Do you work in early childhood policy, or a related field like education or health policy? If so, are you working on helping your state to develop a unified early childhood data system—or states generally, if you work at the federal level? If you answered yes to the first question but no to the second, then you may be missing out on one of the most significant opportunities to improve early childhood policy. This Unofficial Guide may be just the thing you need to get engaged in work that may not seem sexy, but which has great potential to fundamentally change state policy on early childhood.

**HERE’S WHAT YOU’LL LEARN IN THE UNOFFICIAL GUIDE:**

- Why unified early childhood data systems are so important. Chances are your state is allocating resources among programs, trying to provide families with a mix of needed services, trying to provide information to the public about the quality of services, and looking to improve the kindergarten through 2nd grade years. All of those efforts and more would go better with a unified early childhood data system.
• How to unify your early childhood data system. The process takes time, but it has some defined steps that many states have already gotten started on. These include:
  o Engaging stakeholders to figure out how the unified system will meet their needs
  o Developing interagency agreements to share data across agencies—with tips on how to work with the all-important legal and IT staffs
  o Building linkages among systems—with guidance on how to support state agency staff, manage vendors, and bring in the Head Start community

• How to build capacity to use data effectively. Just building the system doesn’t change anything—it’s the use of the data that matters. Maximizing the impact of the system requires multiple kinds of capacity:
  o Producing data
  o Analyzing data
  o Conducting research
  o Advocacy
  o Community systems
  o Program management
This Unofficial Guide provides tips for strengthening capacity in all of those areas.

• Dealing with privacy and security. It’s essential to comply with data privacy requirements, and those can seem confusing. This paper gives advocates the guidance they need to dive into this critical work.

For advocates who really want to fundamentally change the way states support children and families, better data will be a necessity—and without better data systems, there will be no better data. The Unofficial Guide is meant to help early childhood policy leaders ensure that their state builds and leverages a unified early childhood data system.