

Early Childhood Programs

Update to 2018 Evaluation Report

January 2019

Problems Identified

- **Complex and Fragmented Programs.** The evaluation examined nine of Minnesota's early childhood programs overseen by: the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), the Department of Human Services (DHS), or the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH). The set of programs is complex and fragmented; programs differ in their eligibility, how the state funds them, and other requirements. Complexity creates difficulties for families and providers.
- **Inadequate Data on Program Effectiveness.** Data do not exist to measure whether children statewide are ready for school, despite a state law with a goal that school districts meet school readiness goals. Although many of the programs have requirements to assess each child's skills and plan instruction accordingly, the tools for assessing children vary widely. Further, the law does not require programs to report results to the state. State agencies collect certain data but, for the most part, do not analyze program outcomes.
- **Limited Data Sharing.** State and federal laws limit state agencies from sharing data on program participants. For instance, officials overseeing the Child Care Assistance program (which reduces costs of child care for eligible parents) cannot share data with others overseeing a scholarship program for young children, even though the law allows receipt of Child Care Assistance as a method of determining income eligibility for scholarships. Lack of data sharing means program administrators do not know whether children participated in multiple programs or for how long, nor whether programs impact children's school readiness.

Changes Implemented

- **State Agency Initiatives.** MDE received a \$4.7 million federal grant in early 2019 to fund several planning efforts to be coordinated with DHS and MDH. The grant is intended to supplement work already underway on the feasibility of collecting attendance rates for relevant programs and using a universal ID number for children across early childhood programs. It will also fund planning on measuring program effectiveness and a review of both data-practices laws and all three state agencies' data-sharing agreements, to improve future data sharing.

Action Needed

- **Align Program Requirements.** The Legislature should consider aligning the funding and eligibility requirements of certain early childhood programs. One example is standardizing income eligibility.
- **Require Assessments of School Readiness.** The Legislature should consider requiring assessments of children's school readiness as they complete early childhood programs. This would mean requiring use of approved assessment tools and submitting results to the state.
- **Broaden Data Sharing.** The Legislature should consider broadening authority for state agencies to share individual-level data from early childhood programs.