

Supports for Family Navigation: State Models

Executive Summary

State and local education systems are exploring ways to strengthen how families and caregivers navigate the wide range of learning opportunities available to children and youth. As opportunities expand across schools, communities, and broader non-traditional learning settings (e.g., afterschool programs), families and caregivers play an important role in helping children and youth identify, access, and participate in opportunities that align with their needs, interests, and goals.

The Midwest Comprehensive Center developed a pair of briefs examining initiatives, strategies, and approaches for the ways in which state education agencies (SEAs) can strengthen how families and caregivers navigate the state's **varied learning opportunities**.¹

For more information about family and caregiver navigation, check out **Emerging Practices in Family Engagement to Support State Navigation Initiatives**.

To inform efforts to strengthen family and caregiver navigation, the Midwest Comprehensive Center developed a pair of briefs examining initiatives, strategies, and approaches for the ways in which state education agencies (SEAs) can strengthen how families and caregivers navigate the state's varied learning opportunities.

This brief draws on a scan of state models that illustrate how SEAs structure family-facing information, support navigation, integrate out-of-school-time (OST) programming, and leverage partnerships across different governance and service-delivery contexts. The scan highlights approaches that may be adapted to reflect states' and local communities' existing systems, infrastructures, and priorities.

This brief

- highlights examples of how states design and structure family **navigation systems**² to support youth and families across services and programs;
- describes approaches that states use to integrate digital navigation tools (e.g., platforms, databases) and human-centered supports (e.g., navigators, coaches, case managers) to help families and caregivers access and make use of available information and resources; and

¹ In these briefs, *varied learning opportunities* refers to a wide range of high-quality educational options, such as STEM academies, arts-integrated schools, and out-of-school-time programs that expand school choice by allowing families to choose the learning environment and approach that best meet their child's needs.

² In these briefs, *navigation system* refers to a set of tools, supports, and partnerships that help families understand, access, and engage with choices offered through diverse learning opportunities.

- illustrates how states build statewide capacity through infrastructure, staffing, and training to support implementation.

Emerging State Models for Family Navigation Systems

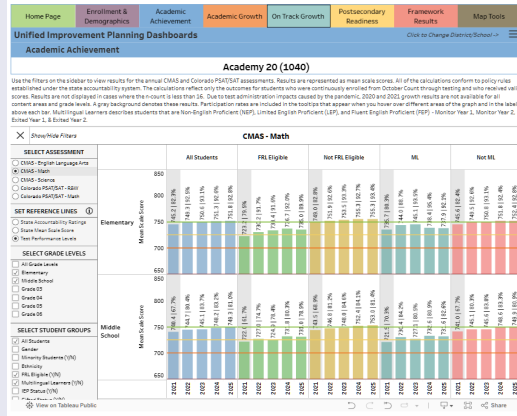
State-led family navigation systems are emerging in a range of forms that reflect differences in governance structures; levels of coordination and centralization; and roles for state, local, and community partners. Across these approaches, states are working to improve how families access and understand information about the varied learning opportunities and supports available, from formal school choice to expanded learning opportunities. In the section that follows, we highlight three approaches: (a) centralized SEA-led systems, (b) hybrid state–local approaches, and (c) community-based navigation ecosystems.

Centralized SEA-Led Navigation Systems

Some states have developed centralized approaches in which the SEA plays a primary role in managing infrastructures that provide families and caregivers with statewide school information systems, such as enrollment platforms and public-facing data tools.

For example, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) puts essential information into the hands of families and caregivers through the [SchoolView](#) platform. **The platform provides families and caregivers with transparent school performance dashboards, enrollment, graduation outcomes, and district comparisons in a user-friendly format.** CDE supplements these tools with multilingual resources, templates for district communication, and regional support teams that help families and caregivers interpret school data and navigate program options (Colorado Department of Education, 2024). As part of these efforts, CDE developed a [statewide family engagement framework](#) through the Council of Chief State School Officers State Consortium on Family Engagement. This framework, when paired with the SchoolView platform, **provides shared expectations for how districts communicate school options, program offerings, and performance data.**

District Dashboard and School Dashboard



Colorado's SchoolView Dashboard

The Colorado SchoolView dashboard serves as a **statewide family navigation tool designed to help families make informed decisions about their child's education**. The platform brings together information on school performance, academic growth, graduation rates, student demographics, and program offerings in a single, accessible location.

By presenting **data coupled with family-friendly explanations and interactive features, SchoolView helps families better understand how schools are supporting student learning and development**.

Families can compare schools across multiple indicators, explore available learning opportunities and services, and identify options that align with their child's needs and interests.

Hybrid State–Local Navigation Models

Many states **operate within strong local-control contexts and therefore use hybrid models** in which the SEA establishes infrastructure, guidance, or standards while local districts and regional partners lead implementation.

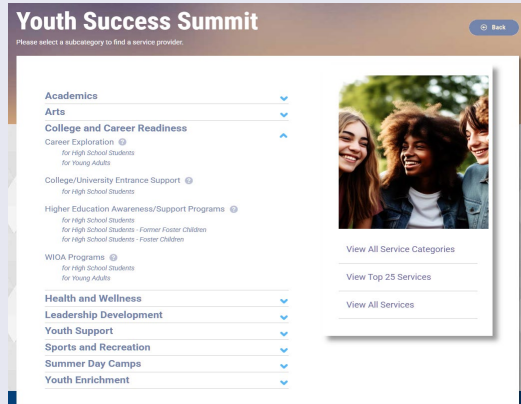
For example, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) supports districts through **statewide family engagement frameworks and digital learning resources while encouraging locally responsive implementation approaches and partnerships with community organizations** (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023). NCDPI provides the [“7 Essential Components” toolkit](#), which features a self-assessment that schools can use to evaluate local needs, set data-driven goals, and identify specific barriers to family engagement (Perrotta, 2026). Similar approaches can create stronger local ownership, enabling local community stakeholders to adapt the resources and tools to fit the local needs and context. This can be particularly effective when the states provide sufficient technical assistance and implementation support (Fixsen et al., 2005).

Community-Based and Distributed Navigation Ecosystems

In some contexts, family navigation systems rely more heavily on networks of schools, community-based organizations, intermediaries, and OST providers to serve as primary access points for families. In these models, the **SEA may function primarily as a convener, coordinator, or capacity-building entity rather than as the direct operator of navigation systems**.

For example, community school initiatives and cradle-to-career partnerships in states such as Colorado and Tennessee position community-based organizations as trusted intermediaries that

help families navigate educational opportunities, enrichment programs, and wraparound supports (Oakes et al., 2017). In Colorado, municipal and county government agencies host after-school program navigators such as the [Boulder County After School Program Locator](#) and the [Denver Youth Program Locator](#), which connect families to learning opportunities typically available beyond the traditional learning environment. [Youth Success Summit](#), which is based in Akron, Ohio, hosts a [program locator](#) of more than 100 Ohio-based learning opportunities, including academics, arts and music, and sports and wellness.



Youth Success Summit—Akron, Ohio

To help families navigate the broad range of learning experiences available to young people within and beyond the school day, the Akron, Ohio-based community organization convenes a countywide network of youth-serving program providers in Summit County, including local school-based programs. Through this collaborative approach, Youth Success Summit works to strengthen family awareness of and access to high-quality learning experiences.

At the center of this effort is the Youth Success Summit Program Locator, a centralized platform that serves as a one-stop resource for youth and caregivers seeking academic, enrichment, workforce, mentoring, and OST learning opportunities. By organizing and elevating existing community assets in one accessible location, the Program Locator helps youth and families more easily identify learning opportunities aligned with young people’s interests, needs, and goals.

Role of SEAs in Family Navigation

States are increasingly recognizing that effective navigation systems require more than simply providing information online. Strong navigation systems combine digital infrastructure with human-centered support (e.g., family liaison, case manager, student advocate) and statewide capacity-building efforts that support local efforts to help families interpret options, access services, and make informed decisions.

This section highlights how states support family navigation through **(1) digital infrastructure, (2) human-centered assistance, and (3) statewide capacity-building and technical assistance**. Together, these approaches can make information more accessible, reduce fragmentation, and help families turn information into action.

Digital Infrastructure and Information Systems

Many SEAs support navigation through centralized or interconnected digital platforms that organize information related to the following topics:



For example, the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) provides statewide family-facing resources related to [school options](#), [student supports](#), and [multilingual family engagement tools](#) designed to increase program accessibility across the state (Washington OSPI, n.d.-a, n.d. -b, n.d.-c).

Some states are also moving toward integrated “one-stop” approaches that reduce fragmentation for families navigating multiple systems simultaneously. Research from the Education Commission of the States emphasizes the importance of making education information accessible and useful to students and families, including information that can support decisions about schools, courses, and educational pathways (von Zastrow & Perez, 2019). A related example is Colorado’s SchoolView platform, referenced in the “Centralized SEA-Led Navigation Systems” section of this brief. Importantly, CDE complements the digital infrastructure with resources and supports that help families interpret and use the data in decision-making.

At the same time, research suggests that **transparency alone does not guarantee accessibility or increased utilization among different populations**, particularly when families and caregivers encounter barriers related to digital literacy or interpreting complex educational information (ECS, 2026; Schneider & Buckley, 2002).

States appear to be most successful when SEAs establish coordinated infrastructure, prioritize user-centered design, and clarify governance agencies and service providers (e.g., OST). SEA leadership is particularly important in aligning systems, setting statewide expectations for accessibility and usability, and ensuring that digital infrastructure is continuously refined in response to family experiences and local implementation realities.

Human-Centered Navigation Supports

Across states, districts and community organizations frequently become the primary entities that help families interpret information, navigate multiple systems, and connect to services. As noted in the accompanying brief, *Emerging Practices in Family Engagement to Support State Navigation Initiatives*, states have also found that families are more likely to engage with navigation systems when support is provided through the following:



**Family
Engagement
Coordinators**



**Community
Navigators and
Liaisons**



**District-Based
Support Staff**



**Help Desks and
Call Centers**



**Partnerships
With Trusted
Community
Organizations**

Research also suggests that **navigation supports are most effective when paired with proactive communication and [early warning systems](#) that help schools respond quickly to attendance concerns** (American Institutes for Research, 2025). Strategies such as [texting](#), multilingual communication, interpretation support, and attendance dashboards can help districts identify attendance risks early, create two-way communication with families, and connect students to support before absenteeism becomes chronic.

Rhode Island provides one example of a **statewide approach that combines real-time attendance monitoring with proactive family engagement and early intervention supports**. Through its [Attendance Matters RI](#) initiative, the state launched publicly accessible attendance dashboards, coordinated messaging campaigns, and guidance encouraging districts to identify attendance concerns early and engage families before absenteeism becomes chronic (Rhode Island Department of Education, n.d.). Between **2021–22 and 2024–25, Rhode Island reduced statewide chronic absenteeism from 34.1% to 22.1%**, one of the largest declines nationally (DiMarco, 2026). State leaders have emphasized that these improvements depend not only on attendance monitoring but also on coordinated outreach, communication, and support involving schools, families, and community partners.

Research on family–school partnerships suggests that **families are more likely to engage with systems when they have access to trusted individuals who can help interpret information and facilitate connections to services and opportunities** (Mapp & Henderson, 2022). In Tennessee, for example, the SEA funds Regional Family Engagement Centers that serve as “choice navigators,”

“Families are essential partners in accelerating student learning, and we must equip them with the tools they need to support their children.”

– Penny Schwinn, Former
commissioner, Tennessee Department
of Education, 2021

supporting families in understanding school options, tutoring programs, and specialized pathways. These centers offer workshops; individualized, one-on-one support; and multilingual materials to ensure information is accessible and actionable.

More broadly, SEAs can strengthen statewide implementation by investing in sustainable structures that support trusted community partnerships, shared learning, clear role definition, and ongoing coordination across systems. For additional resources, refer to the accompanying brief, *Emerging Practices in Family Engagement to Support Navigation Initiatives*.

SEA Capacity-Building and Technical Assistance

Across statewide navigation, family engagement, community schools, and integrated student support initiatives, one of the clearest lessons to emerge from research and implementation experience is that **successful navigation systems require sustained implementation infrastructure—not merely tools, guidance documents, or compliance expectations**. States consistently report that districts and community partners experience challenges operationalizing navigation efforts when local capacity, staffing structures, partnership coordination, and implementation supports are insufficient or inconsistent (Fixsen et al., 2005; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2021).

Several Statewide Family Engagement Centers—including those in Arizona, Colorado, North Carolina, Ohio, and Washington—demonstrate how states can support districts' efforts to operationalize family engagement in navigation systems through professional learning, coaching, technical assistance, regional networks, and other implementation supports designed to build long-term local capacity (National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement, 2021).

Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center

Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center


[RESOURCES](#)
[PROFESSIONAL LEARNING](#)
[ANNUAL SUMMIT](#)

Family Engagement Leaders of Ohio is a virtual professional learning community for family engagement professionals in Ohio's districts and community schools. There are over 200 leaders in this network. We are bringing together family engagement professionals from across the state virtually to share their experience and to learn together how we can build partnerships with all families in our pre K – 12 education community. This community was established with family engagement professionals working in Ohio's districts or community schools in mind. Four on-line meetings are planned for this school year. Click "Join the Community" below to receive email updates.

Representation From

44 Ohio Counties

14 States + Washington D.C.


[Join the Community](#)
[Meeting Materials and Notes](#)

<https://ohiofamiliesengage.osu.edu>

Source: Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center (2026)

In Ohio, the [Statewide Family Engagement Center](#) provides [educator training seminars](#); implementation support through the [Ohio Network of Partnership Schools](#); parent leadership programs such as the [Family Leaders for Ohio Schools Academy](#); and [statewide resources](#) designed to help schools strengthen communication, engagement, and student support systems. Collectively, these efforts illustrate examples of existing statewide family engagement infrastructure that can build local capacity for navigation by helping educators and family-facing staff strengthen communication practices, improve family partnerships, and better support families in understanding and assessing learning opportunities.

Family Engagement Leaders of Ohio (FELO), highlighted in the image in this text box, is a virtual professional learning network created and facilitated by the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center. FELO helps build statewide capacity for family engagement and navigation by providing family engagement professionals with strategies, peer-learning opportunities, and tools to support families in navigating school relationships, understanding educational options, and accessing services aligned with student needs and goals.

In many states, SEAs have the greatest impact when they move beyond policy-setting roles to actively build capacity and convene partners who help local systems translate statewide goals into sustainable practice through the following methods:



Professional Learning and Training



Implementation Toolkits and Guidance Documents



Communication Resources



Peer Learning Opportunities



Cross-Sector Coordination Support

Key Takeaways

The examples highlighted in this brief suggest that effective family navigation systems are defined not by a single model or platform but instead by the extent to which states create coordinated, accessible, and human-centered systems that help families understand and access the varied learning opportunities available in their communities. Across centralized, hybrid, and community-based approaches, states appear to be most effective when navigation systems move beyond information sharing alone and instead combine digital infrastructure with trusted human support and sustained implementation capacity. Together, these examples underscore several considerations that may help SEAs strengthen family engagement within school choice and broader efforts regarding learning opportunity navigation.

Prioritize Accessible and Integrated Navigation Infrastructure

States may benefit from developing coordinated, “one-stop” navigation systems that organize school, OST, and broader support information in ways that are transparent, family friendly, and easy to navigate.

Examples such as Colorado’s SchoolView platform highlight how **centralized tools can help families compare options and better understand available opportunities** when paired with resources that help translate complex information.

Pair Digital Tools With Human-Centered Supports

Research and state examples consistently suggest that **families are more likely to engage with navigation systems when information is supported by trusted relationships and individualized assistance.**

States such as Tennessee and Rhode Island illustrate the **importance of combining digital infrastructure with proactive outreach, family engagement staff, regional support centers, a variety of communications material, and early intervention strategies** that help families interpret information and act on it.

Build Sustainable Local Capacity and Partnerships

Implementation experience across states highlights the **importance of sustained technical assistance, professional learning, and cross-sector coordination** to support long-term success. **SEAs are particularly well positioned to strengthen navigation efforts** by convening community partners, supporting regional implementation networks, clarifying roles across systems, and investing in local capacity-building structures that enable districts and community organizations to adapt navigation supports to local contexts and family needs.

Community-based organizations like Youth Success Summit in Akron, Ohio, are an example of a resource that **districts and states can consider building on or adapting to help families more easily access academic, enrichment, workforce, OST, and other learning opportunities** across their communities.

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