

2022 Legislative Session Issue Brief

Universal child care and early learning

Minnesota's system of care and education for our youngest children is in urgent need of dramatic overhaul.

Our educational system yields deeply inequitable outcomes. And child care is vastly underfunded, relying on workers earning poverty-level wages and that doesn't have nearly enough capacity to meet the needs of Minnesota's families.

This is still the case even though the research is clear: High-quality early childhood education and care provide dramatic lifelong benefits to children and their communities. Studies have found every dollar spent has a return of \$7 to \$17 a year in education, health and social and economic outcomes. Early learning investment is also linked to a decrease in state spending on social programs.

ISAIH's Kids Count On Us Coalition and Education Minnesota's Educator Innovation Policy Center (EPIC) spent 18 months reviewing academic research and family surveys, as well as examining programs across the nation that offer more comprehensive, equitable care and education to their youngest learners and interviewing practitioners in those programs.

This team of child care providers and educators found that Minnesota has ignored the critical needs of our birth-to-4-year-olds, treating child care as if it's nothing more than a safe place to be while parents work and our K-12 system as if it's just about education and not care.

The workforce in both child care and education have also been historically maligned, under-compensated, and unsupported, and these conditions are currently at crisis levels.

Education Minnesota and ISAIH's Kids Count on Us Coalition recommend raising revenue to build a new system for our youngest learners and the workforce that cares for and educates them. This includes:

- Creating a mixed-delivery pre-K system aligned with the early indicators of progress and built on equitable practices that excludes no family wanting access.
- Sustainable funding so that low-income families pay nothing and all other families pay no more than 7% of family income, regardless of how many children are in the birth-4 system.
- Funding to immediately raise the wages of the birth-4 workforce, and to increase compensation, benefits and professional development via a career-wage ladder.
- Laying the framework for the federal Build Back Better plan's early childhood provisions and allocating the state's share of funding for those initiatives.
- Streamlining state agencies and creating regional hubs to better align early care and education systems and give educators, child care workers and families a voice in the services they give and receive. The state would do this by:
 - Creating a new state agency, the Minnesota Department of Early Care and Education, so the state's governance system uses the same vocabulary and aligns practices.
 - Building 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.
 - Creating a community needs assessment tool to be used on an ongoing basis by the regional hubs.

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- Funding regional hubs so they can respond to the community needs assessments with the appropriate services needed by the families in their communities.

COVID-19 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.

Minnesota can do better. Leaders and elected officials must acknowledge the deep injustice embedded in our current, fragmented system, and begin the work toward a more just system designed to support all our youngest learners so they can pursue their dreams.