

Early care and education in Minnesota asset review:

Summary and recommendations

Wilder Research

This asset review is part of an early childhood business plan. The business plan goals are to explain, inform, and guide public and private stakeholders, policy-makers, and the general public about the investments and activities required for all children to have opportunities to reach their full potential.



This summary describes the current status of Minnesota's early childhood care and education system. It is based on a review of several dozen plans and reports produced since 2000, and group discussions and interviews around the state with about 175 early childhood stakeholders. It also provides recommendations for how to improve upon assets and implement new approaches and assumptions that move early childhood care and education beyond “business as usual.”

A similar status report written in 2003 by Wilder Research for the Minnesota Build Initiative, identified key gaps in Minnesota’s early childhood care and

education system. It found no consensus on a vision for an early care and education system, no cost or funding analyses, few clearly identified champions, no shared quality measure, and no ongoing statewide monitoring system to assess kindergarten readiness.

Minnesota now has more building blocks of an early care and education system. Much of the progress has been made through the concerted efforts of advocates based on plans developed by Ready 4 K in conjunction with the Build Initiative and through an incremental, piecemeal approach by various early childhood stakeholders; but many gaps and challenges remain.

Strengths and successes

Vision

- Stakeholders in the discussions and interviews commonly expressed a broad and comprehensive vision of “school readiness” in which all children have opportunities to develop and achieve their full potential.
- The vision encompasses the whole child within local and cultural contexts of diverse families and communities.
- School readiness is perceived as a developmental process that begins prenatally, extends through early elementary school and includes a range of cognitive, language, and social skills as well as physical health, self-confidence, and curiosity for learning. Supportive and supported families in empowered communities are also part of the vision.
- An observational (authentic) developmental assessment at kindergarten does not represent the whole vision of school readiness, but is an acceptable way to measure and assess the extent to which school readiness is being achieved.

- Two-way communication, where information and ideas flow openly between state and local early childhood stakeholders, is also central to the vision.

Awareness and allies

- Awareness about the importance of cognitive and social/emotional early learning for a good start in school and in life and for a strong future workforce is fairly widespread and growing among the general public and community leaders—business, cultural and tribal, foundation, state and local government.
- Legislative awareness has grown, leading to a bipartisan Early Childhood Legislative Caucus with nearly 150 members. Working with Louise Stoney, an early childhood financing consultant, Caucus leaders have coalesced around establishing a quality rating system in Minnesota as the basis for funding early care and education.
- In 2003, Minnesota had no clear champions for early care and education. Since then, most of the action has been in the private sector—Minnesota Initiative Foundations (MIFs), Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF), The McKnight

Approximately 415,183 young children age 5 and younger reside in Minnesota in 303,883 families, representing 8 percent of the total population.

Young children are more diverse and more likely to be in low-income households than Minnesotans generally.



Foundation, and corporate funding inspired by Minneapolis Federal Reserve economists Art Rolnick and Rob Grunewald.

Working partnerships

- The six MIFs, through the joint Early Childhood Initiative, have established 80 local early childhood initiatives with funding from The McKnight Foundation. MIF initiatives have formed coalitions in over 165 greater Minnesota communities that have implemented more than 400 projects, programs, and activities centered on five key components of a nurturing community—strong families, engaged community members, effective and coordinated early care and education, early learning opportunities, and ready schools.
- Ready 4 K and Minnesota Businesses for Early Learning (MnBEL) raised awareness and support in the business community that led to the start up of the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF).
- A group of about 20 funders actively participate in the Minnesota Early Childhood Funders Network, working together to communicate key early childhood policy messages and to increase opportunities for young children and their families.
- The Minnesota Department of Human Service’s Strengthening Families Through Early Care and Education initiative to reduce child abuse and neglect is working with the Minnesota Build Initiative and the Minnesota Department of Health to infuse a focus on family assets and protective factors throughout Minnesota’s early childhood work. This initiative has brought child welfare into early childhood system building.
- At the local level, initiatives are underway to transform the mental health system for families with young children, such as Foundations for Success in Ramsey County and the Minnesota Thrive Initiative in six Minnesota Initiative Foundation communities

in greater Minnesota. The Metro Alliance for Healthy Families is replicating the Dakota Healthy Families targeted home visiting model for first-time mothers to prevent child maltreatment and developmental problems and is promoting the development of a statewide coalition.

Research and innovation

- The Early Childhood Research Collaborative (ECRC) has held two national conferences co-hosted by Art Rolnick, Minneapolis Federal Reserve, and Arthur Reynolds, University of Minnesota professor of child development. The ECRC plus MELF, the Itasca Project, and Growth and Justice are contributing to a growing body of work regarding cost effective strategies for achieving school readiness.
- Stakeholders have general agreement on the economic value of early learning and on early care and education effectiveness factors—safe settings, small groups, warm and responsive adult-child interactions, language-rich environments, developmentally appropriate “curriculum,” and qualified staff.
- MELF is testing cost-effective strategies for improving school readiness, including pilots of Parent Aware (a quality rating and improvement system for early childhood programs and an information source for consumers) and the Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship Program (the Rolnick and Grunewald model). Accomplishments of MELF that provide a foundation for further research and accountability mechanisms include: a taxonomy of effective early childhood programs; a conceptual framework or logic model for MELF underlying all of its projects; and a measurement model with recommended measures of child development.

- Innovations in the past year include: legislation to support family, friend, and neighbor care (the first state to do so); early childhood screening by age 3; home visiting to reach families most at risk for not having their young children ready for kindergarten, and Pre-K Allowances.
- Minnesota Reading Corps is a statewide public-private collaborative program that uses AmeriCorps members and other tutors to provide one-on-one literacy education for about 9,000 disadvantaged children age 3 to grade 3 who need extra support in reading.
- Invest Early is a comprehensive early childhood collaborative for low-income and at-risk children and their families in Itasca County, Minnesota, that provides Head Start quality classrooms for more than 250 3- and 4-year olds using an innovative blending of public funding streams bolstered with foundation dollars. Partners include the Blandin Foundation, Head Start, and the four school districts in the county.
- A 2004 survey by Wilder Research found that parents most commonly consider location, quality, and cost when choosing child care. Parents choose family, friend, and neighbor care because they prefer care by someone they know, and therefore trust, and because they like the flexibility and more individualized attention their children receive. The research also found parents choose center-based care for the structure, activities, and the special training of the caregiver. Child care choices have eroded in the past five years, affecting nearly 40 percent of parents with low incomes, parents of color, those with a child who has a special need, and those whose primary language is not English.

Quality improvement and accountability

- The Minnesota Departments of Education and Human Services have developed standards—early childhood indicators of progress for children and core competencies for early childhood professionals. The legislature has appropriated funding to improve early care and education quality through an improved statewide professional development system and professional development activities such as T.E.A.C.H., an educational scholarship for people working in child care centers and licensed family child care homes.
- The Minnesota Department of Education, MELF, and several initiatives are promoting increased use of age appropriate developmental assessment tools, including assessments for children’s mental health (ASQ-SE) and kindergarten readiness (MDE’s Work Sampling Checklist).

System-building

- An early care and education framework that formulates how early learning intersects with physical and mental health, family support, and special needs, brought to Minnesota through the national Build Initiative (Early Childhood Systems Working Group), resonates with most stakeholders. In this regard, the “system” consists of interrelated components working in concert to achieve a common goal. Rather than being governed under a single authority, the components remain independent and may have other goals as well as the shared one.
- Ready 4 K’s Build Initiative and the Minnesota Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (MECCS) grant through the Department of Health have aligned their system-building work and collaborated on compiling indicators and strategies for an early childhood system in the report, Early Childhood Minnesota (Wilder Research, 2008).

- The new State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care created by the Governor is interested in integrating findings of this Asset Review in their planning and decision-making.

Gaps and challenges

Goals

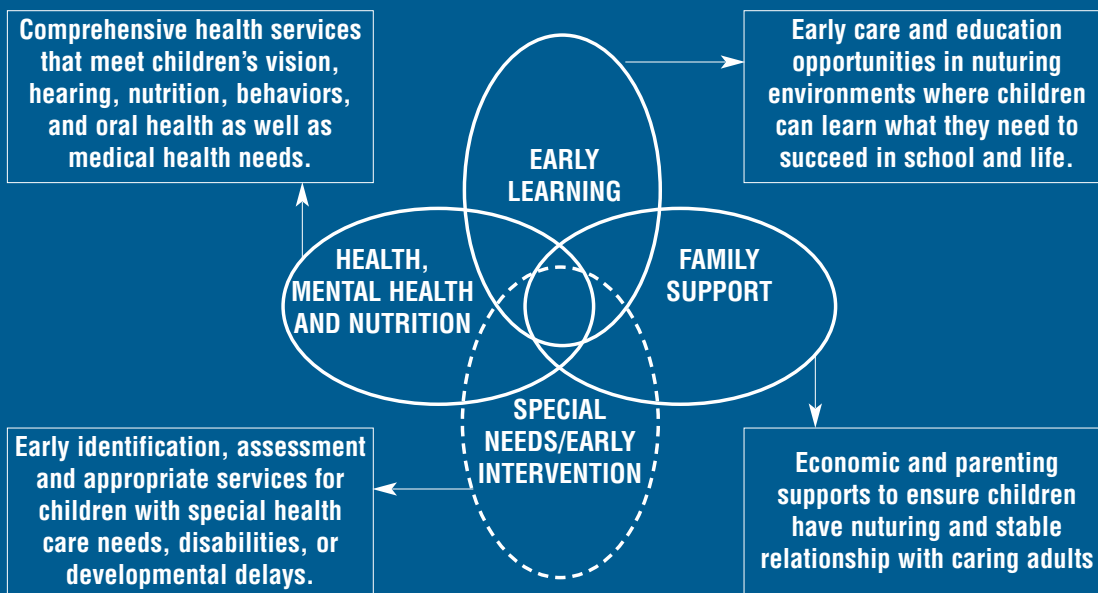
- Stakeholders and plans have expressed several early childhood goals—more money for programs, more quality in programs, more access to high-quality experiences for young children and families, parent empowerment, and more school readiness to close the achievement gap and to ensure a qualified future workforce. The goals are interrelated, but emphasize different strategies and lead to some confusion by legislators and other decision-makers about purpose and focus.
- Child care is a non-profit and for-profit business, an educational opportunity for children to learn and interact with peers, a caretaking service for working parents, and a welfare program for low-income

families seeking payment assistance. These different facets of child care continue to pose challenges to a unified purpose.

Governance and leadership

- Early care and education in Minnesota has governance, but the parts are structurally separated (siloed) in legislative committees (Early Childhood Learning Finance Division in the House and E-12 in the Senate) and in the state departments of education, health, and human services.
- Although awareness about early childhood issues is high, that has not translated to being a high priority. In nearly every group discussion, participants described early childhood as a low priority—in the Tribes; in the state departments of education, health, and human services; in school districts, and in the legislature. They also described a concentration of power in leadership of the House, and Senate along with the Governor and a lack of counter-balancing leadership for early childhood outside of government, leaving most feeling left out of decision-making.

FAMILIES SUPPORTED AND CHILDREN THRIVING, HEALTHY, AND READY FOR SCHOOL IN THE CONTEXT OF CULTURE AND COMMUNITY



PUBLIC SPENDING ON EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

Total public spending in 2008 was nearly \$399 million, an increase of about 6 percent since 2002 in real dollars, but about a 13 percent decrease in adjusted dollars according to the consumer price index.

- 54 percent of the total spending goes for early care and education access (child care subsidies)
- 43 percent for early education programs
- 3 percent to improve quality

- Local communities are looking for flexibility and two-way communication, not more bureaucracy. Closing the leadership gap may require championing different ways of doing business and spending than advocates for current programs may want.

Financing at scale

- Total public spending in 2008 for early care and education was nearly \$399 million, an increase of about 6 percent since 2002 in real dollars, but about a 13 percent decrease in adjusted dollars according to the consumer price index.
- As a consequence of the governance structure, financing for education and child care is fragmented and competitive. In addition, numerous partnerships are running independent pilots that provide and are testing fresh approaches, but none are large enough to supply enough developmentally and culturally appropriate high-quality early care and education.
- While the Build Initiative and MECCS have articulated an early childhood systems framework for thinking about how early care and education intersects with physical and mental health, family support, and special needs, much work remains to increase and strengthen the connections at the state and local levels.
- An emerging challenge centers on legislative interest in bringing to scale a useful and appropriate early care and education quality rating system (through the guidance of early care and education financing consultant Louise Stoney) while MELF is still implementing and evaluating a rating system in selected Twin Cities and rural communities.
- Build and MECCS have defined what data are needed to collect for indicators of a comprehensive, accessible early childhood system with sufficient quality to produce child and family health and well-being. However, the three state departments that are planning and funding early childhood services have no shared data or information systems, and many indicators of early childhood health and well-being have no data sources.

Inclusion and equity

- Voices of rural, cultural, tribal, and immigrant communities are lacking in the early childhood system-building work. Expanding stakeholder engagement to ensure a more culturally diverse and competent early childhood system is a central challenge to early childhood system building.

- While Minnesota has a good start on establishing early learning standards, quality ratings for programs, and child development assessments, a remaining challenge is to ensure that definitions and measures suit all families and providers; have community acceptance; and integrate the values, priorities, and best practices of diverse cultural and ethnic communities.
- Stakeholders in the discussions and interviews raised concerns that quality ratings and child assessments are misused when they are considered as end points rather than as tools for instruction and continuous improvement.
- The professional development system, now undergoing improvements, must address a lack of access in rural communities and a lack of qualified trainers in rural and cultural communities.
- Transportation is a barrier to participating in early learning opportunities for rural and inner-city children. It is also becoming a barrier in the suburbs as more low-income families move there.
- Low-income working families with incomes between 185 percent and 200 percent of poverty are not eligible for public health insurance or child care subsidies. For families with incomes below 185 percent of poverty, small improvements in incomes result in loss of coverage and disrupt continuity of health care and child care. Continuous eligibility for 12 months before re-determination of eligibility would improve this access problem.

Recommendations

These recommendations aim to improve upon the assets and to fill gaps with new approaches and new assumptions that go beyond business as usual.

1. Support multiple paths to a common goal to achieve the common good.
2. Establish a public/private fund for community scholarships.
3. Assert a call to action to advance early care and education.

1. Support multiple paths to a common goal to achieve the common good

In our conversations around the state, stakeholders agreed that more school readiness is a central policy goal, as long as it is viewed and pursued broadly and comprehensively. Minnesota has the opportunity to construct a fair and equitable early care and education system free of disparities in delivery and results—to prevent the achievement gap by closing the equity gap. The efforts of government, community coalitions, and public/private partnerships must ensure that every step of the way respects and is responsive to all families and communities, which are the building blocks of school readiness, being mindful that the context varies by locale and culture. Whatever we do has to make sense in rural Minnesota and in tribal and cultural communities.



Stakeholders agree that early childhood efforts must respect and be responsive to all families and communities, and make sense in rural Minnesota, and in tribal and cultural communities.

Rural and cultural differences require differing approaches and arrays of resources to reach the common goal. Equity and inclusion must be integral to our actions and to how we define and measure access, engagement, quality, and outcomes.

In practical terms, this means to:

- Make young children and early learning community priorities and a collective responsibility.
- Invest in ways that allow maximum flexibility and innovation at the local level.
- Support local partnerships and don't saddle them with new requirements or impose top-down solutions.
- Assist community-based and cultural-specific early care and education programs and providers to meet quality standards as well as adjust standards to value cultural programs so that families in cultural communities have an authentic choice of which programs to use, building on the work of the Early Childhood Resource and Training Center (ECRTC), and the Minnesota Tribal Early Childhood Council (MnTRECC).
- Respond holistically to needs of children, with the understanding that child development is a process, not an academic event that takes place at kindergarten entry.
- Ensure early learning standards, quality rating systems (Parent Aware), and child development assessments are inclusive and culturally appropriate, and equip licensed family providers and center-based programs in cultural and rural communities to meet and use them.
- Focus attention and concern towards the kindergarten children assessed as “not yet” developmentally ready more than on those “in process” or inconsistently demonstrating proficiency.

- Support family-centric approaches that address needs of parents and children at the same time, such as parental depression and child development.
- Recognize the extent that family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) caregivers have a role in early childhood development and maximize the early learning that takes place in FFN homes on a voluntary, not a regulatory, basis. To achieve educational equity and expansion of early learning opportunities throughout Minnesota for low-income children, and to achieve more school readiness, FFN care must be a core part of the solution.

2. Establish a public/private fund for community scholarships

Faced with an insufficient supply of high-quality developmentally and culturally appropriate early care and education and related services, Minnesota must muster the courage, imagination, and openness to spend what we have differently. There needs to be a coordinated system of funding that goes beyond solely constructing and financing a system of programs. Existing programs and public funding streams could be extended and better targeted in locally appropriate ways by establishing a pool of public/private funds for community scholarships. This is critical given the grim times ahead for any new government spending plans.

Ready 4 K has a proposal to finance early care and education in Minnesota by creating a new quality early learning fund. This fund would pool new state dollars to increase quality, support parents, and increase access through more portable resources for parents (such as child care subsidies, scholarships, and tax credits). It would direct financing to early education and parent support programs, with funding tied to quality standards. This recommendation adds private dollars to the funding pool and a third beneficiary of resources—communities.

Community scholarships would allow maximum flexibility and community choice, with no prescribed ways to remove barriers or to improve access to and increase supply of worthwhile, effective early learning opportunities. Communities would have to provide some level of matching funds, to agree to follow program quality standards, and to be accountable for school readiness outcomes. They would also have to employ a transparent, authentic, and inclusive decision-making process for using the community scholarships that builds on root strengths and eliminates root causes of the readiness and achievement gaps.

In the spirit of collective responsibility, maximizing existing resources and opportunities, these community scholarships could:

- Support and strengthen service connections and collaborative efforts to achieve school readiness that take place now out of necessity and naturally based on relationships among programs and agencies in rural and cultural communities.
- Help to level the playing field so that communities that are affected by policies and programs also have a part in developing them.
- Give isolated, disadvantaged families access to high-quality early learning experiences and family supports.
- Leverage other funding to serve more infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in formal programs, such as Invest Early is doing with the Blandin Foundation investment.
- Support family resource centers and support networks, mutual assistance associations for immigrants and ethnic communities, and other intermediaries with connections to underserved children and families.
- Reduce waiting lists to serve more families with infants and toddlers in Head Start programs, expand coverage for low-income children not otherwise eligible, and increase access to proven family literacy, parenting, and mentoring programs.
- Provide transportation services for rural, suburban, and urban children to attend early learning opportunities.
- Strengthen connections between early care and education and primary health care providers to improve early screening and access to needed services.
- Strengthen community connections and ease transitions between early care and education and early elementary education in locally and culturally appropriate ways



3. Assert a call to action to advance early care and education

First, to make early childhood a priority, early childhood stakeholders must be assertive to compete with other interest groups at the legislature and in local communities in order to get a bigger piece of the pie. Once that is achieved, then the stakeholders should share the slice – compete, then cooperate.

Many early childhood stakeholders around the state are looking to foundations to serve by example and as role models for how to exert competitive leadership and then how to cooperate to achieve the common goal of more school readiness. The leverage points include:

- At the foundation board level, speak with a unified voice across foundations at the legislature and with

the governor on ways to increase access to quality early learning opportunities for low-income children and on other agreed upon strategies, moving from being advocates to leaders.

- Convene stakeholders (local and state, public and private), to take a stand, issuing a call to action on an early childhood platform.
- In partnership with affected communities, set and share common expectations across foundations for results, measures of effectiveness, and intermediate markers of progress and success.
- Clarify roles and identify additional resources (public, private, philanthropic) that could bring financing to scale, formalizing the state's financial contribution through legislation and foundations' contributions through memorandum of understanding.



Funders:

- Blandin Foundation
- Bush Foundation
- Greater Twin Cities United Way
- Grotto Foundation
- The McKnight Foundation
- The Minneapolis Foundation
- Sheltering Arms Foundation
- Social Venture Partners

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