

MINNESOTA EARLY CHILDHOOD STRATEGIC REFRESH

**An Updated Cross-System Plan
for 2023 and Beyond**



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The Early Years Matter

The evidence is clear—experiences during the first few years of life have a profound and lasting impact. During the period from birth through age 3, the developing brain forms more than one million new connections per second to form the basic architecture of the brain and the foundation for all future learning and development.¹ Positive early childhood experiences—including within high-quality early childhood programming—are linked to lifelong benefits such as higher earnings, improved health, lower participation in social service programs, and lower chances of involvement with the criminal justice system.²

Not All Children and Families are Well Supported in the Early Years

The state of Minnesota offers numerous early childhood programs and services, each intended to meet the individual needs of young children and their families (i.e., parents, relatives, guardians, and other adults who act as primary caregivers for young children) and set the state’s youngest residents on the path to success in school and life. However, the reality is that society has been shaped in ways that significantly undermine access to these programs—and the resulting child outcomes—particularly for Black and American Indian families as well as other families of color. Racial disparities and segregation—once sanctioned by law and now perpetuated by policies and practices related to housing, education, employment, policing, criminal justice, and other systems—have long led to disparities in access to early childhood services, not only for families of color but also for rural communities, low-income families, families who have children with disabilities, immigrant and migrant families, and others who experience socioeconomic disadvantages.



Minnesota is Building Stronger Early Childhood and Family Systems For All

Minnesota is among many states working to strengthen the system of programs and services that support expecting and parenting families with young children to promote positive outcomes. Fully maximizing the benefit of these programs and services will require a continued focus on advancing equity. Equity in early childhood means “*intentionally putting an end to disparities and inequities in power, money, access, and resources*” as it relates to expecting and parenting families and the programs that serve them in the early years.³

The Preschool Development Grant Provides an Important Opportunity

Minnesota was among states awarded federal funding through the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) and subsequent Preschool Development Grant Renewal (PDG-R). These federal infusions of resources created an opportunity to strengthen the early childhood system, especially by addressing access gaps and other inequities for the children, families, and communities who have historically been excluded from high quality early childhood programming and services. This opportunity included a strategic, multisector effort to strengthen the statewide infrastructure and programming needed to facilitate healthy development from birth through age 5 and support Minnesota's expecting and parenting families. In 2019–2020, those charged with the planning and leadership of Minnesota's early childhood system partnered with agencies, communities, and families across the state to conduct an extensive needs assessment. Informed by the needs assessment findings, the state developed a comprehensive strategic plan to build the early childhood system in the coming years.



The State Identified the Need For a Strategic Refresh

The 2020 strategic plan was rolled out in the midst of system-wide upheaval. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced additional hardship on an already strained early childhood system and shed new light on longstanding issues, along with necessitating novel practices that offered improved pathways forward for the system. As such, Minnesota is using this opportunity to take a fresh look at what has been accomplished in the years since the initial needs assessment and strategic plan and gauge how recent events have reinvigorated, reshuffled, and reshaped the system's priorities.

During conversations, the state (including families, early childhood service providers, and local and state early childhood leaders), identified four key priority areas as focal points for the strategic refresh:

- Families can access the early childhood programs and services they need to help their young children thrive.
- Available early childhood supports and services achieve high quality standards by meeting the needs of children and families and driving toward positive outcomes.
- Families and communities play an active role in informing the planning, implementation, and oversight of state and local early childhood efforts.
- A sustainable and comprehensive statewide infrastructure enables the state to implement a streamlined child and family serving system.

For each priority area, the state developed strategies to respond to the most pressing needs and most salient opportunities to move Minnesota's early childhood system forward toward its overarching vision: By focusing on children facing racial, geographic, and economic inequities, all children in Minnesota will thrive within their families and communities.

Table 1. Minnesota Strategic Refresh Framework: Priority Areas and Strategies at a Glance

Priority Areas	Strategies	Alignment With 2020 MN PDG B-5 Strategic Plan
<p>Priority Area 1: Families can access the early childhood services they need to help their young children thrive.</p>	<p>1.1 Improve outreach to build awareness of and get families connected to early childhood services.</p> <p>1.2 Eliminate barriers to enrollment and participation in early childhood services.</p> <p>1.3 Expand direct service capacity to address unmet demand across communities.</p>	<p>Goals 1 and 4</p>
<p>Priority Area 2: Available early childhood supports and services achieve high quality standards by meeting the needs of children and families and driving toward positive outcomes.</p>	<p>2.1 Invest in building the capacity of the early childhood workforce.</p> <p>2.2 Develop mechanisms to successfully evaluate and scale effective early childhood programming.</p> <p>2.3 Create equitable systems to support all early childhood programs in improving quality.</p>	<p>Goal 5</p>
<p>Priority Area 3: Families and communities play an active role in informing the planning, implementation, and oversight of state and local early childhood efforts.</p>	<p>3.1 Provide clear pathways for diverse families, providers, and community members experiencing inequities due to race/ethnicity, geography, and income to engage in decision-making processes that impact them.</p> <p>3.2 Engage in trust building with communities.</p> <p>3.3 Enact a consistent approach for multidirectional communication with communities regarding early childhood efforts.</p>	<p>Goals 2 and 3</p>
<p>Priority Area 4: A sustainable and comprehensive statewide infrastructure enables the state to implement a streamlined early childhood system.</p>	<p>4.1 Seek diverse and stable funding to sustain early childhood efforts.</p> <p>4.2 Maintain and improve upon the cross-sector alignment and collective decision-making structures solidified by PDG B-5.</p> <p>4.3 Strengthen data-driven decision-making across the early childhood system.</p>	<p>Goals 6 and 7</p>



CONTEXT SETTING

The Early Years Matter

The evidence is clear—experiences during the first few years of life have a profound and lasting impact. During the period from birth to age 3, the developing brain forms more than one million new connections per second to form the basic architecture of the brain and the foundation for all future learning and development.⁴ Positive early childhood experiences—including within high-quality early childhood programming—are linked to lifelong benefits such as higher earnings, improved health, lower participation in social service programs, and lower chances of involvement with the criminal justice system.⁵ Research conducted by Nobel Prize laureate James Heckman demonstrated that effective early childhood programs for children experiencing poverty and related social injustices can provide a cost-benefit ratio of \$6.30 in returns on each \$1.00 invested—delivering a return on investment of 13% per year over time.⁶ The benefits of responsive and comprehensive early childhood services within communities extend beyond children, enabling families to participate in the workforce and creating jobs in local communities. For these reasons, Minnesota is among many states working to strengthen the system of programs and services for their youngest residents and to promote positive outcomes for expecting and parenting families.



Even though the importance of early life experiences is well supported by research, the reality is that society has been shaped in ways that significantly undermine child outcomes, particularly for Black people, American Indians, and other people of color. Racial disparities and segregation—once sanctioned by law and now perpetuated by policies and practices related to housing, education, employment, policing, criminal justice, and other systems—have long led to disparities in access to early childhood services, not only for families of color but also for rural communities, low-income families, immigrant and migrant families, those with disabilities, and others who experience socioeconomic disadvantages. To this day, systemic racism, intergenerational poverty, and chronic underinvestment in young children are the primary factors that perpetuate opportunity gaps and stand in the way of a thriving Minnesota community made up of well-supported and prosperous families.

Building a Stronger Early Childhood System for All

The state of Minnesota offers numerous early childhood programs and services, each designed to meet the individual needs of young children and their families (i.e., parents, relatives, guardians, and other adults who act as primary caregivers for young children) and set the state's youngest citizens on the path to success in school and life. Fully maximizing the benefit of these programs and services will require a continued focus on advancing equity. Equity in early childhood means “intentionally putting an end to disparities and inequities in power, money, access, and resources” as it relates to expecting and parenting families and the programs that serve them in the early years.⁷ Advancing equity necessitates acknowledging racism, sexism, and economic injustice as the root causes of inequities and as current barriers that will require an intentional, system-wide effort to dismantle. This is the effort needed to ensure that all families have what they need to support their children to learn, grow, and thrive in the context of their community and culture.

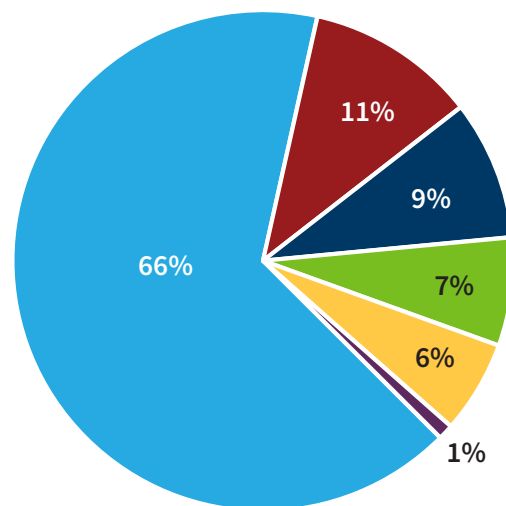
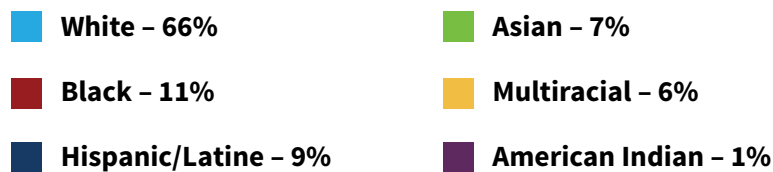


With this goal in mind, Minnesota is committed to advancing equity by narrowing opportunity gaps for young children and their families. This means distributing services and allocating resources in ways that ensure families experiencing inequities on the basis of race and ethnicity, income, and geographic location have access to the opportunities and resources they need to thrive. It means ensuring that early childhood supports build on the developmental strengths and assets often overlooked in children, families, and communities.

Meet Minnesota's Young Children and Their Families

To better understand what is needed to advance equity and build a better system for expecting and parenting families, it is important to know about the children and families that form the fabric of the Minnesota community. This includes recognizing both the numerous ways that families create and leverage resources to give their children the best start possible and the ways that systemic barriers stand in the way.

Figure 1. Minnesota Children Under Age 5 by Race and Ethnicity^{8,9}



HOW EXPECTING AND PARENTING FAMILIES IN MINNESOTA INVEST IN THEIR YOUNG CHILDREN

Stable and connected families; safe, valued, and well-resourced communities; and high-quality early childhood programs and services are all essential to forming a strong, supportive ecosystem for children as they grow and learn. Minnesota families and communities show that they prioritize young children and work hard to create the conditions for them to thrive. Families take their role as their children's first teachers and primary caregivers seriously and are dedicated to giving their children a strong start. The following represents the latest available data, including statistics from 2019–2020.

Among children 6 months to 5 years of age, 87% are “flourishing” in their socioemotional development.¹⁰ According to the National Children's Health Survey, a high percentage of children demonstrate four out of four essential criteria for flourishing (i.e., the child is affectionate and tender, the child bounces back quickly when things do not go his/her way, the child shows interest and curiosity in learning new things, and the child smiles and laughs frequently).

About 95% of Minnesota families read, sing, or tell stories to their young children.¹¹ When families spend time reading, singing, or telling stories together, they help children develop stronger oral language and literacy skills, deeper connections to culture and heritage, and a lifelong love of learning.¹²

Three quarters of Minnesota families report that their children are growing up in a community where they feel safe. Two thirds report that they can get the support they need as parents from other members of their own communities.¹³ Physical safety, along with the availability of social and practical support when it comes to child-rearing and the challenging parts of family life, have a positive impact on children's learning, development, and quality of life.

Ninety-seven percent of children from birth through age 5 have health insurance coverage.¹⁴ For young children, physical health, development, and learning are inextricably linked. When families can access adequate health insurance coverage for their children, children are more likely to attend routine and preventative health care visits, receive vaccinations in a timely manner, and receive effective and expedient treatment when illnesses arise.

Twenty percent of Minnesota's children come from immigrant and migrant families, and that percentage is increasing with each passing year.¹⁵ Immigrant and migrant families often demonstrate and pass on to their young children immense reserves of personal strength and resilience and a strong connection to community and culture, even in the face of significant challenges—like integrating new cultural expectations and ways of life, finding and maintaining adequate employment, and in some cases, managing the reality or the ever-present threat of family separation.





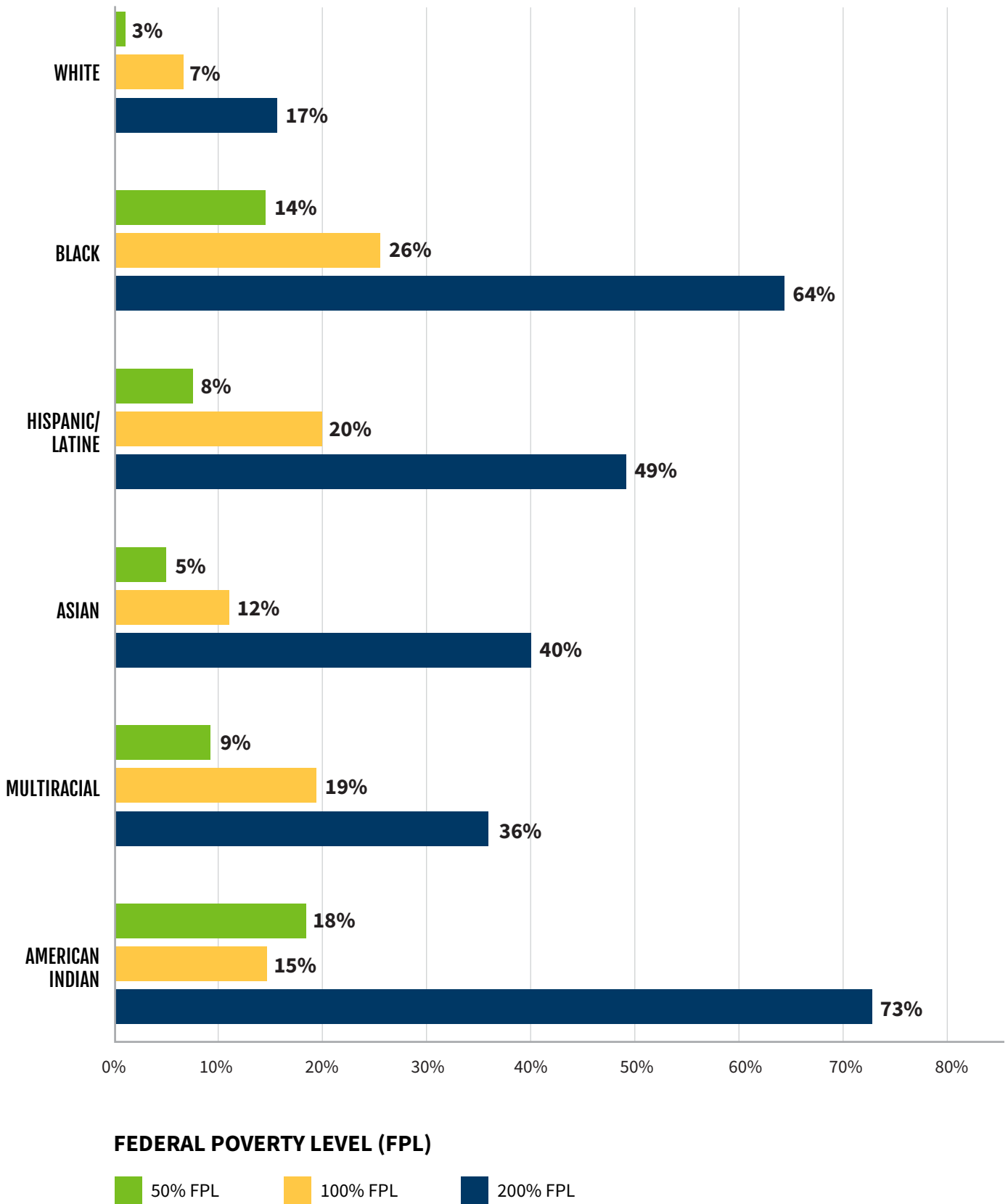
HOW SYSTEMS FALL SHORT OF SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

While the earliest years of a child's life hold great potential for learning and development, they are also some of the most vulnerable. Children who are most impacted by racial and social inequities can be at risk of lifelong developmental consequences, even if their circumstances improve later in life. The economic, social, and health-related barriers that these inequities have created do not stand in isolation but instead are often correlated and mutually reinforcing—causing deep and layered problems that erode the prosperity and well-being of families, communities, and the state as a whole.

Twelve percent of Minnesota's children from birth through age 5 live below 100% of the federal poverty level.¹⁶ For a family of four, 100% of the federal poverty level amounts to an annual household income of \$27,750.¹⁷ Poverty is a profound and unnecessary social injustice—the result of an economy defined by the inequitable distribution of wealth and resources. A society that allows poverty to persist places its members at risk of hunger, inadequate housing, and other traumatic experiences that impact children, families, and society as a whole. For young children, growing up in these conditions can contribute to poor health and impede social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development.

In Minnesota, children of color can be over four times more likely than White children to live in poverty or low-income conditions. Communities characterized as having high rates of poverty are likely to experience systematic loss of capital investment from businesses, limiting access to vital resources such as healthy foods, adequate housing, health care, and jobs. These community factors undermine child and family well-being and create barriers to school readiness.

Figure 2. Minnesota Children Under Age 6 by Poverty Level and Race/Ethnicity^{18, 19, 20}





Birthing parents of color can be up to 9 times more likely than White parents to receive late or no prenatal care.²¹ This is the direct result of systemic access and quality gaps in maternal health care affecting communities of color. Lack of prenatal care often contributes to poor birth outcomes, such as low birth weight or premature birth, which can have long-term health and developmental consequences for children.

Seventeen percent of children live in linguistically isolated households.²² Linguistically isolated households are those in which no one over the age of 14 speaks English “very well.” Unfortunately, many parts of the early childhood and related systems do not have adequate resources to reach and support linguistically diverse families—and for that reason, limited English proficiency within families often means limited access to early childhood programs and supports.

Seventeen percent of children have chronic illnesses or other special health care needs.²³ Chronic health and occupational barriers can erode children’s quality of life and limit their ability to participate in early learning experiences. These special health care needs often require specific and ongoing interventions to ensure that children can achieve their maximum potential for development, learning, and well-being.

Twenty-two percent of children (from birth through age 18) have emotional or behavioral health conditions. These challenges can be the result of developmental delays, trauma and toxic stress, or any other type of disruption to children’s social and emotional well-being. These conditions affect all developmental domains and often call for additional services for children to be well supported within their families, programs, and communities.

Overwhelmingly, the challenges that children and families face indicate points of failure within the early childhood system and others that support our society. They offer clues as to what states must focus on to improve conditions for expecting and parenting families. Minnesota’s leadership looks critically upon these and other current realities and recognizes its responsibility to strategically apply resources to drive toward change.

An Opportunity to Strengthen the Early Childhood System: PDG B-5

Minnesota was among states awarded federal funding through the PDG B-5 and subsequent PDG-R. These federal infusions of resources have created an opportunity to strengthen the early childhood system, especially by addressing access gaps and other inequities for the children, families, and communities who have historically been excluded from high quality early childhood programming and services. This opportunity has included a strategic, multisector effort to strengthen the statewide infrastructure and programming needed to facilitate healthy development from birth through age 5 and support Minnesota's expecting and parenting families.

Among other activities, initial PDG B-5 resources supported the development of a comprehensive needs assessment and strategic plan designed to strengthen Minnesota's B-5 system. For the purposes of the grant, "B-5" specifies programs and services for children and families from the prenatal stage to kindergarten entry. B-5 spans the developmental continuum of expectant families, infants, toddlers, and preschoolers and includes multiple entities focused on perinatal, maternal, and child health; infant, early childhood, and family mental health; early childhood care and education; and family social and economic supports directly impacting young children. This includes family- and center-based child care, school-based pre-K, Early Head Start and Head Start; early intervention, early childhood special education, developmental screenings, and other services supported by Medicaid; child welfare; Early Childhood Family Education; family home visiting; the Minnesota Family Investment Program; Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP); Early Learning Scholarships; services such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits; and other supports designed specifically for expecting and parenting families in the early years.



While they are not typically considered part of the early childhood system, it is important for the purposes of this plan to consider all systems that relate to the overall well-being of families and communities, as these greatly impact the functioning of Minnesota's expecting and parenting families. This includes transportation, housing, food access and distribution, physical and mental health, and more. While these systems are resourced and operated separately from the early childhood system, this plan will reference opportunities for increased communication and coordination in the interest of a whole-child, whole-family approach to supporting Minnesota's families.

The 2020 Needs Assessment and Strategic Plan

In 2019–2020, those charged with the planning and leadership of Minnesota’s B-5 system partnered with agencies, communities, and families across the state to conduct an extensive needs assessment. The focus of the needs assessment was to evaluate the system’s greatest assets, challenges, and opportunities in pursuit of its mission: Create an equitable system that supports expecting and parenting families with young children. To do this, families, communities, and government agencies will partner to eliminate structural racism and inequities that exist in access, policies, programs, and practices. Key findings included the following:

- A fully functioning system is holistic and addresses the interconnection of issues that are woven throughout families’ lives.
- While there are nuances between geography and cultural groups, families across the state face challenges with accessing quality child care, medical care, housing, and transportation.
- A supportive system facilitates choice for families, recognizing the unique needs of diverse communities and individual families.
- The state has a responsibility to provide funding, program opportunities, and resources to make services more available and accessible.

Informed by the needs assessment findings, the state took on strategic planning. At the heart of the strategic-planning process was a commitment to community engagement, which manifested in 134 community engagements in 56 Minnesota communities. Modes of engagement included focus groups, interviews, community forums, and surveys engaging families and early childhood providers. Special attention was given to including families, providers, and communities of color; linguistically minoritized communities; tribal communities; rural communities; and others who have historically been the furthest from high-quality early childhood opportunities—with recognition that elevating the standard of access and service delivery for historically underserved communities is what it takes to build a better early childhood system for all.

The 2020 strategic plan was organized around seven goals:

GOAL 1:

Develop systems within and across state agencies working on early childhood initiatives that make it easier for families to access what they need to thrive.

GOAL 2:

Cultivate authentic community engagement systems and partnership across state agency initiatives.

GOAL 3:

Leverage community-developed solutions.

GOAL 4:

Increase the availability of and access to early childhood well-being supports and services.

GOAL 5:

Increase the quality of early childhood well-being supports and services.



GOAL 6:

Increase the quality of early childhood well-being supports and services.

GOAL 7:

Leverage the oversight of the Children’s Cabinet to advance principles of a child-centered government..

The Strategic Refresh

As the initial PDG B-5 grant period came to a close, PDG-R funding became available in the context of an early childhood system in upheaval. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced additional hardship on an already strained B-5 system. Meanwhile, the pandemic shed new light on longstanding issues and birthed necessary practices that offer improved pathways forward for the system. Therefore, Minnesota leveraged the opportunity for a fresh look at what has been accomplished in the years since the 2020 needs assessment and strategic plan and how recent events have reinvigorated, reshuffled, and reshaped the system’s priorities.

The strategic refresh included a review of current and ongoing initiatives, existing community and program-level data, and robust community engagement to better understand the landscape, needs, and opportunities for Minnesota’s early childhood system in 2023 and beyond. Specifically, the strategic refresh process sought to address the following:

- **Build on existing themes and the biggest challenges facing the early childhood system and the impacts of recent years.** The 2020 needs assessment elevated a lot of important data and was comprehensive. However, by revisiting prior findings with a current lens, we have the opportunity to go deeper in examining key issues that sit at the intersection of what is most critical for the system at this moment and what the state is ready to make meaningful progress toward.
- **Create stronger alignment between the needs assessment and strategic plan.** There was an opportunity to streamline findings about the most pressing needs of the system and the state’s plan to take action in a single document. The benefit of this is to better engage audiences both within and beyond the early childhood system (including policy makers and other potential early childhood allies). The structure of the strategic refresh creates an explicit link between the most pressing needs and the highest impact opportunities in a way that makes a clear and compelling case for action.
- **Elevate family and community voice.** The strategic refresh process was built upon the belief that at the foundation of needs assessment and strategic-planning work is a practical approach to storytelling—and that audiences respond differently to a variety of ways of telling the story. In addition to using quantitative data to demonstrate the key issues, it is essential to make visible a variety of family and provider stories about how they experience the challenges we are naming and make clear how strategic action on the part of the state is responsive.

To conduct the strategic refresh, the state of Minnesota partnered with School Readiness Consulting (SRC) to facilitate a collaborative process. This process resulted in this document, which is intended as a companion to the 2020 needs assessment and strategic plan, and the identification of the steps are detailed below.



IDENTIFY STATE AND LOCAL EFFORTS TO BUILD ON (October–December 2021)

An inventory of current policies, priorities, and strategies at play in Minnesota’s early childhood system illuminated opportunities to build on prior and current efforts. This involved the following actions:

- **A review of key documents** detailing prior and ongoing strategic efforts to build on and system realities to consider.
- **Interviews with state and local leaders**, including members of the Children’s Cabinet, PDG B-5 partners, state and local agency leadership, and others with awareness of efforts to build early childhood systems.
- **Partnership with other emerging and ongoing activities funded by PDG B-5**—including evaluating initial activities funded by PDG B-5; reviewing Minnesota’s Community Solutions for Healthy Child Development Grant effort; gathering data and offering recommendations on the state’s emerging Community Resource Hubs initiative; continuing communication with Improve Group, the BUILD Initiative, and other partners of the state in evaluation and systems building.

IDENTIFY THE GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES (January–June 2022)

A series of community engagement activities identified the most pressing needs of those whom the system is intended to serve. Community engagement activities included the following efforts:

- **Focus group sessions** created spaces for families, providers, and community leaders to share their experiences with the early childhood system and their knowledge of what matters most for children, families, and communities. Focus group sessions were designed to identify broad themes from the perspectives of these essential members of the early childhood community and to deepen local awareness of the strategic refresh process.
- **Advisory council meetings** brought together a group of families and providers from various parts of the state to offer their thoughts on the most important strengths, gaps, and opportunities for the state and to review aspects of the strategic refresh in real time.
- **Photovoice** included a small group of families and providers representing multiple regions and demographic characteristics present within the state. For this project, SRC supported these individuals in capturing photos and creating written narratives to give a firsthand account of their experiences as part of Minnesota’s early childhood system. Throughout this document photovoice stories appear to further illustrate the triumphs and challenges of family life and the early childhood system.

HOW MINNESOTANS GOT INVOLVED

During the initial strategic-planning process in 2019, the intention was to hear from as many families and providers in as many Minnesota communities as possible. Building on the breadth of voices represented in the initial strategic plan, the refresh was an opportunity to “go deep” on key issues that have a significant impact on end users of the early childhood system. We did this through the following activities:



9 focus group sessions with a total of 20 families



7 focus group sessions with 20 early childhood providers



4 advisory council meetings with families and providers



12 photovoice participants contributing individual stories



13 interviews with state and local early childhood leaders

DEVELOPING THE STRATEGIC REFRESH (July–December 2022)

A set of strategies and action steps was developed to create a shared purpose and path forward for the multiple sectors that make up Minnesota’s early childhood system. The co-creative process included these activities:

- **Regular advisory meetings were held** with key representatives of state-level decision-making bodies to contextualize findings and advise on the development of proposed strategies and action steps.
- **A strategic framework and supporting rationale was developed**, ensuring (as do the findings from the 2020 needs assessment and other efforts supported by PDG B-5) that the voices and needs of all partners and communities are well represented.
- **Minnesota Early Childhood Strategic Refresh: A Plan for 2023 and Beyond was presented.** This includes the full report for use by community and agency leadership, state and local decision makers, and others entrusted with the important work of implementing this plan. This also includes a family- and community-facing version to inform the general public of the process and outcomes associated with the strategic refresh and of what to expect in the coming years.



The Strategic Framework

According to conversations with Minnesotans, focal points for the strategic refresh were narrowed from the seven goals of the original strategic plan to four key priority areas:

- Families can **access** the early childhood services they need to help their young children thrive.
- Available early childhood supports and services achieve **high quality standards** by meeting the needs of children and families and driving toward positive outcomes.
- **Families and communities** play an active role in informing the planning, implementation, and oversight of state and local early childhood efforts.
- A sustainable and comprehensive **statewide infrastructure** enables the state to implement a streamlined early childhood system.

For each priority area, the state developed strategies to respond to the most pressing needs and most salient opportunities to move Minnesota’s early childhood system forward toward its overarching vision: *By focusing on children facing racial, geographic, and economic inequities, all children in Minnesota will thrive within their families and communities.*

Table 1. Minnesota Strategic Refresh Framework: Priority Areas and Strategies at a Glance

Priority Areas	Strategies	Alignment With 2020 MN PDG B-5 Strategic Plan
<p>Priority Area 1: Families can access the early childhood services they need to help their young children thrive.</p>	<p>1.1 Improve outreach to build awareness of and get families connected to early childhood services.</p> <p>1.2 Eliminate barriers to enrollment and participation in early childhood services.</p> <p>1.3 Expand direct service capacity to address unmet demand across communities.</p>	<p>Goals 1 and 4</p>
<p>Priority Area 2: Available early childhood supports and services achieve high quality standards by meeting the needs of children and families and driving toward positive outcomes.</p>	<p>2.1 Invest in building the capacity of the early childhood workforce.</p> <p>2.2 Develop mechanisms to successfully evaluate and scale effective early childhood programming.</p> <p>2.3 Create equitable systems to support all early childhood programs in improving quality.</p>	<p>Goal 5</p>
<p>Priority Area 3: Families and communities play an active role in informing the planning, implementation, and oversight of state and local early childhood efforts.</p>	<p>3.1 Provide clear pathways for diverse families, providers, and community members experiencing inequities due to race/ethnicity, geography, and income to engage in decision-making processes that impact them.</p> <p>3.2 Engage in trust building with communities.</p> <p>3.3 Enact a consistent approach for multidirectional communication with communities regarding early childhood efforts.</p>	<p>Goals 2 and 3</p>
<p>Priority Area 4: A sustainable and comprehensive statewide infrastructure enables the state to implement a streamlined early childhood system.</p>	<p>4.1 Seek diverse and stable funding to sustain early childhood efforts.</p> <p>4.2 Maintain and improve upon the cross-sector alignment and collective decision-making structures solidified by PDG B-5.</p> <p>4.3 Strengthen data-driven decision-making across the early childhood system.</p>	<p>Goals 6 and 7</p>

THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

During the initial needs assessment and strategic-planning processes, Minnesota early childhood leaders established a set of guiding principles to guide decision-making and set a high standard for those entrusted with the important work of building and implementing the early childhood system. These guiding principles remain at the heart of the state’s commitment to expecting and parenting families and form the foundation of the goals and strategies described in this plan:



Address intersectionality (multilayered discrimination) and the interconnection between needs



Practice geographic equity and responsiveness



Uphold racial equity and dismantle structural racism



Respond to complexity with interagency collaboration



Prioritize the whole-family system



Create conditions for belonging, inclusion, and trust



Acknowledge trauma and normalize trauma- and healing-informed practices

WHO IS LEADING THE WAY?

No single agency or organization within the state holds the resources or capacity to achieve the state’s vision alone. Instead, success lies in a coordinated cross-system effort in which state and local leaders in all agencies and at all levels have a role. Considering the importance of the connections between children’s health, well-being, access to opportunities, and school success, there is no time to waste in building a comprehensive system that helps young children and their families thrive during the early years. As part of building such a system, focused and ongoing efforts will be integral to advance a cohesive early childhood system that ensures all children and families in Minnesota are able to thrive.

The agencies leading the development of the strategic plan anticipate it will have a meaningful impact on a range of partners and organizations. The table below, originally developed for the 2020 strategic plan and updated for the strategic refresh, describes how several key partners (listed in alphabetical order) may incorporate the strategies of the plan.



Table 2. Impact on Key Partners

Key Partner	Actions Suggested by the Updated Strategic Plan
Advocates and advocacy organizations with an early childhood focus	Continue to play an educational and storytelling role to lead the charge for child- and family-centered policy and practice.
Children’s Cabinet Advisory Council and the State Advisory for Early Education and Care	Utilize this plan to provide recommendations and guidance to the Advisory Council and the Children’s Cabinet.
Early childhood navigators and care, education, and health providers	Increase capacity to deliver high-quality, trauma-informed, culturally responsive, whole-family-oriented services.
Early childhood professional associations	Remain abreast of the state’s priorities identified in this plan, and align with state efforts to maximize resources and create momentum.
Head Start Collaboration Office	Continue collaboration efforts and communications surrounding grant goals, particularly as they align to the strategies and actions outlined in this plan.
Minnesota Children’s Cabinet	Utilize this plan to leverage interagency partnership to help make Minnesota the best place to raise a family—for everyone.
Minnesota Departments of Education, Human Services, and Health	Continuously improve approaches to programming and service delivery, workforce preparation, cross-agency collaboration, and community engagement to address structural racism and other barriers to equitable access to high-quality B-5 services.
Minnesota families and communities	Continue to inform early childhood priorities; provide feedback loops on efficacy of action steps; experience services as more whole-family focused, trauma informed, and culturally responsive; experience greater ease in navigating the early childhood system, including with eligibility and application processes.
Other state, regional, and local agencies, including schools, counties, public health, and community-based organizations	Strengthen practices and develop new approaches to address early childhood well-being and interrelated community issues in holistic ways toward a common goal of helping children and families thrive.
Policy makers	Review the data, stories, and strategic pathways identified in this and other essential strategic documents and commit to doing what is right for expecting and parenting families.
Tribal nations	Recognize the need for and participate in continuous consultation regarding early childhood services for the 11 sovereign nations as well as the urban American Indian population as the state implements the work slated in this plan and all future B-5 efforts.



HOW TO READ THIS PLAN

The following sections provide a deeper dive into the priority areas, strategies, and action steps the state will pursue in the coming years:

- **PRIORITY AREAS:** Broad statements that describe the intended results of strategic efforts; each explicitly stating its alignment with the findings and directions of the 2020 needs assessment and strategic plan
- **WHAT WORK CAN WE BUILD ON?** Highlights of related prior and ongoing efforts from which the state can learn and leverage as a foundation for future efforts
- **WHAT ARE THE GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES?** Discussion of findings that point to the need for further action on the part of state and local entities to improve conditions within the early childhood system
- **QUOTES:** Insights directly from families, early childhood providers, and state leaders sharing their experiences with the early childhood system
- **BY THE NUMBERS:** Key data to provide additional context on Minnesota's early childhood landscape
- **STRATEGIES AND ACTION STEPS:** Specific activities that must take place to achieve set priorities
- **PHOTOVOICE SPOTLIGHTS:** Stories from families, providers, and community members that highlight the triumphs and challenges of the early childhood system from an end user perspective
- **WHO'S ON DECK?** A brief overview of state and/or local entities that may be well positioned to carry out the strategies in each priority area
- **HOW WILL WE KNOW WE ARE MAKING PROGRESS?** Key indicators to use to measure results, drive decision-making, and communicate impact

PRIORITY AREA 1

Families Can Access the Early Childhood Services They Need to Help Their Young Children Thrive



When children have healthy, safe, and positive experiences during the early years, they are provided critical building blocks for their long-term well-being and success. To create these conditions, expecting and parenting families deserve access to a range of high-quality early childhood services before their child turns 5.

What Work Can We Build On?

The state invests in several community-based efforts to improve outreach and streamline linkages to comprehensive early childhood services. The 2020 needs assessment clearly indicated that services and supports needed to be made more accessible through improved translation services, more availability for young children, and fewer barriers for families to find and enroll in early childhood services. As a result, the state invested PDG B-5 funds into community-driven models, including Community Resource Hubs, which focus on addressing local needs through cross-sector collaboration and serve as a bridge between families and local service providers. Hub staff receive training on how to use tools such as Help Me Connect, which provides a way for families to identify and connect to a broad spectrum of resources related to prenatal and early childhood development, education, mental health, food, housing, safety of children and families, and more. When they are driven by community leadership and local partners, these efforts can be more sustainable and impactful over time.



In addition, the state has seen success with the Community Solutions for Healthy Child Development Grant, which focuses on funding community-based solutions for child well-being with a strong focus on racial and geographic equity. Community Solutions grantee organizations have effectively integrated equity-focused and community-centered practices for supporting young children, and preliminary data shows that grantee initiatives are also having a positive impact on the well-being of children, families, and communities—including improving their access to culturally relevant early childhood services.

The state also shows a commitment to promoting accessibility of public communications about early childhood. This includes the launch of key platforms that simplify learning about program eligibility and application processes. Partners that work to promote connections for families are seeing the value of tools and stronger partnerships such as Help Me Connect and Bridge to Benefits that help identify the services families are eligible for and help them get connected. To increase accessibility, Help Me Connect communications have been translated into four languages in addition to English, and its developers strive to include culturally specific, locally based resources. In addition, the MNbenefits online application interface allows users to apply for benefits in nine different programs in a short, streamlined process. It is currently available in English and Spanish, with plans to expand to additional languages, and should be expanded to include even more programs based on what families currently need. The state has also demonstrated commitment to promoting belonging and inclusion for families that access early childhood services through intentional use of language and images in community-facing documents. As noted in the guiding principles, experiencing feelings of belonging and inclusion can determine how community members interact with the initiatives and resources available in their communities and is correlated with opportunities for educational and economic success.

Efforts to increase access to services during COVID-19 demonstrate the state’s potential to offer these same supports in an ongoing way. Despite the inequities that were heightened as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many early childhood partners reported that Minnesota’s early childhood service delivery was improved and better coordinated during this time. For example, families in smaller communities experienced simplified access to key child health and nutrition programs, including Medicaid, SNAP, and WIC benefits. Others discussed the significant impacts of waivers of family eligibility requirements, which also helped make it easier for families to get services during the pandemic. For example, families with children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals were able to access temporary food benefits when school operations were impacted by the pandemic through Minnesota’s Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer plan. State leaders spoke about how the successful pandemic response was made possible because of the sudden need for increased communication between public agencies and a clearly defined role for the Children’s Cabinet in leading and promoting interagency collaboration. This shift shed light on the ways the state can continue to improve service delivery in a sustained way post pandemic.

“What the pandemic did was create a pretty clear and defining role for the Children’s Cabinet in a way that I don’t know would have happened as quickly had the pandemic not happened. I think they were already going in that direction, but [it] sort of just expedited that. And I think many state agencies serving kids [are] now much more oriented to the Children’s Cabinet as an organizing body, as a convener, as a support for doing a lot of the cross-agency work that we’re all interested in doing but often aren’t paid to do.”

- STATE LEADER

Moving Forward

Access to services that support young children and their families is impacted by a variety of factors. Therefore, increasing access will require a multifaceted approach. This includes improving outreach and awareness of available programs, continuing to scale successful community-level efforts, eliminating barriers to enrollment and ongoing participation, and expanding the capacity of critical early childhood services. Strategies for increasing access must recognize that programs and services have been designed and distributed in ways that have limited access for communities that have historically been marginalized within early childhood and other systems, which has created profound access gaps by socioeconomic status, geography, and other factors.

Through this strategic refresh process, the state has an important opportunity to identify the root causes of access gaps and to address the barriers that are common across all sectors representing the early childhood system. A renewed commitment to supporting children and families in comprehensive ways rests on coordinated efforts to link families with appropriate early childhood services and supports.



STRATEGIES AT A GLANCE

- 1.1 Improve outreach to build awareness of and get families connected to early childhood services.
- 1.2 Eliminate barriers to enrollment and participation in early childhood services.
- 1.3 Expand direct service capacity to address unmet demand across communities.

Strategy 1.1

IMPROVE OUTREACH TO BUILD AWARENESS OF AND GET FAMILIES CONNECTED TO EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES

HOW DOES THIS STRATEGY EXEMPLIFY THE STATES' GUIDING PRINCIPLES?



Prioritize the whole-family system



Practice geographic equity and responsiveness



Create conditions for belonging, inclusion, and trust

WHAT ARE THE GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES?

Despite recent efforts to improve outreach, not all families are being reached by key messages and opportunities to connect with vital services.

Gaps continue to exist in accessibility for many groups who may benefit from additional and more-tailored methods of communication and outreach. This situation gives local agencies the opportunity to be more responsive to audiences who have limited internet access, transportation, social networks, English language proficiency, or overall experience navigating the early childhood system or who have disabilities. The burden of navigating the early childhood system is made exponentially more difficult for families when language is a barrier. Early childhood partners reported how translation services are not always available for all types and sources of support and cited an inadequate number and distribution of providers who reflect the languages and cultures of diverse communities. This means families must often travel to other counties to seek services without knowing if they will be eligible to receive services or if there are staff members equipped to communicate with them at the time of their visit. The state has the opportunity to prioritize tailored supports for families with limited English proficiency across early childhood service areas. Families with children with special needs and those living in rural communities also reported access challenges.



“It’s unusual to find a translator who speaks your same language. Most translators are... American or they’re from other cultures, and then they don’t translate what they’re telling us, so that’s also difficult. There should be more people [who identify as] Hispanic [to translate], right?”

- FAMILY MEMBER

Families and communities support each other through informal communication networks when formal, institution-led communications fall short of reaching all. For example, many families spoke about how they rely upon word of mouth and familial and friend networks (e.g., Facebook groups) along with connections forged through well-established models for comprehensive services, such as Head Start and Early Head Start programs, to find out about early childhood resources and to get help when they face challenges with accessing services. Similarly, providers often use social media to connect with families in their community about their program or may reach out to the local school district to expand the reach of their communications. While honoring the value and necessity of these informal networks, institutions have a role to play in ensuring that families have a reliable and trusted source of accurate information about early childhood programs and services. State and local institutions can increase their awareness of existing networks, trusted sources of information, and platforms that families turn to most often and can build a more responsive and timely communication strategy that reaches families where they already are.

WHAT ACTIONS IS MINNESOTA PREPARED TO TAKE?

1.1.a Ensure all public-facing early childhood resources meet the linguistic and accessibility needs of their target communities. As part of a broader effort to ensure all expecting and parenting families can access information that impacts their children’s well-being, the state should continue to plan for and prioritize making early childhood documents and communications available in multiple languages, adhering to Americans with Disabilities Act guidelines, plain language standards, and other accessibility factors. State and local efforts in this area can be co-informing, as local agencies often have effective strategies for reaching their communities and state agencies can offer a model and guidance for consistent practices statewide to prioritize accessibility.

PHOTOVOICE SPOTLIGHT



Meeting the Needs of Minnesota’s Babies

"Recently, our foster care licensing agent sent us resources for finding baby formula. There is currently such a shortage of baby formula that parents are driving for hours, enlisting the help of friends and family, and joining Facebook groups to find the formula they need to feed their babies. To me, this shortage is one more way that society has not taken care of young families, new parents, vulnerable children, and birthing people."

- FAMILY MEMBER



1.1.b Work with state- and community-level partners to actively hire and promote individuals from underrepresented communities and enhance representation of communities in public-facing documents. As part of Minnesota’s ongoing commitment to transforming the culture of early childhood institutions to be welcoming for all, state leadership can model and offer clear guidance on how to recruit and retain people from communities that are underrepresented in government and agency roles while also working to incorporate appropriate representation of diverse communities in public documents and communications.²⁵

1.1.c Acknowledge, utilize, and build upon the resources that communities have already built and rely upon for information while prioritizing access to reliable information. Existing infrastructure and communication channels must be part of an overall strategy to ensure expecting and parenting families are able to connect to resources they need. This could include building relationships with trusted groups and leaders and disseminating information through established informal networks that are already considered reliable resources among community members. This could also include working with local agencies to actively recruit individuals from underrepresented communities to serve as cultural liaisons with families.

Who Is On Deck?

- Family and Community Resource Hub navigators, pending a sustainable funding solution
- Minnesota Departments of Education (MDE), Health (MDH), and Human Services (MHS) leadership
- Agency communications leads
- Children’s Cabinet
- Local early childhood service providers and community partners
- School districts
- Public health organizations
- Head Start and Early Head Start programs

How Will We Know We Are Making Progress?

We will see ...

- More visits to the Help Me Connect website
- More visits on Bridge to Benefits
- More families served through Community Resource Hubs
- More families receiving information about early childhood resources and opportunities in their preferred language
- More communication strategies aligned with data on how people learn about services (e.g., brief family surveys)
- More recruited and retained staff who are traditionally underrepresented across the early childhood system



Strategy 1.2

ELIMINATE BARRIERS TO ENROLLMENT AND PARTICIPATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES

HOW DOES THIS STRATEGY EXEMPLIFY THE STATES' GUIDING PRINCIPLES?



Address intersectionality



Uphold racial equity and dismantle structural racism



Practice geographic equity and responsiveness



Prioritize the whole-family system

WHAT ARE THE GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES?

Families continue to face long waiting lists and other challenges with getting and staying connected to services even after being identified. While strides have been made to provide assistance to families through Community Resource Hubs and positions dedicated to help with navigation, at the time of this report there is no identified sustainable funding for the hubs and a significant gap remains when it comes to ensuring services are ultimately received by those who are eligible. Even after completing paperwork, many families seeking assistance may face additional obstacles to getting services, such as transportation challenges, long waiting lists, or additional unknown requirements for eligibility. Other families receive limited or no response when they request help or services. Furthermore, too many families continue to struggle with navigating the complexities of the early childhood system and do not know where to begin looking for support, particularly for families already facing socioeconomic disadvantages.

Minnesota's 2020 needs assessment highlighted the inequitable access to available programs and services by race, geography, income, and type of programming needed. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has only underscored the need for streamlined program requirements, reduced burden on families, and improved collaboration across the early childhood system. While access is an issue for all families, these challenges are felt most acutely by Minnesota families with limited English proficiency, within areas without reliable transportation, with a need for special health or education services for their child, or simply without the resources and general flexibility required to successfully navigate the system.

The early childhood system needs to build the capacity to be agile and responsive to emerging issues facing expecting and parenting families. One of Minnesota's PDG B-5 guiding principles is to embrace a whole-family approach in the design of the early childhood system. This concept—also referred to as a multigenerational approach—is rooted in the understanding that families benefit from holistic service delivery, and it emphasizes creating opportunities for and addressing the needs of both children and the adults in their lives. Minnesotans described the need to dedicate resources to meet emerging needs, specifically child care, mental health services, housing supports, and intentional coordination of services for families affected by incarceration. For example, some spoke about their experiences with trying to access mental health services, with many families facing extended waits for appointments or diagnoses and poor coordination between various entities, such as schools and social workers. Others noted the severe lack of accessible and affordable housing for families and additional supports needed for those facing homelessness. There were also concerns about families having to meet too many eligibility requirements to be able to receive services such as financial support for their families. To improve outcomes in these areas,

the state’s early childhood system needs to ensure there is adequate agility, staff capacity, and resources to be prepared to continually assess who applies for and receives services and to evolve to match shifting needs of communities.

The way the early childhood care and education system is currently financed does not reflect the true cost of providing care, leaving providers with impossible choices and families without affordable options.

Currently, early childhood care and education services are funded based not on need but on available resources. This fact can lead to some communities and agencies being under resourced and overextended, while children and families are not necessarily getting the services they need. Unfortunately, families have long been made to stand in the gap of an inadequately funded system, bearing undue financial burdens and limited options. To make equity-informed decisions about funding that move the system forward, the state needs a complete and nuanced understanding about levels of funding required to meet the need for additional, high-quality early childhood care and education settings and home visitation—and it can lean on the February 2023 recommendations and implementation timeline of the Great Start for All Minnesota Children Task Force to define next steps. For example, in keeping with recommendations of the task force, it will be important to identify the per-child investment needed to expand all parts of the early childhood system (commensurately with the needs of varying communities) and fully fund the network of supports that Minnesota’s young children and families need to thrive. While increased funding for early childhood can be challenging, this type of investment in the early years has the potential to reduce costs in the long term for services such as child welfare, mental health interventions, special education, and more.



“With my experience with working with families, as far as making things easier for families, paperwork is a big issue for families looking to sign up for CCAP, medical assistance, things like that. Providers have found it very overwhelming. And if they don’t get their paperwork in on time, their services lapse and things like that. So it’s just been something that’s been hard for families. And I feel like [making the process easier is] something we need to think about more. Maybe it’s electronic or, if it’s not, maybe having someone to support the families when they are getting ready to sign up for services.”

- PROVIDER

WHAT ACTIONS IS MINNESOTA PREPARED TO TAKE?

1.2.a Create a supportive infrastructure for the continuation and expansion of Community Resource Hubs and Help Me Connect in Minnesota. To help ensure that families are successfully connected to services, it is important for the state to sustain and expand its pilot Community Resource Hub efforts that focus on helping families to navigate the full range of services for expecting and parenting families. Minnesota leaders can work to secure additional funding and resources to expand the reach of the Hubs, especially toward rural families, racially and linguistically minoritized families, and families experiencing poverty while also ensuring that the programs they refer families to are fully funded and available to meet the need. Hand in hand with sustaining the Hubs is continuing to support Help Me Connect as a navigational tool for those working with families.



1.2.b Strengthen the operational capacity of organizations implementing early childhood services to ensure a whole-child, whole-family approach to service delivery. The state can invest in organizational capacity and leadership to encourage collaboration and partnerships between programs and systems serving families. This can allow communities to promote practices that reduce churn and to better respond and generate holistic solutions to emerging needs for families. This could include efforts to expand mixed delivery as a statewide approach to early childhood, along with automated eligibility and/or an intentional alignment of eligibility requirements across services that families often need and utilize in tandem. Organizations working to implement community-developed solutions can benefit from long-term, sustained support from the state to forge strategic connections with other early childhood community partners in the health care, housing, and mental health fields, which can help them to be more agile and equipped to handle growing needs in these areas.

1.2.c Expand cost studies to better estimate the true cost of a full range of quality early childhood services. To address the chronic underfinancing of the overall child care system, DHS has already taken important steps to study the true cost of quality early childhood care and education. The state can look for additional resources to expand the scope of the study in the future to encompass a wider range of early childhood programs, including home visitation, mental health, Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC), food and nutrition benefits, and more. The results of this type of cost modeling can then be used to compare with existing public resources devoted to the early childhood system—for example, data included in the Minnesota Children’s Fiscal Map. This type of research provides a more realistic picture of the range of costs involved in operating and sustaining all types of early childhood services, and it can help decision makers determine what is ultimately needed to fund a system that is well resourced and works for all families.

Who Is On Deck?

- MDE, DHS, and MDH leadership
- Multiple agencies collaborating through the Children’s Cabinet
- Interagency Leadership Team
- Child Care Action Team
- Head Start Collaboration Office
- Local administrators (school districts, county health departments, and Community Resource Hubs)
- Local early childhood service providers and community partners

How Will We Know We Are Making Progress?

We will see ...

- More children enrolled in early childhood services relative to the number eligible (for programs with eligibility criteria) (e.g., an increase in the percentage of eligible children directly certified for school meals through the Medicaid program)
- A decrease in the average time to complete the MNbenefits enrollment process and an increase in the rate of successful completions overall

Strategy 1.3

EXPAND DIRECT SERVICE CAPACITY TO ADDRESS UNMET DEMAND ACROSS COMMUNITIES

HOW DOES THIS STRATEGY EXEMPLIFY THE STATES' GUIDING PRINCIPLES?



Address intersectionality



Acknowledge trauma and normalize trauma- and healing-informed practices



Prioritize the whole-family system



Respond to complexity with interagency collaboration

WHAT ARE THE GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES?

The overall capacity and distribution of vital early childhood services in Minnesota does not accommodate the number of eligible families.

The undersupply of early childhood services, particularly early childhood care and education settings across the state, was a key concern of many families and providers whose perspectives and experiences are reflected in the initial needs assessment and strategic plan, and supply

continues to be a challenge statewide. This issue is especially prevalent in rural communities, where low population density has kept services sparse and spread over large geographic areas. This creates conditions in which families experience isolation and young children are less likely to receive adequate services to support healthy, on-track development in the earliest years of life. Relatedly, broad swaths of families in Minnesota are living where there is a severe lack of child care, and the gap is even more pronounced when it comes to infant and toddler settings, settings that can adequately accommodate children with special needs, and settings with the capacity to integrate mental health services. A lack of appropriate early childhood care and education settings not only limits early learning opportunities for young children but also has major economic impacts for Minnesota families who need reliable child care in order to work.



BY THE NUMBERS


Prior to COVID-19, approximately 222,000 licensed child care seats were available in the state of Minnesota to serve the 419,000 children under age 6. Meanwhile, 76% of children under age 6 have all adults in their households as members of the workforce. While data is still emerging about how the pandemic and ongoing recovery efforts will ultimately impact these numbers, they clearly demonstrate that child care supply has not kept up with demand.^{26,27}

Twenty-six percent of Minnesota's young children live in areas that severely lack child care.²⁸ This refers to census tracts with more than 50 children under age 5 that either contain no child care providers or have more than 3 times as many children as licensed child care slots.²⁹

Families with children and youth with special health needs are more likely than families with children without special health needs to forgo needed services due to challenges with accessing care (e.g., long waiting lists, difficulty getting appointments, lack of engagement with early childhood care and education settings where they would likely be identified for additional services, etc.). An estimated 222,109 children and youth in Minnesota have special health needs, which include a range of chronic physical, developmental, behavioral, and emotional conditions.³⁰

Many partners spoke about the strain that the COVID-19 pandemic has put on an already fragile early childhood care and education system. A severe early childhood care and education crisis persists across the state, resulting in an overwhelmed workforce and an inadequate supply of programming to meet demand from families. This points to the need for an upstream solution to stabilize the sector and create a viable plan for addressing long-standing issues surrounding program supply.

PRIOR TO COVID-19, ONLY
222,000
LICENSED CHILD CARE SEATS WERE AVAILABLE IN THE STATE OF MINNESOTA TO SERVE THE
419,000
CHILDREN UNDER AGE 6

26% 
OF MINNESOTA'S YOUNG CHILDREN LIVE IN AREAS THAT SEVERELY LACK CHILD CARE

There is an opportunity for stronger connections between the early childhood system and other services that families rely upon. That linkage requires a better understanding of the capacity of state and local programs outside of the early childhood system that deliver the full range of services that impact expecting and parenting families—including housing, health care, mental health, and transportation. A more nuanced picture of what is available and where gaps remain would allow the state to coordinate and prioritize efforts to enhance programming across the board and to expand programming and resources efficiently and equitably. While efforts are underway to promote awareness and streamlined access points for early childhood services, such as the navigator positions offered through the Community Resource Hubs, navigation support is only effective if there are enough programs and services to accommodate families in their community. Furthermore, many families are limited in their ability to fully engage with early childhood opportunities due to a variety of other unmet needs. Inadequate coordination of programming within and beyond the early childhood sector has created a larger system that fails to support families holistically. Particularly during the pandemic, many community partners were overwhelmed with high demand for basic programs, including child health and well-being services, family stability and economic supports, child care assistance, and more.

WHAT ACTIONS IS MINNESOTA PREPARED TO TAKE?

1.3.a Expand research on early childhood care and education settings to better understand supply and demand. Building on initial efforts to understand the current supply of programs, the state can continue to create a more nuanced and dynamic picture of the evolving early childhood care and education landscape. This could include developing an ongoing way to collect data on licensed versus actual (including family, friend, and neighbor) capacity, supply by setting type and age group, and more. This type of information will help decision makers invest resources in a targeted manner, in

PHOTOVOICE SPOTLIGHT



A Challenging Road to Accessing Health Care

"Here are the challenges I went through on my road to enrolling my daughter into a comprehensive applied behavior analysis therapy program:

- Early childhood special education in her school can only afford to provide 1-hour-a-week therapy.
- Waiting 5 months to get into [Minnesota's] Medical Assistance program
- I needed to be very proactive with Hennepin County to get my daughter approved.
- There was a 19-month wait to be admitted to an intensive treatment program.
- Private practices don't accept Medical Assistance [payments].

The challenges I went through are very typical for families with autistic children. Furthermore, the needs and priorities don't differ across geographical locations. Everyone who applies to Fraser and Medical Assistance has about the same amount of wait time regardless of their race, income status, or geographical location."

– FAMILY MEMBER

accordance to timely and relevant data, and in keeping with its stated commitments to advancing equity and boosting overall system capacity.

1.3.b Increase capacity of the early childhood system to meet demand for a broad range of early childhood services.

The state can continue to scale successful efforts centered on a whole-family approach while examining emerging issue areas in which additional capacity is needed. Increased investments in early childhood services should prioritize communities who have historically had the least access.

1.3.c Address the full range of family service needs through coordinated, targeted investments.

It's important for Minnesota to acknowledge that this is an unprecedented time that requires different types of support to navigate the emerging needs for families and communities. A viable approach to improve coordination could include cross-training of staff, such as social workers and case managers, or colocating services to ensure a broader range of services are integrated or connected in the places where families are served. These strategies are already modeled through Community Resource Hubs, Head Start and Early Head Start, Full-Service Community Schools, and other efforts that prioritize a whole-family approach.



Who Is On Deck?

- Department of Employment and Economic Development
- MDE, DHS, and MDH leadership
- Multiple agencies collaborating through the Children's Cabinet
- Head Start Collaboration Office
- Department of Labor and Industry
- Minnesota Housing, Department of Transportation, and other state and local agencies broadly representing the interests of families and communities
- Business community
- Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System (ECLDS) governing body

How Will We Know We Are Making Progress?

We will see ...

- More early childhood care and education programming (i.e., child care, Head Start/Early Head Start, Pre-K) commensurate with demand by age group, setting type, and geographical location
- More early childhood services such as early intervention, home visiting, infant and early childhood mental health, and so on
- More expecting and parenting families referred to and receiving services to increase overall well-being, mobility, and family stability

PRIORITY AREA 2

Available Early Childhood Supports and Services Achieve High-Quality Standards by Meeting the Needs of Children and Families and Driving Toward Positive Outcomes



While it's integral to ensure that children and families are linked with early childhood services, the quality of these services is what will determine the degree to which children benefit. Across the programs and services that make up the early childhood system, quality standards are defined in a variety of ways. However, for the purposes of cross-system work, quality can be understood as the degree to which services meet the needs of children and families and lead to positive outcomes.

What Work Can We Build On?

A commitment to quality is built into the guiding principles and goals that form the foundation of current and ongoing early childhood efforts. Within the 2020 needs assessment and strategic plan, quality was defined by the early childhood community—the key tenets being trusting relationships, safe environments, professional experience, and linguistic and cultural responsiveness. Quality-advancement efforts defined in the strategic plan have been built upon the recognition that any serious effort to address the quality of early childhood service delivery must (1) involve the various programs and sectors with which expecting and parenting families interact in the first 5 years, and (2) focus on elevating the standard of quality for those who have been marginalized within the early childhood system. This shared recognition sets the stage for ongoing quality-improvement efforts that center equity, cultural and geographic responsiveness, and the total experience of families as they interact with multiple services and agencies.

The process to define quality for the purposes of strategic action included perspectives and lessons from community-based initiatives. For example, in 2021 the state engaged in a community-driven process resulting in *Advancing a Racial Equity Action Plan for Parent Aware: Minnesota's Quality Rating & Improvement System*.³¹ The group prioritized four racial-equity strategies as the focus of the plan: (1) development and implementation of discipline and expulsion policies, standards, and strategies for prevention; (2) implement change to increase availability and accessibility of resources for family child care programs and child care centers, including programs not participating in Parent Aware, and track demographic data to ensure historically underserved communities receive equitable resources; (3) conduct community engagement for recommendations and implement racial-equity-focused improvements to Parent Aware standards, indicators, and policies; and (4) update professional development requirements to align with Minnesota's Knowledge and Competency Framework for Early Childhood Professionals, with topics of culture, race, racism, and bias in early childhood. These and other efforts exemplify the state's readiness to confront the status quo and ensure that concepts of quality in early childhood services are aligned with what communities value and what drives toward positive outcomes for young children.



There are some emerging opportunities to support early childhood workforce initiatives. Minnesota’s grant work to support the early childhood workforce advances aspects of *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8*³² and planning for next steps for state agencies. This includes increasing the recruitment and retention of a diverse and well-qualified early childhood workforce through Grow Your Own initiatives and housing child development associate’s degree programs in high schools. The work also supports building the knowledge and competencies of early childhood educators through job-embedded training and supports and within teacher preparation programs to include supporting multilingual learners, cultural responsibility, and trauma-informed work. Finally, the work includes a review of early childhood licensure requirements and career pathways. It is also of note that in recognition of workforce compensation issues as inextricably linked with program quality and effectiveness, new federal Head Start guidance will allow programs to reduce enrollment in favor of increasing staff compensation, creating an opportunity to move toward compensation parity between early childhood and elementary school teachers.

Moving Forward

Within a comprehensive early childhood system, quality is best defined through the experiences of families as they interact with services and through evaluation of progress toward the state’s vision for young children with an equity lens. That is, through strategic integration of diverse family and community perspectives, the state can move toward a shared understanding of quality that aligns the program characteristics and outcomes that are most important to the state with those that are most important to families and communities—and it can enact strategies for advancing quality that are responsive and meaningful for all.

Reimagining and building the high-quality early childhood system that the state envisions for young children must begin with the recognition of how systems have been designed, resourced, and implemented in ways that have limited quality overall, and especially for communities that have been marginalized. This recognition will require the continued willingness to rethink long-standing definitions of quality that center dominant culture values and potentially exclude key quality factors that lead to positive outcomes for diverse families. This effort will require a deepened commitment among state and local systems leaders not only to listen to families but also to work toward substantive changes based on family and community voice—particularly those voices that have most often been excluded.

The strategic refresh presents an opportunity to move the state forward in improving quality across the full range of child and family supports by looking toward approaches to quality that are system wide, outcomes focused, and equity informed. The strategies described here rely on the willingness to break agency and program silos to (1) address challenges with the workforce, (2) improve quality assessment of community-driven early childhood efforts, and (3) advance equitable solutions for quality monitoring and improvement.



STRATEGIES AT A GLANCE

2.1 Invest in building the capacity of the early childhood workforce.

2.2 Develop mechanisms to successfully evaluate and scale effective early childhood programming.

2.3 Create equitable systems to support all early childhood programs and services in improving quality.

Strategy 2.1

INVEST IN BUILDING THE CAPACITY OF THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE

HOW DOES THIS STRATEGY EXEMPLIFY THE STATES' GUIDING PRINCIPLES?



Create conditions for belonging, inclusion, and trust



Uphold racial equity and dismantle structural racism



Practice geographic equity and responsiveness

WHAT ARE THE GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES?

There is a shortage of well-prepared, well-compensated, and well-supported early childhood service providers. Among the most powerful predictors of quality in early childhood programs are the characteristics and professional preparation of the adults who provide these services. However, the recruitment, preparation, and retention of the early childhood workforce have historically been a challenge and have only worsened in the wake of COVID-19.³³ For example, in 2020 child care staff were much more likely than usual to become unemployed, and employment rates among child care providers remain 20% below pre-pandemic levels.³⁴ More broadly, the overall shortage of direct service providers who work to support the health and well-being of families and communities is well documented in Minnesota. When there is a shortage of available staff, it impacts the ability of children and families to access the services they need. It strains program resources that are often already stretched thin, and it undermines the relationships and continuity between service providers and the children and families they serve, which is a foundational component of high-quality programming.

At the root of the recruitment and retention issue is the reality that compensation for those who work directly with young children and their families is extremely low. For example, the median hourly wage for Minnesota early childhood care and education providers is between \$12.06 and \$17.46, depending on degree and role, and the lowest wages go to assistant teachers and home-based providers.³⁶ For Head Start, wages are somewhat higher, averaging from \$13.51 to \$23.60 per hour.

Across the board, those who work in direct service of young children and their families (as teachers, care providers, specialists, home visitors, and more) are among the lowest paid professionals overall. Low wages and lack of benefits (e.g., health

insurance, paid time off, etc.) not only discourage Minnesotans from entering the early childhood field but also keep qualified professionals from staying and advancing inside the system. For Minnesota to attract and retain early childhood professionals, the system must be reshaped to include reasonable working conditions and compensation that is commensurate with the level of knowledge and skills needed to facilitate the learning and healthy development of Minnesota’s youngest residents. Fully addressing Minnesota’s workforce capacity issues in ways that will be sustainable and drive toward improvement across all child outcomes will require ongoing financial investment along with infrastructure to allow professionals to have the time and capacity to engage in learning while working full-time, as well as managing the other aspects of their personal lives.

“We also need new providers to reflect the communities that we’re serving.”

- PROVIDER

More early childhood providers are needed that reflect the racial, cultural, and linguistic characteristics of the communities they serve and can provide culturally competent and trauma-informed services. This includes early childhood care and education providers, home visitors, specialists delivering a range of early intervention and early childhood special education services, health and mental health specialists, parent educators, and others who directly serve expecting and parenting families in Minnesota. Providers are best prepared to offer high-quality, family-centered services when they can meet the needs and preferences of families with diverse lived experiences, backgrounds, and home languages. Both families and providers discussed the need for more-diverse staff that work directly with young children and families in their community—especially staff who are reflective of their communities, speak families’ home languages, and understand the impact of systemic racism on historically marginalized families and communities. Professionals must also receive support for their own mental health and to provide trauma-informed assistance to children through access to IECMHC.

PHOTOVOICE SPOTLIGHT



Child Care in Minnesota is in Crisis—And Families and Providers Need Support

"As we come out of the pandemic, the need for consistent and supportive adults in children’s lives is more important than ever. Child care in Minnesota is in crisis. Family child care [programs] are closing at exponential rates. Staff turnover in child care centers is astronomical. Parents often cannot afford care or even find care for their children. This causes them to resort to piecing together care with multiple caregivers, further increasing the turnover in children’s lives. Care in early childhood seems very expensive because the cost of the care is the burden of the parent. Parents push for their children to start school because it relieves a significant child care burden in their lives. Earlier academics is not a solution to child care in the youngest years. How child care is funded and regulated needs to be modernized. Child care is the more important work because children’s brains develop the most in the first three years and child care allows parents to work and support their families."

- PROVIDER

“[For] a lot of our minoritized families, diverse families ..., I think they still feel like, ‘Is this safe for me to be participating in, accessing any level of care?’... I think we have a lot of families that talk about even going out to a store can be very confronting and worrisome, let alone coming in to just see your teacher or your doctor or whatnot. I think that is definitely a big hurdle that we all need to kind of come to grips with and figure out. How can we do better? It’s [not] enough that we just say words, ... we actually need to turn this into actionable items and show people that we do value them.”

- PROVIDER

There is a need to increase the preparedness of the existing early childhood workforce to support an increasingly diverse population of Minnesota families.

While there have been some statewide efforts to support developing more culturally competent early childhood leaders (e.g., development of language-based competencies by WIDA within the Knowledge and Competency Framework, equity-focused learning experiences for agency staff and other investments in race equity and implicit bias training, National P-3 Center regional leadership training, inclusion coaching, and mental health coaching for providers), there is limited data about how these efforts impacted participants and, more important, how those efforts trickled down to individuals who work directly with families and children and increased quality service provision overall. The evidence suggests that there is more work to be done, as families—particularly families whose primary language is other than English and families who have children with disabilities—shared they don’t feel comfortable asking or know how to ask for the supports they need. Moreover, in small and/or rural communities, Black and American Indian families as well as other families of color have shared that they do not feel safe at local child care centers, and many shared their failed attempts to search for programs that supported antiracism education and diversity. For many of these families, relying on FFN care is the best child care solution.

PHOTOVOICE SPOTLIGHT



A Push to Prioritize and Elevate Black, Indigenous, and People of Color Educators in Early Childhood Education

"Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) families and educators in leadership in early childhood programs build a sense of belonging for the children. When children feel a sense of belonging they learn to respect cultural differences. I have worked in early childhood programs for over 15 years, and I would like to see Minnesota increase BIPOC educators in early childhood settings. This means offering alternative opportunities for BIPOC teachers to obtain a teacher licensure or the education they need to lead a classroom. My kids in this picture represent freedom and happiness. All families desire to know their children feel a sense of belonging in their school programs."

- PROVIDER

“Racialized trauma is real in early childhood. Any education institution is guilty of being a White supremacist institution. Child care is not free from that. Child care started as a result really of slavery. And we haven’t moved away from some of those practices or value systems.”

- LOCAL LEADER

WHAT ACTIONS IS MINNESOTA PREPARED TO TAKE?

2.1.a Build a pipeline of early childhood service providers with a focus on recruiting racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse providers. The state could continue current efforts (including initiatives such as Retaining Early Educators through Attaining Incentives Now (R.E.E.T.A.I.N), T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood, and Grow Your Own) and leverage upcoming federal investments and partnerships with higher education, philanthropy, and other interested entities to strengthen career pathways. Efforts should be designed or expanded to be inclusive of multiple sectors represented in the early childhood system. Pathways should be designed with diverse and nontraditional students in mind and should include elements of support such as mentoring and apprenticeship, scholarships or student loan forgiveness, and opportunities for leadership development and growth to attract and retain diverse early childhood professionals. *Minnesota’s Roadmap for Equitable Economic Expansion* specifies that funding should be provided to incentivize an increase in needed child care programs— including extended hours of care, culturally and linguistically affirming care, rural care, and infant care—and that families need to be allowed to use funding for alternative care options such as FFN care.



2.1.b Strengthen retention efforts by addressing compensation issues and offering accessible supports for professional advancement. The state can build on prior and ongoing efforts (especially the work of the Great Start for All MNChildren Task Force: Workforce Compensation and Supports working group convened between February and October 2022) to examine wages across all settings and sectors, with attention to compensation disparities across the racial and cultural backgrounds of early childhood service providers. From there, the state can create incentives along with adequate financial supports to programs working to elevate compensation, increase access to benefits, and address disparities.

2.1.c Expand targeted professional development focused on antiracism, cultural responsiveness, and trauma-informed practices. While there is a plan to update requirements, training, and supports for early childhood care and education providers who participate in Parent Aware, the state could further develop this work by expanding cross-sector professional development offerings for the variety of professionals who work with expecting and parenting families and young children. A successful effort would include follow-up and/or coaching to help providers put new ideas, actions, and strategies into practice and would document the impact of equity-focused professional learning for purposes of storytelling and ongoing supports offered to families. For example, a promising practice is the expansion of IECMHC.

Who Is On Deck?

- MDE, DHS, and MDH leadership
- Child Care Aware of Minnesota
- Institutes of Higher Education, including tribal colleges
- Multiple agencies collaborating through the Children’s Cabinet
- Achieve: Minnesota Center for Professional Development
- Other invested community organizations

How Will We Know We Are Making Progress?

We will see ...

- Higher overall compensation levels (including access to health insurance and other benefits) among direct service providers offering services to expecting and parenting families
- A reduction in staff turnover among direct service providers offering services to expecting and parenting families
- More financial and nonfinancial supports for diverse and nontraditional learners in higher education programs focused on early childhood professions
- More providers of racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse backgrounds entering, remaining, and advancing in early childhood professional roles
- An increase in families’ reported sense of safety, partnership, and belonging in early childhood spaces, particularly among racially, culturally, and linguistically minoritized families; low-income families; and families of children with special needs



Strategy 2.2

DEVELOP MECHANISMS TO SUCCESSFULLY EVALUATE AND SCALE EFFECTIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMMING

HOW DOES THIS STRATEGY EXEMPLIFY THE STATES’ GUIDING PRINCIPLES?



Practice geographic equity and responsiveness



Respond to complexity with interagency collaboration



Create conditions for belonging, inclusion, and trust

WHAT ARE THE GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES?

Better systems are needed to adequately and equitably measure the success of community-driven initiatives. Having made significant initial investments in community-driven early childhood initiatives, the state faces the challenge of how to evaluate outcomes of those initiatives to inform sustainability efforts and set priorities for future programming. Early childhood leaders expressed the need for consistent mechanisms to evaluate programming for the purposes of data-based decision-making. Meanwhile, this evaluation needs to align state goals with local interests and priorities and avoid placing undue burden on community-based organizations. The recent evaluation of the Community Solutions for Healthy Child Development Grant revealed that while the intention for supportive, community-centered, equity-informed evaluation practices exists, there are significant capacity gaps both at the state and local levels that make it challenging to implement such practices in a consistent and systematic way.



More support is needed to sustain and expand current early childhood initiatives. As PDG B-5 and COVID-19 recovery funding comes to a close, there will be a need for specific effort and planning to ensure that successful initiatives and local innovations can continue and grow in response to the need. For example, nature-based early learning programming was identified within local communities as a priority during the pandemic, which drew state support and has seen great success in recent years. Programs have attributed improved mental health outcomes, classroom behaviors, and teacher retention along with other positive impacts to the implementation of nature-based programming for young children. Now, as initial funding for this effort recedes and demand increases among families, there will be a need for planning and support to ensure programming continues.

Particularly in local, community-based organizations where capacity can be stretched thin by the ever-present demands of service delivery, reporting, and the consistent search for long-term funding, there is a need for additional support to focus on sustainability. Local grantees and early childhood leaders have expressed the need for more opportunities to engage in peer learning and support through communities of practice and other shared platforms as a way to strengthen their practice and improve outcomes. Meanwhile, additional capacity is needed within local implementing organizations to effectively tell the story of their efforts and outcomes surrounding early childhood initiatives as a way of garnering additional financial and nonfinancial supports.

“The Community Solutions grant program [has] been doing a lot of great work. And they directly involve families and children. And I think that has allowed them to tailor the programs and services, because they are in constant communication with the people that they serve. I’m seeing those small glimmers of success. And right now, they’re very place based and community based. But imagine if we could ... scale some of those ideas. ... How would we share information across the state?”

- LOCAL LEADER



WHAT ACTIONS IS MINNESOTA PREPARED TO TAKE?

2.2.a Establish and/or strengthen partnerships with organizations in the lead of community-driven initiatives to support continuous improvement and growth. State leadership may have opportunities to leverage its influence and relationships to better support local implementing organizations. For instance, the state may engage additional partners—such as higher education, philanthropy, and business leaders—with aligning interests to generate vital resources for local efforts in accordance with the state’s values and goals.

2.2.b Increase capacity at the state level to offer targeted supports to state and local entities implementing early childhood initiatives aligned with the state’s goals. This could include expanding approaches to community-centered evaluation, providing ongoing technical assistance, convening meetings for the purposes of peer learning, centralizing development opportunities and supports, and more to build the capacity of implementing agencies for storytelling, fundraising, strategic partnerships, and other sustainability efforts.

2.2.c Prioritize existing and new funding to support the expansion of early childhood initiatives with demonstrated success. The state has the opportunity to channel existing and new funding streams toward initiatives with a demonstrated track record of meeting the needs of expecting and parenting families and promoting positive outcomes. This should include a continued commitment to evaluation in partnership with local initiatives and a primary focus on channeling resources to initiatives developed by and for communities of color and other groups that have historically been marginalized.

Who Is On Deck?

- MDH, DHS, and MDH leadership
- Multiple agencies collaborating through the Children’s Cabinet
- State agency communications teams
- Local early childhood service providers and community partners
- ECLDS governing body

How Will We Know We Are Making Progress?

We will see ...

- An increase in the presence and longevity of state-supported local early childhood initiatives
- More public and decision-maker awareness of effective local initiatives
- More consistent initiative evaluation and higher quality enhancement supports across programs and over time

Strategy 2.3

CREATE EQUITABLE SYSTEMS TO SUPPORT ALL EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS IN IMPROVING QUALITY

HOW DOES THIS STRATEGY EXEMPLIFY THE STATES' GUIDING PRINCIPLES?



Respond to complexity with interagency collaboration



Uphold racial equity and dismantle structural racism



Prioritize the whole-family system

WHAT ARE THE GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES?

There are some key challenges with the effectiveness of the state's voluntary quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) that impact providers and families. Partners mentioned the challenges of Parent Aware, Minnesota's QRIS system. From its inception, a primary intention of QRIS has been to assist families in locating high-quality early childhood care and education programs. However, Parent Aware is a voluntary system and only 30% of eligible programs are currently rated. As a result, there is not a sufficient number of high-quality, Parent-Aware-rated programs available to allow some families to fully access their early care and education choices.

In addition, providers that do opt in have shared that they often find it difficult to access the financial resources needed to meet quality benchmarks. This is particularly true for providers serving lower-income communities, where they may rely heavily on child care subsidies and cannot reasonably demand higher tuition rates from families. Providers who do meet quality benchmarks receive grants, get tiered reimbursement from the child care subsidy system, and have access to Early Learning Scholarships. However, for some providers who lack personal financial resources to outlay necessary funds as they go through the rating process, the current reimbursement-based incentives do not make attempting to meet the current QRIS-defined standards worth the time and financial strain, and there is not enough support from the state to individual providers. High provider caseloads for Parent Aware coaches results in providers not receiving adequate support to improve quality. Several providers participating in focus groups shared that they felt like giving up on trying to access resources and supports through Parent Aware.



Beyond quality monitoring within individual programs and parts of the system, the state lacks a coordinated way to evaluate the effectiveness of the early childhood system as a whole. For those who have been entrusted with building a cohesive early childhood system, the ability to monitor progress toward implementation and population outcomes (e.g., enrollment of eligible families across various early childhood services, children who receive an early childhood screening, children in good health, families reached, etc.) would enable the state to better prioritize resources toward a high-quality, effective system and toward their overarching vision. While program quality benchmarks can be a good proxy for how likely the program is to meet its goals and benefit young children, this data offers little information about how strong the early childhood system is and to what degree children and families are actually better off as a result of state-supported programming. MDE has developed the Successful Learner Equation,³⁸ which is shifting away from the terms “ready for school” and “kindergarten readiness” and instead reinforces that it is the responsibility of adults to be ready to support each child. This framework recognizes four interconnected components that—working together—foster successful learners: ready families, ready communities, ready schools and programs, and a ready state with ready systems.

“When I first opened [my center] was right at COVID. So ... everything was virtual. I went through the building-quality program that Minnesota Parent Aware offers, which was nice. But I mean, for myself, even that was incredibly difficult to navigate. I was constantly sending emails and getting responses back saying, ‘Oh, I’m not the right person, but this person can help you.’ [E]ventually you almost feel like you just want to give up, like you just kind of bounce around a lot.”

- PROVIDER

“We need to talk about quality and how we get quality out through all of those systems.”

- LOCAL LEADER



WHAT ACTIONS IS MINNESOTA PREPARED TO TAKE?

2.3.a Implement recommendations in the Parent Aware Racial Equity Action Plan, including further exploration, planning, and resource development as needed to address the most pressing issues.

Building on the prior review of Parent Aware, the state could invest additional resources to address various concerns about the effectiveness and equity consciousness of the state's QRIS. This could include a reimagining of the funding and incentive structure to make the system more accessible and useful to both providers and families and to ensure that resources are distributed equitably across Minnesota communities, with a particular focus on communities that have been placed at a disadvantage by the current system.

2.3.b Initiate an outcomes-based quality-monitoring structure across the early childhood system.

Building on the precedent and prior efforts established through the currently defunct initiative Results for Children, this could involve establishing a set of shared outcomes focused on both child and family goals and collectively owned by the various implementing agencies and bodies who have a stake in the early childhood system. These outcomes would be aligned to the collective vision for the early childhood system set forth through PDG B-5 and would offer a unifying framework for evaluation of the quality and effectiveness of the state's early childhood system.



Who Is On Deck?

- Minnesota Management and Budget Results Team
- MDE, DHS, and MDH leadership
- Multiple agencies collaborating through the Children's Cabinet
- State agency communications teams
- Child Care Aware of Minnesota
- ECLDS governing body

How Will We Know We Are Making Progress?

We will see ...

- A higher number/percentage of providers from historically underserved communities participating in QRIS
- More hours per provider of technical assistance delivered by Parent Aware staff to providers from historically underserved communities
- More quality-improvement resources and other financial incentives for early childhood care and education providers in historically underserved communities participating in QRIS
- Increased efficiency in cross-agency efforts due to a unified focus on specific child and family outcomes

PRIORITY AREA 3

Families and Communities Play an Active Role in Informing the Planning, Implementation, and Oversight of State and Local Early Childhood Efforts



When family and community members are given consistent and meaningful opportunities to share their experiences and perspectives, they are able to become active partners in the design and implementation of an effective early childhood system. Within an early childhood system that is truly family centered, family and community members drive early childhood policies and practices that work.



What Work Can We Build On?

Minnesota has prioritized a commitment to family engagement and incorporating family and community voice into planning and implementing initiatives. In the 2017 Early Childhood Systems Reform report, the collective of state early childhood leaders states its commitment to “partnering with families and communities to identify system barriers and working to align program requirements, funding structures, and policies so that we and our partners can better provide holistic, integrated services that recognize the interconnectedness of parents and children and advance equitable outcomes for all.” In accordance with this commitment, Minnesota leaders within and beyond the early childhood system have consistently prioritized outreach to families and communities to inform strategic efforts. During the needs assessment and strategic-planning processes in 2019–2020, the state gathered insights from many family and community partners, such as grandparents, parents, people residing in tribal nations, early care and education staff, staff of community health organizations, and advocates. Over 74% of participants in the community engagement sessions were expecting and parenting families.³⁹ This shared commitment and strong precedent established among early childhood leaders lays the groundwork for continuous improvement of family and community engagement efforts.

One statewide effort of note is the recent Parent and Family Leadership initiative. The purpose of the Parent and Family Leadership Initiative Training is to develop a support infrastructure empowering parent and family leaders to participate in state and local planning processes, task forces, and working groups to promote equity and help identify and eliminate bias in program services and policy development through cocreation with families and communities. The initiative aims to build understanding and create the will to make change to better support families and communities so families have what they need to thrive. Multiple federal, state, and local programs require or request parent and family participation on advisory councils, in working groups, and within other similar bodies, and the Parent and Family Leadership Initiative Training supports this goal.

Minnesota has also demonstrated a commitment to supporting community-led initiatives designed to improve community outcomes through efforts designed by and for specific communities. Participants in interviews and focus groups identified several ways in which the state has utilized community voice to support best practices and solutions designed by and for local communities. Two of the most discussed initiatives were the Community Resource Hubs and the Community Solutions for Healthy Child Development Grants. The Hubs help expecting and parenting families navigate the early childhood and family-serving systems and get connected with appropriate services and supports. The hub model demonstrated that having community leaders and trusted local partners in place to help families navigate the system can lead to greater reach and impact of early childhood programs and services. Although hub models and partnerships vary across counties and states, the key success factor is that the Hubs (and their backbone entities) are rooted in shared goals, strong local-state partnerships, and an understanding of the local community’s unique needs and assets.⁴⁰

The Community Solutions for Healthy Child Development Grants focus on supporting community-led health and wellness initiatives that improve child, family, and community well-being and reduce health and other disparities impacting American Indian communities and other communities of color. Based on the needs assessment and goals identified in the strategic-planning process, the Community Solutions for Healthy Child Development Grants program was expanded by braiding grant funds from MDE with state funding managed by MDH to avail resources while avoiding undue administrative burden. The Advisory Council, a committee of community members, has been instrumental in leading the work and amplifying conversations about the potential of community-led solutions to create lasting change. The council continues to provide guidance to the state on equity in grant making, inclusion in state processes, and a vision for the bigger picture of change for Minnesota.⁴¹ These and other examples set a clear precedent for future state action and represent the state’s belief in the efficacy of communities to design effective, human-centered programming that enables families to thrive in the context of their culture and community.

There are opportunities for family and community members to participate in the early childhood system through family advocacy and engagement groups. Another way in which the state has intentionally planned for family and community members to play an active role in decision-making and oversight is through the convening of the State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care and the Children’s Cabinet Advisory. The council includes individuals with the perspective of youth and families, diverse and underrepresented communities, and tribal and county leadership. They provide recommendations and guidance to the Children’s Cabinet. In addition, organizations within the state of Minnesota have supported providers and families with opportunities and resources to advocate for child- and family-centered policy. Participants in focus group sessions mentioned events hosted by Kids Count on Us at the Capitol, the National Alliance for Mental Illness and Chambers of Mothers for the benefit of families and providers. Based on community feedback, some providers and families are taking advantage of these opportunities to share their needs and take their concerns regarding the early childhood system and workforce to state legislators in efforts to actively to shape new legislations.

“[We are] really trying to focus in on that community voice to help us build what we had envisioned for the preschool development grant to do. And I think that’s where you see many of the projects come through, like the Community Resource Hubs. We heard very clearly from community that there are local solutions to this, that we don’t necessarily need the state to just swoop in.”

- STATE LEADER

“We have a lot of internal conversations ... about what we’re seeing, having a lot of specialties, even within our primary care clinics. Like what are the trends that we’re seeing and how do we think we can maybe be flexible to address certain things? I get a lot of the emails from [the National Alliance for Mental Illness]. So anytime there’s new legislation that’s up, I feel like they do a fantastic job with, here’s your script, send it to these people. And I do my very best to always send it in and put a little blurb about who I am and what I do to make it not just another form letter but [an explanation of] why it’s actually really important to me. Yes, this is really good legislation, but it’s near and dear to me for these reasons.”

- PROVIDER



PHOTOVOICE SPOTLIGHT

Advocacy Opportunities for Families and Providers

"I have concerns as an early childhood professional. These concerns are the challenges educators, families, and children face in the early childhood sector. As I began searching for solutions, I discovered advocacy opportunities. Advocacy opportunities give individuals the opportunity to voice issues they have on any topic. Some of the issues in early childhood are a lack of representation in educators for BIPOC communities, the child care desert in rural areas, staff shortages, low wages for educators, and not enough mental health support for children, families, and educators.

This picture represents a solution to these issues. Early childhood professionals have the opportunity to reach out to their state representative to do something about these issues. I encourage providers to speak up, learn about leaders in your district, and take concerns to the Minnesota Capitol. We can see change if we are at the table. I've participated in four advocacy events at the Capitol.

Last year, we were chosen by Zero to Three to represent the state of Minnesota in an initiative titled Strolling Thunder. This initiative was created to support families and 0- to 3-year-olds by encouraging families to speak to legislators about issues we want to see changed for children and families. I shared my family's experience with mental health and the lack of representation in BIPOC clinicians that support families of color. As a professional, I encouraged the state congress to provide support for early childhood programs, educators, and families so they feel supported as they navigate through the trauma."

– FAMILY MEMBER AND PROVIDER





Moving Forward

When it comes to engaging families and partnering with communities, there is an inherent need to balance local autonomy with appropriate state oversight and support. While families and communities possess unique wisdom gained through generations of overcoming challenges and rearing children in accordance with their values, communities largely did not create the most prominent challenges they are currently facing in relation to health, economic, and educational disparities. Indeed, those who have historically held and controlled state resources and decision-making authority have done so in a way that has deeply marginalized communities of color and others who have experienced social and economic injustice, and those in leadership must now work in targeted ways to reverse the harm done.

This requires continued engagement and accountability on the part of state leadership to act in power with communities toward shared goals. It requires that those in a position to direct resources do so in a way that is informed by communities, by an authentic commitment to equity, and by collective knowledge from the field about what strategies and actions have been most effective in similar contexts. It requires a commitment to inviting families into collaborative partnerships in formats that make sense for them and that reduce rather than exacerbate power differentials between families and decision makers. Ultimately, for state leaders, it means a commitment to a reflective practice of learning and action toward effective and dynamic family and community engagement solutions.

STRATEGIES AT A GLANCE

3.1 Provide clear pathways for families, providers, and community members experiencing inequities due to race/ethnicity, geography, and income to engage in decision-making processes that impact them.

3.2 Engage in trust building with communities.

3.3 Enact a consistent approach for multidirectional communication with communities regarding early childhood efforts.

Strategy 3.1

PROVIDE CLEAR PATHWAYS FOR FAMILIES, PROVIDERS, AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS EXPERIENCING INEQUITIES DUE TO RACE/ETHNICITY, GEOGRAPHY, AND INCOME TO ENGAGE IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES THAT IMPACT THEM

HOW DOES THIS STRATEGY EXEMPLIFY THE STATES' GUIDING PRINCIPLES?



Create conditions for belonging, inclusion, and trust



Uphold racial equity and dismantle structural racism



Acknowledge trauma and normalize trauma- and healing-informed practices

WHAT ARE THE GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES?

There is an ongoing need for diverse perspectives and voices to be integrated in decision-making. While the state of Minnesota has committed to and put effort into including diverse voices in decision-making, more work needs to be done to recruit and engage families who may feel that their voices do not matter because of their circumstances or because they've experienced a history of feeling unheard when attempting to share their perspectives and experiences. Specifically, according to community conversations informing this plan, more can be done to ensure representation of Black and American Indian families as well as other families of color; linguistically isolated families; LGBTQ families; and families impacted by incarceration. It is important to note that state early childhood leaders have taken significant initial strides to be more inclusive, including a strong recent focus on families experiencing incarceration. There has been substantial cross-agency investment of time and resources to generate opportunities and pathways to engagement in the early childhood system for these families. This is an example of the state's recognition that, particularly in communities that have historically been marginalized, there is a need to intentionally invest in human resources, capital, and time to develop meaningful, multidirectional partnerships and communication with families who the state has thus far failed to reach.

“I think by design that we don't think about children and families affected by incarceration because we have been taught that we just lock them up and we get them out of our communities. . . . And nobody really stops to think, ‘Oh, most of those people in there are parents. Where are their children? What are their children's needs? What are those resources? What has happened when this dad has become incarcerated and now loses his job, loses their house?’”

- LOCAL LEADER

State and local entities can play a significant role in helping to prepare diverse families and community leaders as advocates and in making these opportunities more inclusive and accessible. While there have been some opportunities for family and community members to participate in advocacy events, focus group participants also noted some challenges they faced in participating. Families and providers of color shared experiences of being the only person of color at the table and thus feeling dismissed or pressured to represent the definitive perspective of others like themselves. Sharing the stories of families and providers of color can have an impact. But when advocates usually are White providers and family members, the experiences of providers and families of color may not get the attention and support needed to influence change at the policy level. It is likely that this will continue to be the reality until there is a serious effort to make advocacy spaces more accessible to people of color and other historically marginalized communities, including support for efforts aimed at preparing and building capacity within families, providers, and community members to advocate effectively.

“BIPOC voices are demanding a seat at the table. Oftentimes when I sat at the table, I [was] the only BIPOC voice. . . . Research shows that the early childhood field is led by White women. These women are often the voices at the table when decisions are being made. I’m challenging the state of Minnesota to elevate the voices of the BIPOC community, because this allows systems to hear other perspectives that will not align with the dominant culture.”

- PROVIDER AND FAMILY MEMBER



BY THE NUMBERS

In the 2020 needs assessment, the grant identified an intent to focus on diverse populations:

- Racially diverse children and families
- Children and families living in rural Minnesota
- Children and families living in poverty
- American Indian families
- Children who speak a language other than English
- Children with special needs and their families
- Children and families experiencing homelessness and housing instability



Any serious effort to address challenges to a community requires wisdom, perspective, and voice of those most affected.

DISPARITIES AMONG THESE FOCAL POPULATIONS

Minnesota has one of the lowest infant mortality rates in the United States; however **infant mortality rates are higher among Black and American Indian infants than White infants.**^{42, 43}

It is estimated that **73% of youth experiencing homelessness are Black, American Indian, and other people of color.** Additionally, **35% of youth experiencing homelessness are expecting and parenting families**—in Hennepin County, the percentage is nearly 50%.⁴⁴

Child care in rural Minnesota has declined, with a steeper decline after 2020.⁴⁵

Black and Hispanic/Latine children with special health needs are more likely to be uninsured than White children with special health needs.⁴⁶

Considering that many of the challenging issues that arise for families in the first five years have an outsized impact on families of color, it is essential that the same communities are well represented in decision-making and solution-seeking efforts. Indeed, any serious effort to address challenges specific to a community requires the wisdom, perspective, and voice of those most affected.

There is a need for more racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity within state- and local-level decision-making bodies. Participants in focus groups shared a sense that decisions were frequently being made about early childhood services that affect them by people whose identities and backgrounds are very dissimilar to their own. Many shared a desire to see more diverse state, regional, and local staff that interact and engage with community members. When families who may already be reluctant to participate in community engagement opportunities or utilize information and resources designed to support them continuously feel that their realities and interests are not well understood or represented by decision makers, state and local entities miss out on countless opportunities to support and learn from families.

WHAT ACTIONS IS MINNESOTA PREPARED TO TAKE?

3.1.a Partner with local faith-based and cultural institutions and other trusted community-based organizations to engage with more-diverse family and community members in assessment and planning processes. Recognizing that current efforts are a good start but that there is an opportunity to expand the reach of family and community engagement, state leadership can leverage their relationships and influence to work toward a more equitable reality through stronger partnerships. This could include tapping into existing outreach platforms, such as social media groups, community meetings and gatherings, word of mouth, and more. This should always include strategies that honor the unique capacities and contributions of diverse families and minimize harm.

3.1.b Offer technical assistance and capacity-building opportunities to recruit and support families and providers as leaders within formal advocacy and decision-making spaces. Building on former and current efforts to support families as leaders, especially the Parent and Family Leadership Initiative training, this would include a strategic use of resources and partnerships to build a pipeline of parent and community leaders who can effectively act as liaisons between their communities and decision makers at the local and state levels. Ongoing support and engagement of well-prepared family and community leaders can be an essential step toward creating a channel for multidirectional communication that consistently informs an evolving early childhood system. A successful effort would include strategies to overcome barriers to accessibility for people of color and other underrepresented groups.

3.1.c Revise recruitment and hiring practices within state agencies to increase racial, linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity in keeping with the characteristics of communities served. Representation matters to those who are most impacted by decisions made about the B-5 system. Engaging diverse communities would be strengthened by ensuring that staff have diverse experiences and backgrounds and can make culturally competent connections with family and community members. Recent planning and recommendations in partnership with New Practice Lab point to specific opportunities for state agencies to operationalize this commitment.

“Just in general, ... there’s a vibe you get if you don’t see any Black [people] or people of color who are putting out the messaging, or even in the messaging, if you don’t see anything that gives you an indication that this is someplace that is not only inclusive but centers the experiences of people who are within this culture. That’s definitely something that I look to.”
- FAMILY MEMBER

Who Is On Deck?

- Governor’s Community Engagement Office
- MDE, DHS, and MDH leadership
- Multiple agencies collaborating through the Children’s Cabinet
- Advocacy groups
- Human resources departments within state and local agencies

How Will We Know We Are Making Progress?

We will see ...

- Implementation of the lessons learned from the Minnesota’s PDG Indigenous Evaluation, community-developed metrics, and co-created evaluations
- More families who are engaged in outreach designed to inform planning and improvement (especially families of color, linguistically diverse/isolated families, LGBT families, and families impacted by incarceration)
- Families in priority populations doing well based on current measures of success
- More staff members who represent diverse racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds
- More racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity among active members of advisory boards and committees

Strategy 3.2

ENGAGE IN TRUST BUILDING WITH COMMUNITIES

HOW DOES THIS STRATEGY EXEMPLIFY THE STATES’ GUIDING PRINCIPLES?



Acknowledge trauma and normalize trauma- and healing-informed practices



Respond to complexity with interagency collaboration



Create conditions for belonging, inclusion, and trust

WHAT ARE THE GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES?

Trust from the community is impacted when feedback loops are not closed.

Providers and families indicated that they are interested in using their voices during community engagement opportunities. However, it was also very evident that they wanted to know how the concerns and experiences they shared impacted change. When families and community members share their voices and do not see how their efforts or perspectives were leveraged in making change, it impacts trust and willingness to be involved in engagement opportunities in the future. Institutions that represent power and authority own the responsibility to rebuild trust through authenticity and transparency, particularly in communities that have historically been marginalized, where trust has already been eroded due to underinvestment of resources and services, resource apartheid, mass incarceration, and immigration practices.



Families and communities lack clarity about what state and local agencies are prioritizing and why. In addition to sharing how family and community voices impacted change in the state’s early childhood system, the general public could benefit from hearing and seeing examples of the strategic efforts occurring at the state, regional, and local levels. Family members and providers shared that they are often in the dark when it comes to decisions that are made, how they will be impacted, and how decisions and efforts are related to the challenges they are facing on a daily basis. Intentionally highlighting the work that is being done may give family and community members a better understanding of how state and local agencies are utilizing existing resources, who is involved in decision-making, and what substantive changes they can expect as a result.

“Follow up, give me a little something. Let me see some material change that we can actually see based on this complaining or filling out these surveys or whatever. That, in general, will be a start. We’re just looking for a start.”

- FAMILY MEMBER



“[I] think that the other feedback from our council was people don’t know you’re working together. They still think—and this is not a criticism of PDG, it’s state government in general—nobody’s working together. You’re just doing your thing. And they said [that] this is really an opportunity to kind of shift that narrative, that agencies can work together. You talk to each other, things happen, and work is getting done. That’s really helpful for kids and families.”

- STATE LEADER



WHAT ACTIONS IS MINNESOTA PREPARED TO TAKE?

3.2.a Ensure that all family and community engagement efforts at the state level include a focus on “closing the loop” with communities. As a key component of strategic B-5 efforts, there is an opportunity to share how the state has directly responded to the input of families and has drawn on families’ expertise, experiences, and wisdom to plan for meaningful progress. This could include specific shifts within state agencies (e.g., dedicated time and resources for community feedback loops, increased communications support within and across agencies, improved communication with decision makers outside the early childhood system, etc.) as well as established mechanisms and platforms for this type of communication, with the necessary infrastructure to create and sustain them.

3.2.b Develop an interagency communication strategy to promote public awareness of strategic early childhood effort. This could include communications about resources secured by the state, plans to address concerns that are important to families and communities, and more. It could also include shared messaging and storytelling platforms to shed light on new initiatives, policy “wins,” and data about how initiatives are driving toward better outcomes for expecting and parenting families in Minnesota.

Who Is On Deck?

- MDE, DHS, and MDH leadership
- State agency communications teams
- Multiple agencies collaborating through the Children’s Cabinet
- Public television, radio, and/or other relevant media platforms
- Local early childhood initiative leaders and community partners

How Will We Know We Are Making Progress?

We will see ...

- An increase in the number of communications and amount of contact the state has with communities post engagement
- More families participating in outreach opportunities
- More-frequent engagement of families by state agency staff in relationship-building activities
- Increased public awareness of statewide early childhood priorities and initiatives

Strategy 3.3

ENACT A CONSISTENT APPROACH FOR MULTIDIRECTIONAL COMMUNICATION WITH COMMUNITIES REGARDING EARLY CHILDHOOD EFFORTS

HOW DOES THIS STRATEGY EXEMPLIFY THE STATES' GUIDING PRINCIPLES?



Practice geographic equity and responsiveness



Respond to complexity with interagency collaboration



Create conditions for belonging, inclusion, and trust

WHAT ARE THE GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES?

There is a need to coordinate and align community engagement efforts associated with various early childhood initiatives.

According to the state's commitment to multidirectional communication with families and communities, there have been and will continue to be a significant number of community engagement opportunities. While each implementing agency may query families for its own purposes, families have expressed that they experience a lot of overlap in the information they are asked to provide, which creates confusion as to where and to whom their thoughts and perspectives are going. In addition, there was a clear message from Minnesotans that the same communities are being tapped for input and feedback regularly, while others are being overlooked. The findings pointed to a clear opportunity to identify ways in which multiple state and local agencies can plan community engagement in coordinated ways to maximize data received from families and not overtax certain communities with multiple engagements or the burden of speaking on behalf of other families.

Despite the amount of family and community outreach, there are challenges to deriving and then scaling sustainable solutions from community perspectives.

For state agencies, while there is strong evidence of community engagement, there seems to be limited ability to apply solutions that genuinely respond to community voice. When communities share the successes and challenges of their work, they often touch on realities that are systemic and beyond the scope of the implementing agency collecting the information. For example, when asking families about their challenges related to the accessibility of early intervention services, leaders are likely to hear ways in which geographic location of services and lack of transportation create barriers for some families. With the recognition that the challenges expecting and parenting families face are compound and mutually reinforcing, there is an opportunity to create a system for multidirectional communication that considers not

“We still have a long way to go to coordinate efforts across departments in our community engagement. . . . One of the things I’m keenly aware of is that oftentimes we’ve heard from them what they need, but we keep going back out and asking. And my concern, I guess, is that we not overburden the same community members with our questioning. And I don’t think we’re there yet.”

- STATE LEADER

only how information is collected but also how it is processed and applied across multiple state agencies and implementing bodies, both within and beyond the early childhood system. Such a system would equip early childhood leaders with a broader pool of context from which to design family-centered solutions.

Community engagement occurring at the local level is experienced as inconsistent in reflecting the state’s guiding principles and goals. While it is important for community-driven efforts to incorporate family engagement, there could be opportunities for local efforts supported by the state to better reflect agreed-upon processes and values. If state-level early childhood leaders seek to improve not only their own actions, but also the quality of the experience for families and the overall outcomes of community engagement, state and local efforts to incorporate community voice are equally important. Both efforts should receive support and some level of oversight from the state.

WHAT ACTIONS IS MINNESOTA PREPARED TO TAKE?

3.3.a Coordinate family and community engagement events and opportunities that are broadly aligned with the state’s goals and intentions for statewide early childhood initiatives. This could look like regularly occurring early childhood town hall meetings, storytelling platforms, or other outreach offered in various in-person and virtual spaces, giving families the opportunity to speak about a variety of issues that are impacting their parenting experiences in the early years, including their experiences accessing and utilizing state-supported early childhood services.

3.3.b Create shared platforms to analyze and apply findings from community engagement opportunities. This would include dedicated action to make meaning of family and community input and derive potential actions on the part of the state as a collective of early childhood leaders. This would enable early childhood leaders to utilize relevant data and information to make community-informed decisions within and across multiple agencies and organizations. It is important to note that this would require an investment in agency and interagency capacity to create the needed infrastructure (see 4.2.a).

3.3.c Convene regional and local early childhood leaders for technical assistance and support with family and community engagement practices. Intentional approaches to oversight and capacity building can create a more consistent experience for families and can ensure that local implementers are acting in alignment with the state’s values and standards for equitable community engagement. Meanwhile, local implementers can engage with the state to encourage mutual accountability and ensure state-level guidance is responsive and aligned with local needs, preferences, and values.

Who Is On Deck?

- MDE, DHS, and MDH leadership
- Multiple agencies collaborating through the Children’s Cabinet
- State agency communications teams
- Regional and local early childhood leaders and community partners

How Will We Know We Are Making Progress?

We will see ...

- More cross-agency community outreach efforts
- More co-analysis and sharing of data from community engagement across state agencies and departments
- More consistency in the type, methods, and frequency of family and community engagement opportunities within local communities
- More multidirectional communication via established communication platforms between families and early childhood leadership bodies

PRIORITY AREA 4

A Sustainable and Comprehensive Statewide Infrastructure Enables the State to Implement a Streamlined Early Childhood System



In the coming years, it is critical for the state to put a sustainable and comprehensive infrastructure in place to ensure the early childhood system continues to drive positive outcomes for children and families. Key to the success of the system and the execution of the strategies and actions identified in this strategic refresh is the state's ability to increase alignment and effectively coordinate efforts, ensure adequate funding is channeled into the system, and collect good information to make timely and conscientious decisions.

What Work Can We Build On?

The vision of PDG B-5 and lessons learned from pandemic recovery can be carried forward. The 2020 needs assessment revealed a vision of a coordinated, whole-family approach to early childhood and was realized through more cohesive state infrastructure, cross-agency participation, sharing of resources, and community-driven efforts set up by PDG B-5. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated greater flexibility of resources for programs along with the urgent need to enhance communications and focused collaboration at the agency level. These habits of strong collaboration are now in motion and have demonstrated what is possible through strategic coordination.

These conditions manifested a number of positive impacts, including leadership buy-in across government. A key asset for the state is the incredible level of buy-in for early childhood cross-system alignment that was built through the implementation of the 2020 strategic plan. As a result of PDG B-5 and increased emphasis on cross-agency collaboration facilitated by the Children's Cabinet, there is greater awareness of early childhood systems work among key champions and stronger relationships across Minnesota's early childhood leadership. Minnesota leaders have indicated a strong interest in overall sustainability, including finding ways to continue pandemic-era flexibilities for programs and identifying strategies to fund and maintain key agency positions that have been essential to successful coordination—even after the PDG B-5 funding cycle ends. Partners also spoke about the value of dedicated funding and multiple staff positions across agencies specifically tasked with interagency coordination and alignment (e.g., PDG B-5 coordinator).

Minnesota has demonstrated a strong commitment to a coordinated early childhood vision through its embrace of whole-family efforts, targeted universalism, and ongoing efforts to streamline program eligibility through data-sharing. For example, the use of the targeted universalism approach is evident in the state's support for community-driven initiatives, including the Community Resource Hubs and the Community Solutions for Healthy Child Development Grant. While both of these efforts share common policy goals and strong local-state partnerships, the local partners in each of these programs have developed unique and holistic strategies to impact child and family outcomes in their communities. Recognizing that the best way to support young children is to support the whole family, Minnesota agencies have also cultivated programs that strengthen families through a multigenerational approach. State agencies continue to explore and encourage continuous learning with ECLDS and related data-sharing efforts to simplify programs, practices, and policies for the end users of the early childhood system—Minnesota's expecting and parenting families.



The state is actively exploring governance options and how changes potentially impact early childhood programs and services. Minnesota has a long history of exploring various governance structures, including the recent Management Analysis and Development (MAD) report on state-level governance of early childhood programs in response to a 2021 requirement from the Minnesota legislature.⁴⁷ While the report stops short of offering a recommendation for which governance model should be used, stating that the “choice of governance model cannot ensure improvements to early childhood programs and systems,” it captures perspectives from several partners about the impacts of different governance models. For example, the report discusses the value of determining key priorities for the early childhood system before selecting the governance model—a critical goal toward which this strategic refresh represents an important step. It also emphasizes building upon what’s been done, supporting partner engagement, and linking governance changes to more resources for early childhood.

The state has already engaged in cross-agency sustainability planning efforts. In April 2022, MAD worked with PDG B-5 agency leads, other state officials and staff, and community partners to develop a set of sustainability planning steps as part of the *Minnesota Preschool Development Grant Sustainability Planning Guide*. As part of that work, Minnesota’s PDG B-5 agency and project leads and MAD identified 11 programs, initiatives, and efforts supported by PDG B-5 to sustain beyond the federal grant along with recommended next steps. As it relates to funding for the early childhood care and education sector, initial work has been done to analyze state investments using the newly developed Minnesota Children’s Fiscal Map.⁴⁸ The vision for this effort is to better understand existing funding streams and determine opportunities to align or change existing funding models to fit with a larger strategy for ensuring accessible, high-quality early childhood care and education for all families. This analysis will be used to inform coordinated policy and budget development.

Moving Forward

As in any state system, challenges often persist in building overall system capacity to address issues related to governance, alignment, funding, and data. Creating the early childhood system that Minnesota envisions for its children and families will require continuous coordination of funding streams and administering state agencies. Regardless of coordination and efficiency, however, to make progress toward a stronger and more equitable early childhood system, the state must increase the overall level of funding allocated—including providing funding to create the necessary infrastructure to take effective action on the strategies within this plan. Furthermore, building a stronger early childhood system will require increased attention to data-driven decision-making and the resources, processes, and collective will to utilize data efficiently across various state and community contexts.

Through this strategic refresh, the state has an important opportunity to address these challenges head-on. The true challenge is that change requires a multifaceted commitment and persistence to see the commitment through by informed leaders with the power to make decisions. To build on the commitment to equity, there must be action now and in the future to overcome existing barriers within the system. This action will require the vision and courage to challenge the status quo on behalf of children and families.



STRATEGIES AT A GLANCE

4.1 Seek diverse and stable funding to sustain early childhood efforts.

4.2 Maintain and improve upon the cross-sector alignment and collective decision-making structures solidified by PDG B-5.

4.3 Strengthen data-driven decision-making across the early childhood system.

Strategy 4.1

SEEK DIVERSE AND STABLE FUNDING TO SUSTAIN EARLY CHILDHOOD EFFORTS

HOW DOES THIS STRATEGY EXEMPLIFY THE STATES' GUIDING PRINCIPLES?



Uphold racial equity and dismantle structural racism



Prioritize the whole-family system



Respond to complexity with interagency collaboration

WHAT ARE THE GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES?

The improvements made and needed to the state early childhood system cannot be reliant upon temporary federal funding. Pandemic recovery funds from the federal government resulted in an unprecedented infusion of resources into the early childhood system to stabilize communities and address urgent priorities during the public health crisis. These resources were essential because they provided temporary program and funding stream flexibility to build infrastructure, enhance sustainability planning, and pilot new community-driven initiatives. However, these federal investments are not intended to sustain the system long-term and should not be relied upon by the state for this purpose. Rather, state efforts initiated through PDG B-5, federal relief funds, and other resources should aim to develop a sustainably funded early childhood system. Partners are also concerned that the temporary nature of these funds leave many of their coordination and service delivery efforts at risk of scaling back or ending abruptly at a time when the communities being served are only starting to see results of stabilization efforts. This is particularly problematic when many gaps still remain in families' access to a broad range of comprehensive services. Minnesota leaders have an opportunity to identify sustainable funding streams to permanently support comprehensive early childhood services.



There is a danger of losing the political will and momentum built over the past few years for early childhood systems building. Partners, particularly at the state level, cautioned about losing momentum when promising efforts are underway but so much is still needed to improve the overall early childhood system. There is also the recognition that this type of long-term systemic change takes time, and stopping or slowing down state efforts at this point may squander the valuable partnerships and work implemented over the past two years, eroding the trust that has been built thus far. Others indicated there is a disconnect between what partners and agencies observed as success stories with notable positive impacts on communities and the messaging and communication required to build good will among the larger public and legislators with decision-making power. Therefore, it is important for the state to improve leaders' capacity for strategic communication and storytelling to ensure the messaging on effective policy solutions is clear and impactful, leading to a greater likelihood for future resources.

“There has been a wealth of resources actually in the last two years that has allowed us to do things that I think were successful. I don’t feel confident that any of those things will maintain as we move into sort of an endemic phase in response to COVID. So I worry a lot that our increased access to supports and services was a temporary reprieve.”

- STATE LEADER

“This huge infusion of federal resources, significant state resources as well, being invested and ... the way that the pandemic also pulled back a lot of other bureaucratic processes that otherwise impede the speed of progress, that’s created this opportunity now of possibility. ... It would have been a generational change to achieve before [what] we’ve seen happen over the last two years.”

- STATE LEADER



WHAT ACTIONS IS MINNESOTA PREPARED TO TAKE?

4.1.a Commit more resources to proactively sustain the early childhood system. State leadership should continue to dedicate staff time and resources to looking to the future and forecasting needs, gaps, and system improvements as well as identifying potential funding opportunities to address issues and implement solutions. A clearly defined process can be used to proactively alert agency leadership about new funding opportunities being made available to states and develop a coordinated strategy to apply for funding. In addition to public resources, state leaders can also build relationships with local and regional philanthropic organizations with an interest in improving the early childhood experience for children and families. Leveraging these types of public-private partnerships can help the state to build connections and infrastructure that support ongoing evaluation, as well as storytelling and messaging regarding the successes of early childhood efforts that can drive more-sustainable funding at the state level. These efforts could build on initial efforts surrounding the Minnesota Children’s Fiscal Map and be expanded to encompass all sectors within the early childhood system.

4.1.b Prioritize strengthening connections with the state legislature through agency government-relations staff and the Children’s Cabinet policy director. State policy makers are in a prime position to identify potential funding streams and legislative opportunities that are aligned with and can reinforce the state’s ongoing efforts to coordinate early childhood services, particularly those that are showing positive outcomes for their constituents. Minnesota state agency leadership should continue to build relationships with agency legislative staff and the Children’s Cabinet policy director to ensure they learn about emerging opportunities and can be ready to share relevant information and progress updates with legislators and other decision makers as these policy and funding decisions are being made at the state level.

4.1.c Establish mechanisms to guide ongoing messaging efforts that accompany the pursuit of funding opportunities for the early childhood system. The entities that have been key to successfully advancing system coordination, including the Children’s Cabinet and agency government-relations staff, may benefit from a formal local-state mechanism (e.g., through an interagency liaison) to more intentionally connect and streamline the strategic messaging for policy makers, philanthropy partners, and the general public. These communications (e.g., testimony by community partners and families) can also support the advocacy needed to pursue potential funding opportunities by helping to showcase the work and promote external communication on the policy wins borne out through PDG B-5 efforts and subsequent coordination.

Who Is On Deck?

- MDE, DHS, and MDH leadership
- State agency legislative and government-relations staff
- State agency communications teams
- Multiple agencies collaborating through the Children’s Cabinet
- Early childhood advocates

How Will We Know We Are Making Progress?

We will see ...

- More state funds dedicated to early childhood programs
- Increased philanthropic and other private sector engagement with the early childhood system
- Fewer bureaucratic and administrative barriers to the timely delivery of resources to programs
- An increase in the presence and longevity of state-supported early childhood programs
- More-frequent relationship-building and educational contacts between policy makers and both advocates and agency government-relations staff
- More early childhood “champions” in the state legislature

Strategy 4.2

MAINTAIN AND IMPROVE UPON THE CROSS-SECTOR ALIGNMENT AND COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURES SOLIDIFIED BY PDG B-5

HOW DOES THIS STRATEGY EXEMPLIFY THE STATES' GUIDING PRINCIPLES?



Prioritize the whole-family system



Respond to complexity with interagency collaboration



WHAT ARE THE GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES?

The ongoing potential for changes in leadership at the state level creates an even greater sense of urgency regarding systematizing existing coordination efforts for the early childhood system. Minnesota's current coordinated approach includes early childhood programs spread primarily across MDE, MDH, and DHS, but the state lacks a formal office that some states use to promote cross-agency coordination. Minnesota's Children's Cabinet, along with the enhanced funding and resources of PDG B-5, has played an integral role in pushing the state's coordination efforts for early childhood. However, there could be expanded opportunities for key leadership within the early childhood system to increase the system's influence in state budget and allocation decisions.

Not all public programs and agencies currently benefit from the practices and culture developed as part of PDG B-5. Partners spoke about the incredible value of PDG B-5 resources and structures in promoting interagency collaboration. One state leader stated they would like to see PDG B-5 activities "just be the way we do business." However, all state programs and agencies could benefit from the lessons learned regarding cross-agency coordination, community engagement, and a whole-family approach to service design and delivery. There is a need to ensure these strategies are well documented and embedded across state government to continue connecting what has been learned across state agencies well after the PDG B-5 grant ends. To do so, there will be a need as PDG B-5 funding comes to an end to sustain financial support within and across agencies to enable and incentivize continued cross-agency collaboration.

"How do we be intentional about using that information and transferring that to the content experts? Because for example, CCAP might not be directly involved in the hub model, but their work directly impacts providers and families. So how do we make sure that they see themselves in this space here and utilize some of the things that we've learned in PDG?"

- STATE LEADER

“We’ve been able to fund positions in agencies and in the Children’s Cabinet that are tasked with coordination. So it’s part of their job description to do this coordination. Those types of positions with that authority and task is another factor. So if there are ways we can figure out how to maintain those positions beyond the life of the PDG, that would also be impactful.”

- STATE LEADER

WHAT ACTIONS IS MINNESOTA PREPARED TO TAKE?

4.2.a Build capacity within and across state leadership to support and sustain ongoing cross-agency collaboration. The state can consider ways to expand and solidify cross-agency decision-making structures to ensure the progress made by PDG B-5 is not only sustainable but expanded with a whole-family approach. This can include providing leaders across state agencies—along with the Children’s Cabinet, which is viewed as an integral support for cross-agency coordination—with protected meeting space and time to regularly convene to discuss a set of shared child and family outcomes and goals. For example, as supported in the MAD governance report, the Children’s Cabinet and/or other state leadership bodies can continue to build and codify their role in cross-agency coordination and alignment to ensure continued influence on budget allocations and prioritization of funded efforts. Dedicated staff positions to champion and support ongoing interagency coordination and communication is also critical to sustain after PDG B-5 funding ends. These positions and the Children’s Cabinet not only need adequate funding and staffing but also must have sufficient organizational authority to effectively drive improvements in coordination that rise above individual agency and/or program interests.



4.2.b Promote the strategic refresh as a guiding document across all early childhood programs and services. The state can take steps to ensure that all content experts at the agency level see themselves in the strategic refresh and are able to utilize what has been learned through PDG B-5 efforts. This might include an expansion of the types of program leaders who are involved in cross-agency meetings to deepen communication and shared knowledge to all levels of implementation.

4.2.c Implement steps outlined in the Minnesota sustainability planning guide. The process the state has already taken to identify the most feasible, suitable, and desirable elements of PDG B-5 that should be sustained puts the state in a strong position to implement the next phase of this work. Specifically, the state should focus on identifying resources to fully implement the steps outlined in the sustainability planning guide (see the Minnesota Sustainability Planning Guide: Recommended Next Steps).

MINNESOTA SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING GUIDE: Recommended Next Steps

The process and ideas that emerged from this sustainability planning effort have helped Minnesota advance priority elements of its federally funded PDG B-5 work and allowed PDG B-5 leads to identify a number of recommended next steps:

- Develop a cross-agency communications plan
- Complete an analysis of the Minnesota Children’s Fiscal Map to better understand cross-agency financing structures for insights into financing processes and opportunities for funding
- Create sample position descriptions to help sustain full-time work hours important to cross-agency coordination
- Create road maps for IT projects
- Document lessons for equitable grant making learned from PDG B-5 programs and initiatives
- Create a community engagement plan
- Develop a plan to sustain cross-agency governance of early childhood programs and initiatives



Who Is On Deck?

- Multiple agencies collaborating through the Children’s Cabinet
- MDE, DHS, and MDH leadership
- PDG B-5 program leads

How Will We Know We Are Making Progress?

We will see ...

- More-efficient and more-effective cross-sector meetings
- An increase in staff capacity within key state agencies
- Increased familiarity among state early childhood leaders of the strategies and priorities defined in the strategic refresh

Strategy 4.3

STRENGTHEN DATA-DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING ACROSS THE EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM

HOW DOES THIS STRATEGY EXEMPLIFY THE STATES' GUIDING PRINCIPLES?



Prioritize the whole-family system



Respond to complexity with interagency collaboration



Acknowledge trauma and normalize trauma- and healing-informed practices

WHAT ARE THE GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES?

Regulatory constraints pose barriers to levels of data-sharing that could enable coordinated, data-driven decision-making. Data-sharing laws in Minnesota have not been modernized in several years and are still viewed as overly restrictive and a challenge to comprehensive collaboration by state agency staff. These constraints, while initially developed to protect health records and privacy, prevent public agencies from sharing needed information about families served through the early childhood system. This lack of flexibility, both in the laws and also in the interpretation of laws, creates a barrier for the state to improve the overall data infrastructure, streamlining data processes, and strengthening coordination.

There is a need to improve the culture surrounding data usage at all levels and center key data in early childhood decision-making.

Data-sharing within the early childhood system allows for better cross-agency planning and more seamless and stable service delivery at the community level. While Minnesota has shown innovations in building a comprehensive early childhood data infrastructure, partners described how more could be done to streamline the technology of cross-agency data systems, allowing them to more easily communicate with one another. For example, enhancements to system interoperability could facilitate targeted sharing of individual data, such as individual household contact information, at the local and state levels to more effectively identify who is eligible for services and guide families to access those services. Local early childhood leaders discussed how efforts to improve data-sharing ultimately benefit families. With such improvements, families do not have to repeat their story or continuously prove their eligibility to receive services and partners can more easily coordinate referrals and services. At the state level, data can be used across agencies to inform policy decisions, including where resources are going to be most impactful, and to share outcomes and success stories with policy makers and other external audiences.

“Figuring out how to make referrals, how to share data, what that looks like from a privacy perspective, recognizing that it’s oftentimes to the benefit of that kiddo, of that family, so that they don’t have to tell their story again, so that it makes it easier to coordinate care.”

- LOCAL LEADER

WHAT ACTIONS IS MINNESOTA PREPARED TO TAKE?

4.3.a Explore regulatory solutions to address data-sharing barriers. State laws can be examined with a specific early childhood lens to identify areas where changes may facilitate greater data-sharing across both local and state agencies. Early childhood leaders should continue efforts in partnership with agency-specific legal departments and the attorney general's office to create appropriate guidance for changes to eliminate undue barriers to data-sharing. Such changes may help community partners working at the local level to conduct more-targeted outreach and ease the complexity for families of navigating early childhood services.

4.3.b Continue to expand cross-agency infrastructure for sharing data. Better information leads to better decision-making on behalf of children and families. The state can continue to build upon the strong foundation of community-informed data-sharing that has already been established, increasing participation in data-sharing agreements to additional programs as part of a whole-family approach.

4.3.c Support the capacity of programs and communities to inform data collection and leverage data to support the effective delivery of high-quality early childhood services. The capacity to assess needs and evaluate current processes can be developed further at the program level through technical assistance and other tools. For example, communities of practice, technical assistance, and other capacity-building opportunities can help drive toward data collection and evaluation methods that are human centered and successful in informing improvements to service navigation and delivery.



Who Is On Deck?

- ECLDS governing body
- MDE, DHS, and MDH leadership
- MDE, DHS, and MDH legal counsels
- Attorney general's office
- Multiple agencies collaborating through the Children's Cabinet
- Local and programmatic early childhood leaders

How Will We Know We Are Making Progress?

We will see ...

- An increase in integrating and sharing data through use of a high-functioning, statewide, integrated data system
- Increased capacity at the local and program levels to collect and contribute meaningful, outcome-aligned data to the data system
- Increased capacity to use data regularly to inform critical decisions of state agency leaders, policy makers, community leaders, providers, researchers, advocates, and more

LOOKING AHEAD

Fulfilling the ambitious goals outlined in the 2020 strategic plan is a long-term commitment. The state has seen steady progress and documented success in the past two years, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, an ongoing racial reckoning, and changes to the economic and political climate. All the incredible strides made at the state and local levels point to the need to not slow down but double down on these efforts to ensure systemic change takes root. Minnesota leaders must continue building upon the foundation of authentic cross-agency collaboration, community partnerships, and enhanced service delivery for a high-quality, equitable B-5 system.



APPENDIX A

Methodology

SRC employed a mixed-method approach to gather insight from communities and partners and craft key takeaways. This approach included an in-depth document review as well as data collection and analysis from family and early childhood provider focus groups, state and local leader interviews, a photovoice project, and a survey.

DOCUMENT REVIEW

The project team conducted an in-depth review of existing data and pertinent documents and other materials related to the grant activities and strategic plan goals and objectives. This review of relevant documents and data was completed in an effort to get an in-depth understanding of the implementation of PDG B-5 activities and progress made toward meeting the grant's strategic goals.

COMMUNITY AND PARTNER ENGAGEMENT

SRC project team members with experience and training in qualitative data collection conducted the interviews and focus groups, which were each recorded and transcribed for analysis. The SRC team guided the interviews using protocols for questions designed specifically for this project. As an integral part of the qualitative data collection, interviews and focus groups provided an in-depth opportunity to understand the experiences of state and local leaders, providers, and families across the state of Minnesota. Demographic information was collected from both interview and focus group participants via a survey through a Google form.

RECRUITMENT

The project team worked closely with local communities in Minnesota to recruit state and local leaders, families, and providers to participate in interviews, focus groups, and the photovoice project. Recruitment efforts included flier distribution, cold outreach to Community Solutions for Healthy Child Development grantees, hubs, local child care centers, and a social media campaign. Project team members also contacted families and providers via cold outreach and through referrals from providers and other community members. A total of 130 invites were sent to various community members. Recruitment occurred between March 2022 and June 2022.

INTERVIEWS

In spring 2022, the SRC project team conducted 1-hour, one-on-one interviews guided by an interview protocol developed by SRC in collaboration with Minnesota PDG B-5 leads. One team member led the discussion and followed up with probes to ensure we received detailed information about state and local leaders' experiences. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were digitally recorded. Recordings were sent to a professional transcription company and transcribed for analysis.

13 INTERVIEWS WERE CONDUCTED
WITH **6** STATE LEADERS AND **7** LOCAL LEADERS

FOCUS GROUPS

The SRC project team facilitated 15 focus groups with families and early childhood professionals/providers. The discussion was guided by a focus group protocol. One team member led the discussion and followed up with probes to ensure we received detailed information about the experiences of the families and providers. A second team member distributed and collected exit surveys that gathered demographic information about the participants. This team member also monitored the time and Zoom chat function, managed the recording, and distributed incentives. Families and providers who identified as Spanish speaking were also provided with live translation from a Spanish-speaking SRC project team member. Participants received a gift card as an incentive for participating in the focus group. The focus groups lasted 60 to 75 minutes and were digitally recorded. Recordings were sent to a professional transcription company and transcribed for analysis.

PHOTOVOICE

Photovoice is a group method initially developed by Carol C. Wang and Mary Ann Burris in 1993 that adopts a grassroots approach to social change. Photovoice seeks to address a particular issue by giving cameras to people who are directly affected by that issue so they can document and communicate their experience through their own lens. The resulting photographs are exhibited for public display in an effort to engage the community in dialogue and facilitate positive social change.

In an effort to ensure the voices of Minnesota families and providers were elevated and Minnesota leaders' efforts remain relevant to the needs of families and providers, SRC used the photovoice group method to facilitate the strategic refresh photovoice project. Participants who self-identified as a family member or a provider were recruited and selected to participate in the project and were required to attend three sessions in which they were oriented to the project and photovoice methods, shared photos and experiences, and received feedback from the SRC project team.

Photovoice participants were asked to focus their photos and narratives on the following guiding questions:

- In what ways do families/providers feel supported? In what ways do families/providers feel undersupported?
- What do families/providers identify as the most pressing realities and needs?
- What factors play a role in how families access and experience programs (e.g., race, income, geography)?
- In what ways can family and community voices be better centered/elevated?
- How do the needs and priorities differ across geographical locations?

EXIT SURVEY

Surveys were distributed after focus group, interview, and photovoice sessions through a Google form. The survey form collected demographic information, such as participants' race/ethnicity, region, and number of young children in the home.

ANALYSIS

The project team used a qualitative analysis approach to analyze the data from existing documents, interviews, focus groups, and the photovoice project. The use of multiple sources of qualitative data (e.g., focus groups, interviews) allowed for triangulation of the data to help corroborate themes and phenomena that arose during the analysis.

40
**TOTAL NUMBER
OF PARTICIPANTS**

20 **FAMILY
MEMBERS**

20 **PROVIDERS**

APPENDIX B

Glossary

BLACK includes all people from African descent, including African immigrant and refugee communities.

BLACK, INDIGENOUS, PEOPLE OF COLOR (BIPOC) is an overarching term that includes Indigenous communities and Black, Brown, and Indigenous, API communities, immigrant and refugee communities, etc.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SYSTEM refers to the comprehensive system that serves children and their families from birth to age 5, including child care, food, housing, physical health, mental health, transportation, and other family services.

EQUITY is the goal and process of ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to attain their full potential and no one is disadvantaged from achieving this potential because of social position or any other socially defined circumstance (Minnesota Department of Health, 2017).

HEALTH is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

INDIGENOUS is an overarching term to describe populations in colonized places; it includes American Indians, Alaska Natives, Native American, Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders.

LATINE is used to describe any person of Latin American descent. This term is used in place of the gendered “Latino/Latina” to be inclusive of nonbinary, agender, queer, or gender fluid people.

TARGETED UNIVERSALISM is a policy framework whereby policies and programs are designed so that everyone can achieve a common policy goal through targeted, group-based strategies (Powell, Menendian, Ake, 2019).

WHOLE CHILD/FAMILY APPROACH is an approach that focuses on creating opportunities for and addressing needs of both children and the adults in their lives together, and recognizes that families come in different configurations. Also known as the Multi-generation or Two-generation approach.

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APPENDIX C

Photovoice

FAMILIES

"These are my son's favorite shoes. He loves them because they have magnets on them, and as an almost 3-year-old, he is fascinated with how things work, especially magnets. He's curious and yearns to learn in all different ways.

In so many ways, my son is ready for preschool. Unfortunately, in our small community there is only one facility that offers preschool for 3-year-olds, and it is offered twice a week (Tuesdays and Thursdays) from 8:15 a.m.–10:30 a.m. With our household of two working parents and two children under 3 years old, we are not able to make those small hours of preschool work. Our son is not going to attend preschool because of this, and it is disappointing to me. He won't be in school until he turns 5 and starts kindergarten.



Besides the limited hours of the only preschool offered in our small town, the service comes with a cost that has an hourly rate higher than my son's day care, not to mention we would still have to pay for 3 days of day care a week if he attended preschool and then have to have a parent home with him 2 days every workweek. There are no transportation options to take my son from preschool to his day care center as the two of them are located 30 minutes apart."

- KATHY

"I am going to discuss an identified need of the School Readiness Program in East Grand Forks, Minnesota. The School Readiness Program is run by the school district and has classrooms that are spread between the New Heights Elementary School, South Point Elementary, and Central Middle School. I have two sons who have attended preschool here (one of my sons is currently enrolled in the 4-year-old preschool class). I asked the three teachers of the classrooms housed at the Central Middle School location. They identified a number of needs, including an outside play structure for their fenced-in play area.

This photograph is the outside play area that is housed at Central Middle School. It is a medium-



sized play area with grass, a fence, and some outside toys. The identified need is for a play structure to fill this area because the 3- and 4-year-old children who attend preschool here do not have access to a climbing structure, swings, tunnels, or other structures for outdoor activities. They also have limited access to indoor play space because they are only allowed to use the gymnasium at the middle school before the school day begins due to time/scheduling constraints of the middle school schedule.

The classrooms housed at South Point Elementary School and New Heights Elementary School have access to the playground structures at those respective schools, an outdoor playground structure at Central Middle School would enhance the preschoolers' experiences. Children in this age range need active space in order to run and play and to work on motor development and also gain physical exercise to enhance physical and mental health. This need is greater in the wintertime because in our area (the far north Minnesota area, just south of Canada), we have snow on the ground from October through April or May. An outdoor play structure would mean that children would be able to make the most of their limited outdoor playtime."

- LACEY

"This is a picture of my 4-year-old daughter and one of the teachers at her preschool. We've recently been told by the school that she has very strong attachments to some of the teachers, and they are trying to encourage her to be more independent.



This was not surprising to us as we've struggled with our daughter's separation anxiety at home for several years. Her attachment to mom, and resulting distress when detached from mom, has been the source of countless tantrums. Our daughter was hospitalized with RSV and pneumonia in February 2019 when she was only 6 months old and spent 4 days in the PICU. COVID happened a year later. I can't help but wonder if those experiences had a lasting impact on her and the way she tends to depend on adults for support.

My wife and I found a child therapist and began to attend virtual sessions with our daughter approximately 1.5 years ago, when she was 2.5 years old. We saw her for about 10 sessions to help with separation anxiety.

While we felt supported by the therapist, we struggled to know how to best care for our daughter since with separation anxiety, too much attention and loving time spent together is the very thing that can cause future distress in a child. At the time, having additional assistance with an early childhood mental health screening could've been useful, but we didn't know if we were eligible for that service, or if it even existed. Having that information made available to us at the time of enrollment would have been useful, as we were unsure what resources were available to us because of our daughter's young age.

We were told by her day care providers that she struggled with separation anxiety, but their approaches tended to include spending more time with her and providing more individual attention. It was evident to us that our daughter's providers and child therapist had very different approaches, and we felt caught in the middle."

- PATRICK

"In the photo, our son Wyatt is playing with the colorful wood blocks. He is paying attention, laughing, and very interested in this game. We took him to the Minnesota Museum of Children. They designed a special area for babies 0–3 years old with lots of beautiful toys, a playground, and a water park. Our Wyatt was very happy to see many friends his age and see new toys. He was especially interested in the colorful blocks, which were easy to arrange. He played with those blocks for an hour. We are happy when seeing Wyatt happy.



We found out that babies are in need of social communication, and our Wyatt is very social. Every day I stay at home to take care of him, and it's just me and him in the house. He is well taken care of by me, but I recognize that it's not enough. He still needs friends to communicate with and needs some large areas where he can play toys with his friends. Things are this way because day care is expensive, and we can't afford it. Wyatt has to stay at home with me, and I have to quit my job to be a stay-at-home mom. Wyatt can't always be at home; he will need more friends his age to play with, and I will need to come back to work.

Those community spaces like this are very necessary. Day care shouldn't be too expensive, so parents can afford it. Then they can send their kids to day care where kids have friends to play with, and parents can go back to work. We can ask for decreasing the day care fee, so parents can afford it. We can also build more community areas, such as kids' parks or children's museums, so kids will have space to play, especially in winter."

- THI

PROVIDERS

"After a particularly difficult day of work of supporting a family facing homelessness, parental incarceration, and a mental health crisis, I was able to contact a mental health provider through my work to help me process the experience. Through a video chat session, she helped me by validating the experience, helped me accept the frustrations of the limitations of help I could provide, and helped remind me of coping strategies I later used to manage the stress. I was able to leave the workplace at the end of the day refreshed and in a healthy mental state to enjoy home time with my family. I was able to come back to work the next day feeling energized and capable of handling the workload for the day. The mental health consultant would later attend a home visit with me and the family to help with the mental health crisis the family was experiencing.



One changing trend among early childhood service providers is helping staff with the mental health stress that can often negatively impact their work. Often, staff who work in early childhood are regularly working with families who have experienced or are experiencing trauma. The regularity of hearing those families' stories, and seeing the physical and behavioral reactions of the children and family, cumulates on a provider's mental health, and some begin showing symptoms of a trauma victim. The secondhand trauma can lead to providing a lower quality of services and even burnout, potentially causing a career change for the employee and a higher staff turnover for the organization.

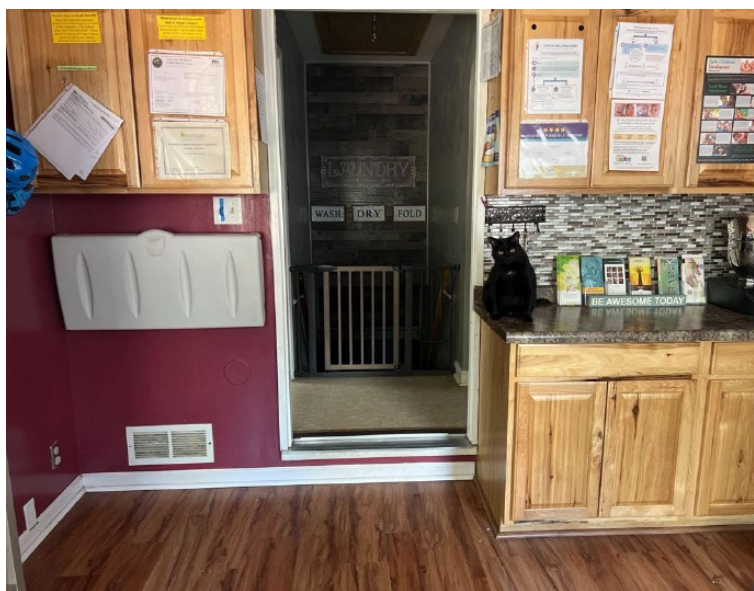
Early childhood service organizations are combating the effects of secondhand trauma by employing or contracting professional mental health providers for their staff and the families they serve. These mental health consultants are often available as needed, as my picture demonstrates here, but they also routinely meet with staff to consult on how to best support families facing unique challenges. Some mental health providers also provide ongoing training sessions for employees to teach skills that impact resiliency and mindfulness techniques to help negate the effects of secondhand trauma.

Mental health support should be routinely and freely offered to providers of early childhood services. Mental health support helps with the well-being of the employees and the families that are served. Secondhand trauma is more recently receiving widespread acknowledgement, and early childhood organizations should have the funding to obtain mental health support for their staff."

- JACKIE

"This is the entryway to my day care. This is the entrance parents use to drop off/pick up, sign kids in/out for care, etc.

If you zoom in, you'll see that the yellow signs on the left set of cabinets invite parents to use any products in that cabinet to change diapers/clean up bodily fluid spills. In my child care, I provide everything a parent needs: diapers, bottles, formula, wipes, sunscreen, etc. I do this because I never want anyone to feel ashamed that they don't have access for whatever reason to get to the store to buy diapers. I'm not going to shame them by writing on their kid "I NEED DIAPERS" as you may have seen before on social media. It's easier for me to provide it and write it off on my taxes rather than have five different kinds of diapers/supplies for kids. It would be nice if centers were able to provide those kinds of things as well. Maybe a parent works long hours and can't get to the store, doesn't have enough money on them, or doesn't have reliable transportation. It's late when she gets off work, and the last thing she wants to do is drag her tired children to the store for diapers. Or they might have them auto shipped from Amazon, but they're out of stock and that shipment is late. There are many different reasons why they may not be able to provide what their child needs, but they at least know that when they walk through my door, I have everything they need and there's no judgment.



On the right set of cabinets and on the counter, I have local resources for PAVSA, WIC, SNAP, Head Start, 211, HDC classes, and more. There are applications for SNAP and child care assistance as well as health care programs and also flyers for Parent Aware, Help Me Grow, and Community Action, which offers several programs to assist parents in buying a new car, buying a first home, opening a savings account, etc. While providing some of this information is a requirement of being a four-star Parent Aware provider, I do it more to help take a little bit of the edge off and make my house more of a one-stop shop for care. Not a "I have to drop my child off at Jaime's, then run to the store for diapers, and then make sure I get done with work early enough to have time to stop at the government services center to get recertified for child care assistance, I hope the bus isn't running late." Having an all-inclusive form for public assistance options and having phone interviews would help parents be able to fit all this in."

- JAIME

"ECFE is a term some have heard of, some haven't, and even having heard it, maybe people know nothing about it. As an early childhood educator, I know the importance of ECFE (Early Childhood Family Education) and the outreach and benefits it can bring to families across communities. This is a photo of the program brochures and resources at ECFE in the community. There are a variety of resources ECFE programs offer such as parenting classes, early childhood screening, connecting to Help Me Grow, outreach events, advertisements for food shelves, options for child care, and events in the community like summer in the park programs.



While there are many families that do take advantage of ECFE programs, there are a number of families who get wait-listed for the classes and programs offered. If families aren't even entering into the building to take a class, how can they even know about the resources and brochures shared here? Where else can we inform families new to the community about resources like this in order to make sure all families are getting access to the programs and opportunities they need? The ECFE program in the school district has grown tremendously due to the growth of the community in the last couple of years. It's awesome to see program expansion; however, when a program expands, this means more resources are needed—more staffing to meet the needs of all the families and more opportunities for families to connect to the community. When growing so quickly, we need to make sure people are still having opportunities to be a part of these positive programs in the school, but staffing can be a big issue for providing those opportunities."

- SARAH

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