

Early Childhood Programs

Update to 2018 Evaluation Report

February 2020

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, the Child Care Assistance program (for reducing child care costs) cannot share data with a program offering scholarships for preschoolers, even though the law deems people receiving Child Care Assistance as income eligible 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.** With the intent of improving data sharing across agencies, MDE, DHS, and MDH in 2019 reviewed data-sharing agreements and laws on data practices. They are working on a joint powers agreement to coordinate program services and eligibility. Other efforts included developing (1) a consent form template intended for parents' use across programs and (2) a legal opinion on data sharing among local agencies. The state received a federal grant in 2019 of \$27 million for three years. Among planned uses is new technology to offer program information to families and allow multiple programs to use a family's single application. The technology would also allow local agencies to coordinate a family's services.

Actions Needed

- **Align Program Requirements.** The Legislature should consider aligning funding and eligibility requirements, such as standardizing eligibility, for certain early childhood programs.
- **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.