



Early Childhood Programs

Minnesota's key early childhood programs are complex and fragmented, and their statewide effectiveness is unknown.

Key Facts and Findings:

- Early childhood programs offer varied services for young children and families, such as preparing children for school, offering parenting education, and helping pay for child care.
- Minnesota has numerous early childhood programs overseen mostly by the Minnesota departments of Education (MDE), Health (MDH), and Human Services (DHS). Of the nine programs we evaluated, six provide direct services to children and families, two provide funding rather than services, and one rates provider quality.
- The array of early childhood programs is complex and fragmented, due in part to differences in the way programs are funded and variation in their eligibility and other requirements. For example, although the programs are primarily aimed at low-income families, they define income eligibility differently.
- Complexities in certain programs create burdens for families, which may result in lower access to needed services. They also create difficulties for program providers.
- It is not possible to determine the extent of potential duplication among program funding or services. One reason is the lack of a unique number to identify children enrolled in multiple programs overseen by different agencies. Missing and incomplete data also inhibit assessing duplication.
- Some children received services funded by more than one program, but this does not necessarily indicate duplicative services.
- The lack of important data prevents measuring program effectiveness

statewide. State law gives priority to meeting goals on school readiness, but the number of children prepared for school is unknown.

- State and federal laws limit state agencies' ability to share data even when they oversee related programs.
- MDE does not have data on whether all children underwent required health and development screening.

Key Recommendations:

- The Legislature should consider aligning funding and eligibility requirements of certain early childhood programs to make them more understandable and efficient.
- MDE, MDH, and DHS should jointly identify what is needed to use a universal identification number for children participating in early childhood programs.
- The Legislature should consider requiring assessments of children's school readiness as they complete certain early childhood programs; it should consider assessments for children entering kindergarten. It should also direct MDE, MDH, and DHS to plan a comprehensive evaluation of early childhood programs' impacts.
- The Legislature should consider broadening authority for MDE, MDH, and DHS to share individual-level data from early childhood programs to improve program coordination.
- MDE should collect (1) attendance rates and dates of participation for children in early childhood programs and (2) data on the number of children who are not screened.

Even among early childhood programs with similar functions, eligibility requirements differ.

Report Summary

Early childhood programs offer services to help young children and their families in a variety of ways. The intent of some programs is to help prepare children for school. Some focus on children’s health, others on parenting education, and still others on paying for child care.

Certain Minnesota early childhood programs have been in place for decades. One is new as of 2017.

For this evaluation, we examined nine key programs, based on their stated purposes. Most share common purposes, such as preparing children for school or supporting children’s development. The six programs below provide direct services to children and their families.

- | Programs Offering Direct Services |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early Childhood Family Education • Early Childhood Health and Development Screening • Family Home Visiting • Head Start and Early Head Start • School Readiness Program • Voluntary Prekindergarten |

This evaluation did not include all relevant programs. As an example, we did not review Early Childhood Special Education, even though many of the programs above operate with it.

Two programs provide funding, rather than services, and they are listed below.

- | Programs that Provide Funding Rather than Services |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child Care Assistance Program • Early Learning Scholarships |

One is the Child Care Assistance Program, which provides low-income parents with help to cover the costs of child care while they work, look for jobs, or receive education or training to become employed.

The second program that offers funding is Early Learning Scholarships. It helps low-income families afford to send their children to high-quality early learning programs or child care programs.

The final program we reviewed is the Parent Aware Quality Rating and Improvement System. It does not provide funding or services to children, but both the Child Care Assistance Program and Early Learning Scholarships have connections to it. It rates the quality of child care providers and early education programs that voluntarily agree to meet standards of high quality, which qualifies them to accept scholarships and receive higher reimbursements for child care assistance.

Waiting lists for Head Start, Early Learning Scholarships, and one component of the Child Care Assistance Program indicate that not all low-income families interested in early childhood programs can enroll their children. Some programs do not maintain waiting lists but have other indications that demand for the programs exceeds the supply.

Differences in funding and program requirements have created a complex, fragmented set of early childhood programs.

Even among early childhood programs with similar functions, eligibility requirements on income and age differ. For example, a family of four would qualify for the School Readiness program if its yearly income is less than \$45,510. By contrast, families at any income level could qualify for Voluntary Prekindergarten.

Comparing eligibility by age, children at age 3 qualify for the School Readiness program. Children must be 4 years old, however, to attend Voluntary Prekindergarten free of charge.

Funding requirements also vary between the two programs. The School Readiness program is fee-based, although school districts must waive fees for families unable to pay. By contrast, Voluntary Prekindergarten is offered at no charge. However, school districts have a limited number of slots for which they receive Voluntary Prekindergarten state aid; if more children enroll, school districts could use fees or other revenue.

Additional differences exist, including that Voluntary Prekindergarten programs are required to transport to school those children

The Legislature should consider aligning the funding and program requirements among certain early childhood programs.

who live two or more miles away. The requirement does not apply to the School Readiness program. Another difference is that teachers in Voluntary Prekindergarten must be paid salaries comparable to those paid to other instructors in the school district, but this is not the case for School Readiness programs.

The Legislature should consider aligning the funding and program requirements of certain early childhood programs. This could simplify the use of the programs for families and improve efficiency for administrators of programs that rely on multiple funding streams from the state.

It is not possible to determine the extent of potential duplication in early childhood programs.

Potential duplication is hard to detect because state agencies differ in how they collect data. Currently, MDE, MDH, and DHS use different identifying numbers when they identify the individual children who receive services from their programs.

State agencies developed an “Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System” to track participants across programs, among other functions. The data system, however, was not designed to identify potential duplication, and it lacks key data for that purpose. As of early 2018, it had no enrollment data for three early childhood programs and incomplete data for five others. Further, neither the data system nor certain early childhood programs themselves have data on the time periods during which a child received services.

Some children received services funded by more than one early childhood program, but this does not necessarily indicate duplication.

Of children using Early Learning Scholarships in Fiscal Year 2016, about 15 percent also used child care assistance to pay for the same program. However, this does not indicate duplicative funding. Programs first bill the Child Care Assistance Program and then bill the scholarship program to cover remaining charges. For some families, even those two sources combined are insufficient to cover costs.

In Fiscal Year 2017, 27 percent of children enrolled in Voluntary Prekindergarten were also enrolled in a School Readiness program. Whether these children received overlapping services is unknown, as the data do not show dates of service. Also, MDE reported that school districts commonly combine these two funding streams to enhance a single preschool program, such as expanding it to a full day.

MDE, MDH, and DHS should jointly identify what is needed to use a universal identification number for individual children in early childhood programs the agencies oversee. MDE should also collect students’ dates of participation. A universal ID number and other missing data are needed to track children who are in more than one program at a time. They are also needed to evaluate program effectiveness.

Statewide data on the effectiveness of early childhood programs are inadequate or do not exist.

MDE collects student participation and demographic data for Early Learning Scholarships, Voluntary Prekindergarten, and the School Readiness program. However, MDE does not analyze program outcomes.

MDH is required to evaluate Family Home Visiting every other year, but the reports have been insufficient to evaluate program impacts. For other early childhood programs we evaluated, statutes do not require evaluations of effectiveness.

The number of children ready for school as they enter kindergarten is unknown.

State law places a priority on children’s readiness for school. One of the goals in the state’s “World’s Best Workforce” statute is to “meet school readiness goals.” However, the state does not currently measure whether children statewide are prepared for school.

Many early childhood programs overseen by MDE require providers to assess each child’s skills and plan instruction accordingly. However, standards for the assessments vary by program, and assessment results are not reported to MDE.

Assessing children as they complete certain early childhood programs is important if Minnesota is to know whether these children are prepared to begin school.

MDE has provided guidance on (1) assessing readiness for school when children enter kindergarten and (2) using the results to plan instruction around what students know and are able to do. We surveyed school districts and charter schools, and 81 percent reported assessing all of their kindergarten pupils in 2016-2017; 3 percent reported having assessed none. Of those assessing some or all students, 49 percent reported using assessment tools that MDE has not approved for validity or alignment with Minnesota early learning standards.

The Legislature should consider requiring assessments of school readiness for all children who complete education-related early childhood programs. This is important if Minnesota is to know whether children completing programs are prepared for school. Program providers would have to use state-approved assessment tools, and they would have to report results to MDE, if statewide results remain a goal.

Moreover, the Legislature should consider requiring assessments of school readiness as children enter kindergarten. This would expand assessments of school readiness to include all children enrolled in kindergarten, with the possible exception of students recently assessed after completing early childhood programs. If the statutory requirement on striving toward all children meeting school readiness goals remains a priority, the assessments are needed. Additional

assessments would add costs for school districts and MDE.

The Legislature should also direct MDE, MDH, and DHS to plan a comprehensive approach for evaluating impacts of early childhood programs. Results from assessments of children's school readiness should be part of it, but such results alone are not sufficient.

It is unclear whether all children undergo Early Childhood Health and Development Screening, but the law requires it.

State law requires children to undergo health and development screening before or within their first 30 days of kindergarten, unless a parent files a conscientious objection. MDE collects screening data from school districts but does not require data on the number of children who were *not* screened. MDE should collect such data.

Laws limit the sharing of data among agencies overseeing early childhood programs.

Due to laws that protect the identity of individual children, state agencies cannot readily share child-level data with each other. This inhibits the departments' abilities to coordinate related programs and services to families. The Legislature should consider broadening authority for MDE, MDH, and DHS to share with each other individual-level data from early childhood programs.

Summary of Agencies' Responses

In separate letters dated April 20, 2018, Minnesota Department of Education Commissioner Brenda Cassellius, Department of Health Commissioner Jan Malcolm, and Department of Human Services Acting Commissioner Charles Johnson agreed to continued interagency collaborations on early childhood programs. They acknowledged challenges with creating universal identification numbers for program participants but stated their intent to work together on it. Commissioner Cassellius said requiring assessments of children's school readiness as they complete early childhood programs will require "significant resources and training." She said a comprehensive evaluation of program impacts would be a "multi-year, multi-system, and multi-million dollar project." Acting Commissioner Johnson said child assessment data are best used in context with data such as "children's health status, parent employment, ... income, [and] family mobility." Commissioner Malcolm said effective data sharing involves addressing issues such as "limitations of our current data systems." However, she believes that aligning certain program requirements will improve outcomes for children.

The full evaluation report, *Early Childhood Programs*, is available at 651-296-4708 or:
www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/ped/2018/earlychildhood.htm