



**Minnesota School District Early Childhood and Family Education Programs
Fall 2018
Response to Office of the Legislative Auditor (OLA) Report**

The mission of MNAFEE is to promote communication, purposeful networking, staff development, and evaluation activities that strengthen Early Childhood Family Education, School Readiness, and other family and early education programs and initiatives.

Purpose/Intent:

This document has been created to support the recommendations of the Office of the Legislative Auditor (OLA) report by providing context for each of the findings by the auditor's office. This insight supports the spirit of the report, and contributes to an understanding of current conditions that support, as well as impede, delivery of high quality early childhood and family education programs in Minnesota's public schools.

We appreciate the Office of the Legislative Auditor's report, and agree with the importance of the public school investment in early childhood programming, including but not limited to those covered by the OLA report: early childhood and family education / ECFE, screening, VPK, School Readiness.

The MNAFEE Board of Directors has reviewed the Facts / Findings and Recommendations of the OLA report. Please find our comments below.

Key Facts and Findings

Finding # 1 - 3

Early childhood programs offer varied services for young children and families, such as preparing children for school, offering parent education, and helping pay for child care.

MN has numerous early childhood programs overseen mostly by MDE, MDH, and DHS. Of the nine programs we evaluated six provide direct service to children and families, two provide funding rather than services, and one rates provider quality.

The array of early childhood programs is complex and fragmented, due in part to differences in the way programs are funded and variation in their eligibility and other requirements.

MNAFEE response:

- 1. The following are public school early childhood programs and/or funding streams, offered through MN public schools for young children and their families:**

Statewide Funds

- o Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE)
- o ECFE Home Visiting
- o Early Childhood Screening
- o School Readiness

Selected Districts (application process)

- o School Readiness Plus
- o Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten
- o Early Learning Scholarships, Pathway II

- 2. The audit addressed these public school funding streams:**

- o ECFE
- o Screening
- o School Readiness
- o VPK
- o (ECSE was not addressed in this report, which is unfortunate as this programming is a vital partner with early childhood programming)

In addition the audit addressed:

- o Family Home visiting - public health nurses
- o Head Start / Early Head Start

MNAFEE acknowledges that numerous programs currently exist, which are overseen by various MN departments. The OLA report's decisions about what to review - and what was left outside of the purview of the review - reflects the complexity that early childhood programs and family education programs have been experiencing with their funding streams and funded programs.

Finding # 4-6

Complexities in certain programs create burdens for families, which may result in lower access to needed services. They also create difficulties for program providers.

It is not possible to determine the extent of potential duplication among program funding or services. One reason is the lack of a unique number to identify children enrolled in multiple programs overseen by different agencies. Missing and incomplete data also inhibit assessing duplication.

Some children received services funded by more than one program, but this does not necessarily indicate duplicative services.

MNAFEE response:

Early Childhood departments of school districts are funded by a complex web of funding sources, originating from multiple MN departments.

Alignment of early childhood education with the K-12 system is expected. There is an equal push for coordination with community early childhood and family programs and services. These two alignment expectations are distinct, and require significant investment of time, resources and effort to accomplish the work in a meaningful way. As funding becomes available to public schools, so does the expectation to change the current programming to fit the requirements of that funding stream.

There is a value in creating partnerships and collaborations with our communities. There is value in offering programs that are tailored to meet the diverse needs of families participating in the public schools. However, the complexities involved in meeting program requirements and the requirements for funding streams can create difficulty for program administrators to utilize resources efficiently and effectively.

Funding that is accessed through an application to MDE creates a significant challenge. If awarded, these new funds are often granted in the spring. There is a limited amount of time to establish new spaces, staffing, programs, and marketing before the start of the next school year. Each year that the funding is in place the programs that are created become more robust, however working within a school system, the changes in programming and staffing can take a full year or two to fully implement.

Administration and coordination of these many programs has changed and become more complicated. Shifts have occurred in the skill-sets required of coordinators; from basic programming and teaching to community needs assessment, community building, budgeting and alignment with K-12. Many programs are functioning well, making coordinated and integrated programs and services accessible to families and demonstrating positive outcomes for children.

Finding # 7-9

The lack of important data prevents measuring program effectiveness statewide. State law gives priority to meeting goals on school readiness, but the number of children prepared for school is unknown.

State and federal laws limit state agencies' ability to share data even when they oversee related programs.

MDE does not have data on whether all children underwent required health and developmental screening.

MNAFEE Reponse:

- District early childhood coordinators are responsible for gathering, preparing and reporting to MDE for programming, scholarships, screening, Minnesota Common Course Catalog, Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten, School Readiness Plus and Early Education (EE) Student. Expectations are high for data collection and evidence of program outcomes. The support from MDE for training in data collection is limited, which negatively affects submissions to MDE. The capacity for training of support staff, the gathering of needed data on program inputs, and inputting the data to show child and family outcomes are limited.
- The data currently being gathered does not fully represent the actual program delivery and outcomes, because systems are not fully in place at the state and local levels. The state is likely receiving and reporting inaccurate data at this time because the systems and training are not adequate for the amount of and type of data requested.
- Training and capacity for data collection is an issue for all districts, however this is particularly true for smaller districts. Smaller districts have fewer funds, access to fewer qualified teachers, and a limited capacity to reach out to families. In addition, 40% of coordinators across the state have teaching duties as well. However, they have the same requirements for data entry. This may result in smaller districts setting aside certain data collection requirements. The guidance on how to prioritize the data collection tasks is not clear, and so there are likely gaps in data collection in smaller districts across the state.
- Public school district leaders concur that the data entered is valuable and well worth the effort. Over the next years, improved accuracy in data entry from school districts across the state will significantly affect the ability to evaluate the data. These new systems will need some years of accumulation before they can be accurately evaluated, our estimate is 2020.

Key OLA Recommendations:

***Recommendation #1:** The Legislature should consider aligning funding and eligibility requirements of certain early childhood programs to make them more understandable and efficient.*

MNAFEE Reponse:

MNAFEE agrees with this recommendation.

Combine VPK, School Readiness, School Readiness Plus, and Pathways II funding streams into an entitlement structure; in this way early childhood programs are able to access their funding in a timely manner, streamline their funding, and provide programming for all families through equal access to programs.

Encourage ECFE funds / ECFE Home visiting to continue to be the separate funding source that focuses on parent education and support. Ensure that the beneficial and essential work that educates and supports parents of all young children ages infant to kindergarten - or 3rd grade - continues. Continue to closely partner with preschool programming and expand ECFE's reach through 3rd grade.

Recommendation # 2: MDE, MDH, and DHS should jointly identify what is needed to use a universal identification number for children participating in early childhood programs.

MNAFEE Response:

MNAFEE agrees with this recommendation and encourages state/federal agencies to merge data collection methods.

Recommendation # 3: The Legislature should consider requiring assessments of children's school readiness as they complete certain early childhood programs; it should consider assessments for children entering kindergarten. It should also direct MDE, MDH, and DHS to plan a comprehensive evaluation of early childhood program' impacts.

MNAFEE Response:

Clarify the definition of School Readiness to focus on the whole child, with an emphasis on the strengths and skills that young learners bring to the classroom. Ensure that our youngest learners leaving preschool and moving through kindergarten are welcomed and supported as beginning learners. This supportive approach emphasizes the fact that as students enter into the school system they are ready if they have a readiness to learn; there are no prerequisite skills for kindergarten entrance.

Recommendation # 4: The Legislature should consider broadening authority for MDE, MDH, and DHS to share individual-level data from early childhood programs to improve program coordination.

MNAFEE Response:

MNAFEE agrees with this recommendation.

Recommendation # 5: MDE should collect (1) attendance rates and dates for participation for children in early childhood programs and (2) data on the number of children who are not screened.

MNAFEE Response:

MNAFEE agrees with this recommendation.

A significant number of children are not identified by the school district due to being outside of the census count. This is often a result of apartment living, moving to an area

after having a baby, or not participating in a school-related activity. This creates a significant barrier on collecting data on these children, reaching out to families about the importance of screening, as well as a significant barrier to counting them as being absent from the screening process.

MNAFEE would like to offer two additional issues impacting early childhood programming:

Workforce issues, (currently being acknowledged at the state level as well):

- We have limited staff availability for teachers with appropriate licenses in the classroom at the local level. The workforce issues for early childhood and family educators are difficult to address within individual communities and programs. These include less than full time employment for teachers, pay rates that do not balance the investment in the education required, highly invested individuals who are unable to pursue the profession due to financial inequities.

State-level support issues:

- Many state staff in the early learning division have little experience working in school districts and understanding how they function. No stakeholder or specific advisory group specific to school district early childhood and family education programs exists from the Minnesota Department of Education to the field.

Suggestions for Change / Strengthening Our Early Childhood and Family Education Programs / MNAFEE Legislative Platform:

If we are going to improve child and family outcomes, create innovative and intentional programming with partners, and achieve World's Best Workforce goals, it is urgent that we create a substantial, relentless focus on three areas of early childhood education:

1. Leadership of early childhood programs and early elementary schools
2. Adult capacities throughout the birth to grade 3 continuum (all adults, including parents, child care providers, teachers, etc).
3. Building high-quality, cohesive, and coherent systems for children and families.

Leadership

- To provide coordinated, dedicated leadership and support to school districts, a percentage of current funding from early childhood programs (ECFE, School Readiness, Early Learning Scholarships, VPK) should be earmarked to support two 1.0 FTE positions at MDE.
- These positions would focus on alignment of early childhood and family education to K-12, support building regional capacity, and focus on teacher quality and leadership through professional development activities.

- We propose a public-school district advisory council or stakeholder group to advise the MN Department of Education's early learning division on the implementation of grants, rule or law that are obtained through the department throughout the year.

Adult Capacities

- Using a percentage of current state funding from Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE), we propose dedicated, earmarked funding to support one 1.0 FTE position at MDE. This position would focus on leading, supporting, and enhancing family engagement **and parenting education** throughout the early learning continuum.
- The focus of this position would be on enhancing programming and services for parents and families, system development and alignment, and enhancing the competencies of those adults who work with parents and families throughout the early learning continuum.

System Coherence

- The positions described above in Leadership and Adult Capacities would work together to focus on helping districts build aligned, coherent systems from birth to third grade.
 - These positions will also enhanced mixed delivery through collaborative work with other state and local organizations that serve young children and their parents/families
 - These positions will be used to provide coordinated professional development across the state
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- **Summary of [OLA report on Early Childhood Programming](#)**