



Minnesota's Birth-4 Care and Education System

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Executive Summary: Minnesota's Birth-4 Care and Education System

Minnesota's system of care and education for our youngest citizens is chaotic, inequitable, and in urgent need of dramatic overhaul. We believe that all children have a right to equitable and high-quality care and education. Minnesota's policies and practices have created gaps in outcomes for children that are detrimental to our children, our communities, and our future. We have created an educational system that yields deeply inequitable outcomes. And we have created a child care system that is vastly underfunded and that relies on a workforce that includes many full-time workers who earn poverty-level wages, and that doesn't have nearly enough capacity to meet the needs of Minnesota's families.

This paper reflects the work of a partnership between ISAIH's Kids Count On Us coalition and Education Minnesota's Educator Innovation Policy Center, or EPIC.

Clearly Minnesota needs a dramatic overhaul of the early care and education system. We need to raise revenue to build a new, desperately needed system for our youngest learners and the workforce that cares for and educates them.

Our team has spent 18 months listening to one another. We understand the historical damage done by the artificial distinction between care and education, a distinction that is reflected not only in the ways we talk about young people's needs, but also in the very governance structures charged with oversight. We have collected data via both academic research, family surveys, and interviews with policy makers and practitioners all across the United States. We have looked carefully at programs in other states and municipalities that offer more comprehensive, equitable care and education to their youngest learners, and we have learned some critical lessons along the way.

We have examined programs and interviewed practitioners in West Virginia, New Jersey, Washington, Washington DC, New Mexico, Wisconsin, as well as county and city-wide initiatives such as those in San Antonio, Boston, and Seattle. We have been in conversation with and/or relied heavily on the work already provided by Head Start, Power to the Profession, the National Institute on Early Education Research, Christa Anders of Transforming Minnesota's Early Childhood Workforce, and the labor economist, Aaron Sojourner, at the University of Minnesota.

Our Key findings

- The argument children ages birth-4 need nothing more than a safe place to be while their parents are in the workforce, commonly thought of as “care,” is false.
- The argument that holds that K-12 is strictly about “education” and not about “care” is false.
- Minnesota has ignored the critical needs of our birth-4 year olds and suffers damage that will last for decades because of it.
- We must find a way to create access to equitable and high-quality care and education for all our state’s birth-4 year olds who need it.
- The birth-4 care and education workforce has been historically maligned, under-compensated, and unsupported, and these conditions are currently at crisis levels.
- We must, both immediately and over time, address the needs of the workforce dedicated to caring for and educating our youngest citizens.
- Doing so will require Minnesota to raise revenue and to commit to a complete overhaul of its birth-4 system

Our Recommendations

- Create a new state agency, the Minnesota Department of Early Care and Education, so that the state’s governance system can use the same vocabulary and align practices.
- Create regional Early Care and Education Hubs which are overseen by boards representative of public schools, special education practitioners, child care centers, home care centers, and community members.
- Create a mixed-delivery pre-K system aligned with the early indicators of progress and built on equitable practices that excludes no family wanting access.
- Create a sustainable funding source so that low-income families pay nothing and all other families pay up to but no more than 7% of family income, regardless of number of children in birth-4 system.
- Create a community needs assessment tool to be used on an ongoing basis by the Early Care and Education Regional Hubs.
- Fund the regional hubs sufficiently so that they can respond to the community needs assessments with the appropriate services needed by the families in their communities.
- Create a funding mechanism to immediately raise the wages of the birth-4 workforce, and to increase compensation, benefits, and professional development via a career-wage ladder on-ramping process.

Cost Benefit Analysis

- Researchers have correlated investments in high-quality, early childhood programming with future revenue generation for local communities. Scholars have argued that, “estimated long-term savings range from three to seven dollars for every dollar spent on such programs” because they help build “a U.S. workforce better prepared to meet the challenges of the 21st century” (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014, p. 8).
- Local education agencies can predict to see a greater return-on-investment from early childhood programming than other popular policy changes such as a reduction in class sizes (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014, p. 8).
- State and local education agencies that invest in high-quality, early childhood education and care also report a decrease in the reliance on public assistance programs (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014, p. 56).
- A true investment in early childhood education and care “would expand Minnesota’s economy by 1.1% which equates to \$3.7 billion of new economic activity in the state” (Economic Policy Institute, 2019).
- Economic researchers have “demonstrated the cost-effectiveness of investing in preschool, showing states that investments in early childhood education lead to reduced spending in multiple areas, including education, social welfare, and criminal justice” (Huntington, 2020, p. 348).
- Several studies have confirmed that every dollar spent on early childhood education can be associated with a return of \$7 to \$17 a year in the areas of education, health, and social/economic outcomes. Early investment is also linked to a decrease in state spending on social programs (Bartik, 2014; Whitebook, Phillips, and Howes, 2014).

COVID did not create the current crisis in our birth-4 care and education system. But it has certainly lifted the veil that kept many from understanding the severity of the state’s neglect of it. This is our opportunity to usher Minnesota into a better future. We call on Minnesota’s leaders, especially our elected officials, to have the courage to acknowledge the severity of the injustice embedded in the current, fragmented system, and begin the work toward a more just system designed to support Minnesota’s youngest learners so that they might reach their full potential.

References

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