ownby, Deena Recker, Christine Lippard, Angie McCann, Jen Roberts, Jordan Morse, Monica Shuey, 1<sup>st</sup> Five Upper Des Moines, M Faldet, Peggy Wood, Amy Blanchard, Jada Bahls-Kargalskiy, Kristin Drabek, Julie Hamann, Lori Jahn, Erin Barkema, emelche, Mindy Baylor, Liz Fairchild, Patricia Russman, Jodi, Mary Janssen, Elizabeth Kehret, Deidre DeJear, Carlyn Dexter, Jennifer Weber, Erika Fuentes, Nick Wuertz

**In-person attendance:** Barb Bremner, Kerri Hall, Tasha Beghtol, Diane Martens, Erin Monaghan, Michele Cullen, Benjamin Castrey, Chris Castrey, Representative Wilz, Michael McClelland, Ryan Page, Nick Crawford, Gaylyn Mercer

### **Welcome/Introductions**

**Action Item** - Agenda for Today's meeting, approval of minutes from January 9 and February 2, 2026, invoices for Dickinson, O'Brien, Clay, and Osceola counties, and administrative update

Motion by Aaron Johnson

Seconded by Dave Arens

Passed unanimously

### **Public Comment:**

No public comment.

Approved by ECI State Board  
on April 10, 2026

**Action Item: Proposed ECI State Board Meetings** – Recommended to meet monthly for the rest of the fiscal year. New dates will be from 9:00am – 11:00am. Reassess closer to the end of the fiscal year for additional dates. Updated dates include:

- April 10, 2026
- May 1, 2026
- June 5, 2026 **(9:00am – 12:00pm)**
- August 7, 2026
- September 11, 2026 **(9:00am – 12:00pm)**
- November 6, 2026 **(9:00am – 12:00pm)**

Motion by Paige Berg

Second by Jennie Banta

Passed unanimously

**Action Item: Administrative Update to include HAWC ECI Area** – the discussion centered on issues with the HAWC area related to contract management and fiscal oversight. This fiscal year (FY26) was the first year that all areas were required to upload contracts into IowaGrants. HAWC FY26 amendments were signed but after further review the original FY25 contracts related to preschool scholarships were never signed. As a result, a few programs may have been operating without fully executed contracts. Work is ongoing to correct this, and as of the latest update, two preschool scholarship contracts still need to be completed before service can continue.

The HAWC board is also facing governance challenges, including several recent board resignations, leaving membership low. The board chair is currently stepping in to manage many of the immediate issues. Some historical contract information was recovered from a laptop held by the fiscal agent, Central Iowa Juvenile Detention Center (CIJDC), which has helped clarify parts of the situation. The discussion also raised broader concerns about the role and responsibilities of the fiscal agent. State auditor findings in FY23 and FY24 identified missing signatures, missing dates on contracts, and instances where the fiscal agent did not have copies of required contracts or invoices.

Each area selects and pays for its own audit, while some fiscal agents contract with external auditors, it is not clear how audits are conducted in other areas. Some audits across areas are also delayed due to limited auditor capacity, which may have contributed to documentation gaps. Since December, the TA Team has been working with CIJDC to

Approved by ECI State Board  
on April 10, 2026

strengthen documentation and processes. Leadership there has been cooperative, though changes must go through their board for approval. Currently, oversight of audits primarily focuses on verifying that audits were completed, uploaded to IowaGrants, and whether findings were reported. The TA Team does not have access to and therefore does not directly review invoice-level allowability or audit procedures, and oversight often relies on the knowledge and monitoring of local boards. This has highlighted a potential gap in clearly defining responsibilities and expectations for fiscal agents and local boards. Local boards are responsible for monitoring contracts with both service providers and fiscal agents, while the state board provides broader oversight.

The TA team previously drafted guidance outlining expectations for fiscal agents, and the state board may consider adopting clearer standards to strengthen fiscal oversight and prevent similar issues in the future. Discussion around additional checks such as requiring documentation to be shared with fiscal agents at the time contracts are issued might strengthen accountability. However, there was caution about the state becoming too involved in local contracting decisions, as local boards independently select their fiscal agents. Short-term and long-term solutions were discussed.

In the short term, the TA Team are working with HAWC Board to address missing contracts, halt payments where agreements are not in place, and support the hiring of a new director. In the long term, members emphasized the need to strengthen systems and oversight through the designation process, gap analysis, and clearer standards for fiscal agent responsibilities and follow up when audit findings occur. Several members suggested forming a workgroup as part of the broader designation review process to develop clearer guidance and prevent similar issues in the future.

No formal motion made as this was an informational update.

**Action Item: Tool O** – Updates based on ECI Directors’ feedback from FY26 and mid-year Qualtrics survey. Majority of changes are for clarification and formatting. Key changes include removal of Community Based Supportive Housing due to unknown variables and the absence of existing contracts. Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation with an emphasis on the workforce support over clinical care. Wage Enhancement was split into two service types. Divided into wage enhancement for the early childhood workforce and early learning enhancement and expansion due to consensus from workgroups.

Approved by ECI State Board  
on April 10, 2026

Question was raised to the State Board regarding ASQ requirement within Wage Enhancement and Early Learning Enhancement and Expansion. Discussion on whether ASQs should be required or optional for wage enhancement programs. Some argues for consistency and data collection, while others emphasized retention as the primary goal and that ASQs might not align with all beneficiaries. Additionally, retention/recruitment bonus structure was discussed. A minimum employment period was debated on standardized vs. local control for retention bonus eligibility. There were concerns about excluding seasonal/part-time, high-quality staff. A local wage enhancement program successfully uses a transparent scoring rubric based on local goals e.g. CCA students) to award funds. There was discussion of the growing challenge in the child care system following the rollout of universal pre-k programs in local school districts.

While they support the goal of increasing preschool access, they note unintended consequences for private child care centers. Enrollment in child care centers has dropped especially in the four year old age group, which typically generates the most revenue for centers. At the same time, centers are seeing more infants enrolled, who require more resources and are less profitable to care for. This shift has contributed to financial strain on providers. This issue is being reported widely by providers through a cohort with First Children's Finance. They have raised the concern with the governor's office and believe policymakers need to examine how universal pre-k impacts the broader child care ecosystem. Suggestion of State Board dedicating time in the future meetings to work intentionally with child care strategists to understand the gaps and develop solutions.

Lastly, it was briefly discussed of slowly shifting from outputs and focusing more on outcomes. The group moved into formal decision-making process. A motion was made to adopt the proposed Tool O with a second then opened to floor for discussion. Much of the conversation centered on whether the program should maintain a requirement that employees remain in their positions for six months in order to count towards retention outcomes. Some participants questioned whether six months was the right benchmark, noting that certain programs rely on seasonal staff who may only work for shorter periods, such as during the summer. They wondered if shortening the timeframe to three months might better capture those workers and increase the number of employees counted as recipients. Others emphasized that the purpose of the measure was not simply to increase the number of people receiving bonuses, but to demonstrate that the program actually helps reduce staff turnover and stabilize the workforce. From that perspective, the six-month timeframe served as a meaningful indicator of sustained employment.

The board also discussed the possibility of collecting more nuanced data such as whether bonuses are awarded on the first day of employment or after a certain period. Those

Approved by ECI State Board  
on April 10, 2026

differences might reveal which approaches are more effective in improving retention. The board agreed that local areas should retain flexibility in how they structure their incentive programs. For example, some communities might choose to provide bonuses immediately upon hire, while others might require employees to remain for a certain amount of time. Local boards could also choose to add criteria based on community needs, such as prioritizing programs that accept child care assistance. One example was given explaining that child care employers struggle to compete with wages offered by other local employers. Survey showed that other local businesses were paying significantly higher starting wages than child care programs. As a result, the wage enhancement and bonus strategies were designed to make child care positions more competitive and attract workers who might otherwise take jobs in other sectors.

Throughout the discussion, members acknowledged that the system would likely evolve over time. While they wanted to allow room to learn from the data and adjust the approach, they also recognized that frequent changes could create challenges for contracts and program administration. As a result, there was general agreement that any revisions to the tool should occur no more than once a year rather than mid-year. After the discussion, the original motion was amended.

Motion by Aaron Johnson to accept the tool as presented but striking the ASQ requirements from Wage Enhancement and Early Learning Enhancement and Expansion.

Second by Dave Arens

Passed unanimously

**Information Item: Roles and Responsibilities** – focus on clarifying the roles and responsibilities among the different parts of the ECI system. Board members have been discussing the need to clearly define what responsibilities belong to local ECI areas, the state board, and the state technical assistance team. The goal is to ensure everyone understands their “lane” and avoids confusion or overlap in responsibilities.

As part of this effort the state TA team has begun implementing a structured process to provide technical assistance to local areas. Over the past three months, they introduced a scheduling feature that allows local leaders to directly book time with them. At the bottom of their email signatures is a “book with me” link, which lets individuals schedule meetings with one or both team members and select the type of assistance they need through a

Approved by ECI State Board  
on April 10, 2026

dropdown menu. The available assistance covers a range of topics relevant to local ECI operations. These include help with budgeting, understanding and implementing Tool O, guidance on writing contracts that align with requirements, questions related to local government processes such as board membership or conflict of interest issues, retirement transitions, and reporting requirements such as Qualtrics performance measures.

Additional support areas include questions about IowaGrants, general program issues, and more specialized topics handled by Amanda McKee such as home visitation programs or the DAISEY system. The new approach appears to be working effectively with strong utilization and engagement from local areas. Board members emphasized that the purpose of the TA team is to provide support, guidance, and problem-solving assistance, not to take over operational responsibilities from local areas. The technical assistance function should help strengthen local capacity without becoming a substitute for local leadership or decision making.

**Information Item: State Board Committee Gap Analysis Discussion** – The board discussed launching a governance gap analysis to better understand what is working in the current system and where improvements are needed. The conversation was prompted by concerns raised during an emergency board meeting related to legislative developments and stakeholder feedback. A small group reviewed past board discussions, director interviews, and meeting notes from the past six to twelve months to identify patterns and determine what the board should focus on. Their goal is to clarify the board’s role within its statutory authority and address structural issues that repeatedly create problems across the system.

Several key challenges were identified. Board members noted that roles and responsibilities between the state board, state staff, and local boards are not consistently defined or implemented. Communication inconsistencies have also reduced confidence in the process. In addition, differences in fiscal agent arrangements and employer structures across local areas create uneven accountability and potential compliance risks. The group also highlighted inconsistent data collection practices, which currently prevent the system from fully qualifying for certain federal funding opportunities, including Title IV-E funds.

While the system has historically benefited from local innovation, these structural inconsistencies now present risks related to standardization, fiscal oversight, and compliance monitoring. To address these issues, the board proposed a collaborative process focused on areas within its authority. The work will concentrate on clarifying

Approved by ECI State Board  
on April 10, 2026

governance roles, defining accountability and compliance mechanisms, establishing minimum designation standards for local areas, standardizing data reporting requirements tied to federal funding, strengthening fiscal oversight guardrails, and creating clearer communication protocols among the board, staff and local directors. The process will not involve redrawing district boundaries or rewriting statute but rather defining expectations and governance structures so all parties understand their responsibilities. The group outlined several deliverables for the effort. By the end of the process, the board hopes to produce a written framework describing roles and responsibilities across the system, establish statewide accountability standards, clarify how compliance monitoring should work, define data standardization requirements that support federal funding eligibility, and create a formal communication protocol between the board, staff, and local leadership.

The board also intends to identify policy updates that may require formal votes and develop a 12-to-18-month roadmap for implementing these changes. A key short-term priority discussed was the designation process for local ECI areas. Current contracts with designated areas expire on June 30, 2026, meaning the board must define a designation process in advance of that date. Historically, designation has involved reviewing community plans, fiscal management practices, contracts, and local governance structures, along with interviews with community members and local boards.

Board members discussed updating this process to ensure minimum standards are clearly defined while also encouraging areas to pursue best practices and system improvement. Throughout the discussion, several members emphasized the importance of gathering input from local directors, partners, and stakeholders to inform the work. Others stressed that the board must still provide clear direction rather than waiting entirely for feedback. There was also discussion about involving state staff and a small group of local directors in the working process, potentially through regular Friday workshops.

Board members also noted the need to consider federal funding opportunities that involve multiple state departments, not only Health and Human Services. Finally, the board acknowledged logistical challenges, including several vacant citizen board seats and the potential loss of additional members in the coming months. These vacancies could affect the board's capacity to carry out the work. Despite these constraints, members agreed to continue refining the gap analysis, prioritize the designation process, and aim to draft minimum standards by April with board approval targeted for May. The broader goal is to strengthen governance, accountability, and system consistency while preserving the local innovation that has historically been a strength of the program.

Approved by ECI State Board  
on April 10, 2026

**Action Item: Scott County ECI presentation** - the board revisited an action item concerning a funding request from the Scott County Early Childhood Iowa Board. At the previous meeting, the request needed additional information, so the board invited representatives from Scott County to provide a presentation and further explanation. The group explained the background of the request, potential uses for the funds, and reaffirmed their strong support for home visitation services in Scott County.

The representatives described how the situation developed. In June, after changes to state funding formulas, Scott County issued a RFP for home visitation programs, specifically HFA and PAT. Lutheran Services in Iowa was the only applicant and requested funding for 13 slots. However, the organization already had 13 open federally funded slots through a MIECHV program. Staff had capacity but were not receiving enough family referrals to fill those openings. Recognizing this issue during the RFP process, Scott County leaders began exploring strategies to increase outreach and connect more eligible families to services.

To address the referral gap, the county created an outreach coordinator position that began in October 2025. The coordinator focuses on building relationships with community partners and increasing awareness of home visitation programs. Outreach efforts include engaging families directly at WIC offices, community organizations, and religious institutions, as well as attending community meetings and service provider networks. Since the outreach role was filled, referrals have begun to increase, rising from 12 total referrals in the quarter ending in December to 8 referrals in January and 7 in February. Scott County representatives also acknowledged staffing challenges that slowed progress. Two hires for family support specialist positions between May and December did not work out, leaving the program temporarily without staff to serve new families. A new staff member began on March 2<sup>nd</sup> and is currently completing onboarding and training. Program leaders expressed confidence that within the next few months the program will be able to begin filling the available service slots.

During the discussion, board members asked questions about whether the core issue was staffing turnover, insufficient referrals, or both. They also questioned whether the outreach strategy particularly the cost of the position, was the most effective solution. Program representatives emphasized that consistent community presence is essential for building trust and maintaining referral relationships. Without an outreach presence, they noted, referral networks weaken and credibility in the community declines. They also explained that Scott County has many alternative family support services, which can make families less likely to enroll in home visitation programs, even when eligible. The Scott County team then explained the financial implications. With home visitation slots not being filled as

Approved by ECI State Board  
on April 10, 2026

expected, funds allocated for those services are likely to carry over into the next fiscal year. Estimated at approximately \$221,000. The county board is approaching its allowable carry-forward limit and is seeking clarification from the state board on whether those funds can be moved into a different category, such as discretionary funds. If allowed, they proposed using the funds for initiatives such as a Healthy Homes curriculum, SafeCare programming, additional research into why families are reluctant to participate in services and extending funding for infant mental health services.

Board members discussed the request but expressed uncertainty about making an immediate decision. Some noted that approving a category change without clear policy guidance could set a precedent for other ECI areas to leave home visitation funds unspent and later repurpose them. Others emphasized that the broader policy governing carry forward funds outlined in Tool G was already due for review and that decisions about allowable categories should be addressed at that policy level rather than on a case-by-case basis.

Ultimately, the board decided to defer the request again until the April meeting. At that time, members plan to review Tool G and clarify statewide policies regarding carry-forward funds for future fiscal years. Staff will also bring data and scenarios showing how different policy options could affect funding allocations. The board agreed that resolving the broader policy questions first would provide a clearer framework for evaluating Scott County's request and similar situations in the future.

No formal motion made.

**Action Item: ECI State Board Membership** – the board discussed several upcoming leadership transitions, noting that the terms are ending. One is not up for re-election while the other are eligible. Support was requested from representatives to assist with the reappointment process and the ECI Directors were also asked to submit letters of support. It is anticipated that the Governor's recommended list for State Board appointments will be released next week. Looking ahead, several items were identified for inclusion on the upcoming board agenda. These include updates on audits in the Lakes Areas, a review of a recent child death, discussion of Tool G, and a presentation on child care solutions.

No formal motion made.

**Action Item: Adjourn**

Approved by ECI State Board  
on April 10, 2026

Board did not have quorum as some board members needed to leave within the last half-hour, therefor no formal motion to adjourn.

The board meeting ended at 12:02pm

Next meeting – April 10, 2026

Reminder of 2026 ECI State Board Meeting (9:00am – 11:00am unless noted)

Dates: May 1, 2026, June 5, 2026 (**9:00am – 12:00pm**), August 7, 2026, September 11, 2026 (**9:00am – 12:00pm**), November 6, 2026 (**9:00am – 12:00pm**)

Respectfully Submitted, *Elizabeth Ernst*

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on April 10, 2026