
Introduction

In 1989, President Bush and state governors met to develop national education goals. The President and governors adopted a goal that “by the year 2000, all children will start school ready to learn.”¹ Their objectives toward this goal included the following:

All children will have access to high-quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs that help prepare children for school.

Every parent in the United States will be a child’s first teacher and devote time each day to helping such parent’s preschool child learn, and parents will have access to the training and support parents need.

Minnesota has a variety of education-related programs for families with prekindergarten children. In April 2000, the Legislative Audit Commission directed our office to evaluate several of Minnesota’s early childhood education programs. In our study, we asked:

- **What are the components of Minnesota’s early childhood education system? How are Minnesota’s programs similar and different, and how do these programs compare with those in other states? To what extent do Minnesota residents have access to these programs?**
- **How are Minnesota’s early childhood education programs funded? How has funding changed over time, and how have funds been spent? Should changes be made in the way state funds for these programs are allocated?**
- **What does previous research indicate about the effectiveness of early childhood education programs? What implications does research on child brain development have for state policy regarding these programs? Is there a need for further research on the outcomes of Minnesota’s programs?**
- **How adequately does the Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning oversee the state’s early childhood education programs?**

Our study focused on three programs.

Legislators considered approving a study that would focus only on Minnesota’s Head Start program, but they decided the study should include other large, state-funded early childhood programs that have an education-related component. Our study focused on three programs: Head Start, Early Childhood Family

¹ The National Education Goals Panel, <http://www.negp.gov/page1-7.htm>; accessed August 29, 2000.

Early childhood programs try to foster healthy physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development.

Education (ECFE), and School Readiness. We did not review child care subsidy programs or smaller early childhood programs.

The programs we examined are partly intended to help prepare prekindergarten children for later success in school. They do this by focusing on the broad goal of fostering the healthy physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development of children, and not just by preparing children academically for school. The programs encourage healthy child development in a variety of ways—through play and learning activities for children, parent education, home visits, family support services, child development and health screening, and other services. The term “early childhood education programs” may not fully reflect the broad scope of Head Start, ECFE, and School Readiness, but it is commonly used to describe programs of this type, and our report also uses this term.

To conduct this study, we relied on various sources of information. We obtained state and federal data on program finances, services, and participants from the Department of Children, Families, and Learning. We interviewed department staff and federal officials, and for many individual programs we reviewed plans, annual reports, monitoring reviews, and other documents on file with the department. We visited several early education programs around Minnesota to interview staff and observe program settings, and we interviewed many other program staff by phone. In addition, we collected information on parent fees from 41 school districts.² Finally, we reviewed national and Minnesota research studies related to child development and the outcomes of early childhood programs. Statewide data on the outcomes of Minnesota’s early childhood programs were not available.

Because there are a large number of early childhood programs in Minnesota, coordination is an important issue and we discussed this with some state and local officials. However, the Legislature directed the Department of Children, Families, and Learning to develop a plan for integrating child care and early childhood education programs, so we did not make this issue a major focus of our study.³ The department is required to complete a report on program coordination by January 15, 2001.

Chapter 1 of this report provides a brief overview of Minnesota’s array of early childhood programs and discussions of Head Start, ECFE, and School Readiness. Chapter 2 discusses Head Start funding issues, including program availability and fund allocation methods. Chapter 3 discusses ECFE and School Readiness funding issues, including program availability, fund allocation methods, reserve funds, and state oversight of local financial practices. Chapter 4 summarizes previous research on the outcomes of early education programs. It also discusses the role of the Department of Children, Families, and Learning in ongoing program oversight.

² We requested ECFE and School Readiness fee information from a sample of 43 school districts, including the 10 largest districts and a random sample of 33 others.

³ *Minn. Laws* (1999), ch. 205, art. 1, sec. 61. The law says that “the plan must focus on cost-efficient delivery of services and address central location of programs, integration of programs, ease of accessibility to services by families, nontraditional hours of child care, infant care, sick child care, special needs child care, and legislative simplification of programs.... The plan must contain budget recommendations, proposed legislation in draft form, and recommendations for financial incentives to reward programs that provide cooperative services.”