

Minnesota Early Childhood Accountability System Framework and Plan to Get all Children School-Ready by 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Early Childhood Advisory Council
Accountability Committee
April 2010

Early Childhood Advisory Council

The Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) has been working to meet its goal of creating a high-quality early childhood system in Minnesota so all children are school-ready by 2020. The Council strives to make action-oriented recommendations that are supported by early childhood research that, if enacted, will make a substantial, positive difference in the lives of Minnesota's young children and families. The ECAC has endorsed the Ten Essential Elements of Effective Early Care and Education Programs from the 2006 Governor's Summit on School Readiness as the cornerstone of accountability for direct program services.

Committee Structure

The Council convenes four standing committees: Accountability, Access and Finance, Professional Development and Early Learning Standards. Committees are made up of community stakeholders from a wide variety of organizations, agencies and programs. The committees are charged with making recommendations to the Council on several responsibilities outlined in state and federal law. Recommendations made by committees are brought to the full Council for consideration.

[View additional Council information and documents](#) to learn the Council's guiding principles and priorities.

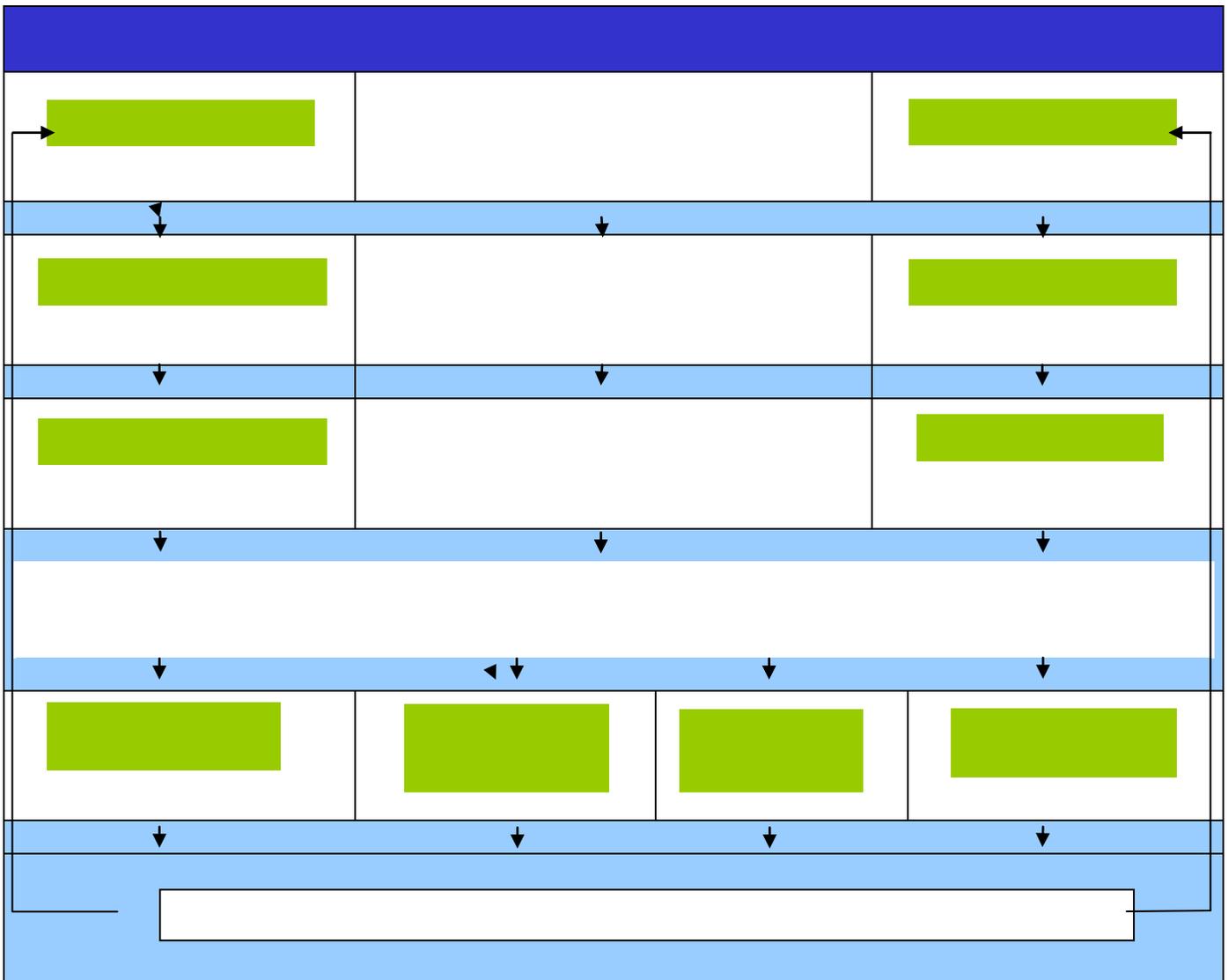
An Accountability Committee Charge

One of the charges of the Accountability Committee is to conduct a statewide needs assessment. Wilder Research conducted a comprehensive early care and education asset review published in November 2008 and a report on the well-being and vulnerabilities of babies in Minnesota published in November 2009. These environmental scans can act as a starting point on which to build and will inform this work.

To look at a needs assessment through an accountability lens, the committee has been working to examine current policy, policy that is under development and gaps that exist. To accomplish this task, the Accountability committee developed a framework based on *Taking Stock: Assessing and Improving Early Childhood Learning and Program Quality - the Report of the National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force* and coordinated

with lead contributor, Dr. Tom Schultz. The report describes features of a standards-based and purpose-driven accountability system. The features include:

- Standards for both children’s learning and development and for program quality.
- Appropriate assessments that are based on these standards.
- Data analysis and reporting methods that assure reliability, validity and accuracy of the data and safeguard the rights of individual children.
- Specific plans for using the data to guide and motivate program improvement initiatives and policy decisions which includes designing and building systems, funding and oversight of specific programs, improving services in local agencies, and aligning/integrating pre-kindergarten to grade 3.
- An ultimate goal of enhancing program effectiveness and positive outcomes for all young children.



From August 2009 to February 2010, members of the Accountability committee and staff from the Departments of Education and Human Services reviewed existing state and federal programs using the Ten Essential Elements and the accountability framework from *Taking Stock*. A template was created to document the work. The template, “Framework of Minnesota’s Early Childhood Services,” was developed as a tool to guide the work of the ECAC to assess the current status of early childhood services in Minnesota in areas including early learning standards, assessment, and data analysis and reporting and to help identify gaps.

The components examined include Early Learning Standards, Program Quality Standards (incorporating the Ten Essential Elements), Program Rating System, Professional Development System, Data Management System, Child Population Assessment, State Program Assessment, Individual State Program Evaluation and PK-3rd Grade Alignment and Integration. Existing programs and initiatives are included as are programs and initiatives under development.

As a final step in this analysis, the Accountability Committee has summarized the findings and has provided examples of potential next steps that may be considered by the Accountability committee and possible actions that might be of interest to the other standing committees of the ECAC. These findings and potential next steps have been organized to coordinate with the responsibilities of the four standing committees. The three other standing committees of the ECAC have not yet had an opportunity to review the findings or suggested actions. The examples that are provided were developed by the Accountability Committee and associated state staff, and can be used by the other ECAC committees to identify potential actions and next steps that are consistent with individual committee charges and work plans.

The Council may use the information to help prioritize next steps or to augment the work of other committees. Policy makers may find the information useful as they consider how to best meet the needs of Minnesota’s young children who are at-risk and their families. Researchers may find the information helpful as they work to identify the elements that are most impactful in improving outcomes for young children.

Conclusions and Potential Next Steps Suggested by the Accountability Committee

Accountability

The Accountability Committee is charged with making recommendations for an accountability system that facilitates positive outcomes for children birth through transition to kindergarten. They are responsible for four state and federal duties.

1. Create an inventory of early childhood services. (State Duty)

Published in January, 2010. [View inventory](#).

2. Conduct a period statewide needs assessment. (Federal Duty)

Minnesota's Early Childhood Accountability System Framework and Plan to Get All Children School-Ready by 2020 is one tool used in examining the needs of young children and the system required to support them. The findings and next steps are summarized throughout the document and organized by committee.

3. Develop recommendations regarding the establishment of a unified data collection system. (State Duty)

Findings:

Currently, MDE and DHS collect child-level data in program-level databases. Not all the data that is considered essential is currently being collected, there are barriers to sharing what data is collected and the current data systems do not link with one another.

Furthermore, it would be valuable to access data on relevant health programs and initiatives collected by the Minnesota Department of Health; wage data gathered by the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED); and participation rates for early childhood preparation programs and graduation rates collected by the Institutes of Higher Education (IHE).

An activity funded through an American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) grant will create a plan to link data sets. The plan will identify and determine the steps that need to be taken to unify the data elements across agencies.

School districts currently maintain a number of early learning program databases. Information regarding which programs individual children attend, and their outcomes, is not gathered. Early Childhood Special Education/Early Intervention has a format for reporting child outcomes across environments and assessment tools that may serve as a model. Minnesota conducts an annual School Readiness Study. The results are reported by cohort and are used to inform stakeholders and policy makers for system design.

Potential Next Steps:

- Move to a common set of measures and data collection methods across state agencies that are indexed to the statewide indicators currently being developed by the Accountability Committee. Develop protocols to ensure the integrity of data collection processes in school based programs, Head Start, and child care including Family, Friend and Neighbor as well as collected by specific child services.
- Develop a unique child identifier to better understand program usage patterns and child outcomes.
- Link individual child records across early learning, health, early intervention, and family support services. Ensure the linkages move into the K-16 longitudinal data system. Incorporate additional data needed to inform state policy such as data on Family, Friend and Neighbor (FFN) care, data on the child care workforce, and

other data useful for tracking progress on achieving goals and assessing impacts of policies and services on children who are at-risk and their families.

- Appropriately address issues of ethnicity, language and culture in the data collection and management system development process. Make the system available and transparent for use at both the local and state level.
- Track early childhood educator and provider data including: 1) pre-service and in-service training to teach educators and providers to use child data to improve instruction; 2) demographic trends to ensure teachers have the skills, including bicultural skills, to interact appropriately with students and families with diverse backgrounds; and, 3) whether there is enough staff to meet the demand by geography, language, age of children, and specialty area.

4. Review Program Evaluations

Findings/Background:

Evaluation requirements of various programs differ and resources to conduct state program evaluations are rare. Both Head Start and Early Childhood Special Education/Early Intervention are monitored under federal regulations. Other initiatives assessed through existing third party evaluations include but are not limited to: Scholarships, Allowances, Minnesota Early Learning Foundation's Community Grants Program, Minnesota's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) and School Readiness Connection. The evaluation of Minnesota's pilot QRIS program, Parent Aware, will be completed by December 2010. This will provide data on the quality of individual early childhood programs participating in Parent Aware.

The potential for using data to assess program quality across different types of early childhood programs has not been fully explored. To accomplish this, additional data may need to be collected and considered in the design of a unified data collection system for Minnesota. Consideration would need to be made regarding investing in evaluation versus expanding programming for more children when resources are scarce.

Potential Next Steps:

- Review current policy and funding levels to determine the degree and frequency to which state-funded early learning programs and services/programs are evaluated and monitored. Make recommendations on policies and funding that ensure programs and services are periodically evaluated in an integrated, coordinated manner to determine effectiveness in improving shared outcomes for children. Consider resources, technical assistance, and training needed for early learning programs found in need of improvement.

Access and Finance

The Access and Finance committee is responsible for examining issues that pose barriers within and across funding streams and will make recommendations to reduce the barriers. In addition, this group is charged with looking at the benefits, drawbacks, and feasibility of an Office of Early Learning to ensure coordination of early childhood care and education programs. The committee is responsible for four state and federal charges.

1. Develop recommendations for increasing the overall participation of children in programs. (Federal Duty)

Findings/Background:

The Council determined in its guiding principles that public funds for early childhood care and education should be prioritized to the children at-risk to support achieving their full potential. They believe that they should work first, to improve outcomes for children who are in families with low incomes and/or children who experience multiple risk factors including, but not limited to: parents with high school diploma or less, dual language learners, children with special needs, children in protective services system, homelessness, child and/or parent mental health issues, and parental substance abuse. They believe that by improving the outcomes for children at-risk, outcomes for all children will be enhanced.

Potential Next Steps:

- Define eligibility for program and services based on risk-factors. Make recommendations on effective and efficient community outreach, identification of children and ensuring their participation in high-quality programs. Consider the use of standardized developmental screenings across early education and care and primary health care settings to assist in identifying children most at-risk for coming to kindergarten unprepared.
- Review effectiveness and funding levels of programs to determine statewide scalability to increase voluntary access for all children to quality programming.
- Offer incentives for community collaborations that extend Head Start services to more at-risk children.

2. Make recommendations on the most efficient and effective way to leverage state and federal funding. (State Duty)

Findings/Background:

Minnesota is working to determine what is desired in its coordinated early learning system based on the Ten Essential Elements. Once the desired system is identified, programs and funding levels will be examined. Once costs are identified, funding mechanisms that support the system should be researched and analyzed.

Potential Next Steps:

- Review current policy and funding to determine the degree to which state-funded early learning programs and services are targeted for children who are at-risk.

Make recommendations on policies and funding that ensure children who are at-risk are served by state-funded programs.

- Evaluate whether the rate differential paid to Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) Parent Aware participants positively impacts child school readiness outcomes.
- Make recommendations regarding how funding should be linked to QRIS.
- Analyze how the economic mix in enrollment (at risk or universal) impacts outcomes. Assess the cost effectiveness of targeted versus universal programming.

3. Identify opportunities for, and barriers to, collaboration and coordination among federally funded and state-funded programs. (Federal Duty)

Findings/Background:

The Access and Finance committee is working to identify barriers to and conditions under which collaborations flourish. The committee will draw on the experiences of current initiatives and pilot projects. A report will be forwarded to the Council for analysis and next steps.

4. Make recommendations on how to coordinate or co-locate early childhood and child care programs in one state Office of Early Learning. (State Duty)

Findings/Background:

The Access and Finance committee is working to develop recommendations regarding an Office of Early Learning based on the Transfer Study developed by DHS and MDE for the state legislature and models being used in other states. Legislation created a taskforce to build on this work.

Professional Development

The Professional Development committee is charged with two federal duties. One is to make recommendations that will establish a professional development and career advancement system. A professional development system includes, but is not limited to: articulation of core competencies, a career lattice, a training delivery system, quality assurance of trainers and training, and credentialing requirements. The second charge is to analyze the current capacity and effectiveness of preservice and inservice training institutions.

1. Develop recommendations regarding statewide professional development and career advancement. (Federal Duty)

Findings/Background:

Minnesota has a complex system of licensing requirements and qualifications for staff, pathways for achieving them, and delivery systems for preparation and continuing education. Formal training that leads to a degree is offered through two and four year Institutes of Higher Education (IHE). Articulation agreements are in place between some

institutions, but not all. This makes it challenging for students who begin their education at one program to move to another.

Pre-service and in-service requirements vary depending on the early learning setting. In-service professional development opportunities are offered through a variety of groups, including but not limited to: Child Care Resource and Referral agencies, school districts, two and four year IHE, and professional membership organizations. Recruitment of trainers needs to reflect demographic shifts to represent the communities they serve.

Three key elements of the professional development system are currently under development including a professional development registry, a career lattice and trainer and training approval.

DHS is implementing outreach strategies to ensure that early childhood personnel in child care settings reflect the diversity of enrolled children, especially at the lead teacher level. There is more diversity of child care staff at the assistant teacher and aide levels.

Current compensation for early childhood educators and care providers is not comparable to other fields requiring similar experience or educational preparation. Without compensation parity, efforts to recruit and retain a well-educated workforce will be challenging.

Minnesota's Core Competencies for Early Childhood Practitioners, released in 2004, serves as a guide for practitioners to improve, measure, and demonstrate their work with children and families.

Potential Next Steps:

- Establish a periodic review process for Minnesota's Core Competencies that ensures the competencies reflect changes in research, demographic shifts, needs of children and families, and best practice. Once revisions are made, provide technical assistance to support teachers, practitioners, trainers and institutes of higher education in implementing the competencies. The Core Competencies will be reviewed as part of the ARRA funding for State Advisory Councils.
- Examine the capacity and need for qualified trainers and mentors across the state especially bilingual trainers and those representing the demographics of the communities they serve. Determine needs for training and mentoring.
- Implement recruitment strategies and supports that will increase the diversity of lead teachers in center-based settings and/or licensed family child care providers.
- Research strategies to reach compensation parity. Make recommendations for implementation.

- Use aggregated child assessment results to inform curriculum and training content for early childhood educators and care providers.
- Explore the compensation, technical assistance, and financial assistance needs of early childhood educators and care providers, especially those of family child care providers, which would incentivize and allow them to obtain higher levels of training and education.
- Consider mandating that district-based and Head Start home visitors are knowledgeable in early childhood curriculum content, assessment, and instruction.

2. Assess the capacity and effectiveness of 2- and 4-year public and private institutions of higher education. (Federal Duty)

Findings/Background:

To date, data regarding the capacity and effectiveness of early childhood teacher preparation programs offered through higher education has not been collected or analyzed for public use. As part of Minnesota’s American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funding for State Advisory Councils, existing data will be gathered to inform decisions about how to best prepare teachers to meet the unique needs of young children and assess the effectiveness of current preparation programs.

Anecdotal and historical information provides some information.

Potential Next Steps:

- Determine the number of teacher preparation programs in Minnesota using materials developed by those responsible for providing services such as Minnesota’s early learning standards and Core Competencies. Make recommendations regarding policy around the usage of these materials in teacher preparation curriculum.
- Examine articulation agreements between institutions of higher education. Make recommendations to reduce barriers and increase opportunities for agreements to support students. Consider whether articulation agreements should be mandated, standardized and enforced.
- Explore recruitment efforts and incentive programs to ensure a pipeline of qualified early childhood educators and care providers who represent the diversity of children in Minnesota. Make recommendations on recruitment efforts.

Early Learning Standards

The Early Learning Standards committee is responsible for looking at the early learning standards, program standards and a continuum of services and programs that meets the needs and provides support for parents. Early learning standards provide a framework for understanding a common set of developmentally appropriate expectations for young

children. Program standards establish criteria for high-quality programs. This committee is responsible for three federal duties.

1. Develop recommendations for increasing the overall participation of children in programs. (Federal Duty) (Shared responsibility with Access and Finance. Recommendations appear in Access and Finance.)

2. Make recommendations for improvements in state early learning standards. (Federal Duty)

Findings/Background:

Minnesota's early learning standards, the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress and Early Childhood Indicators of Progress Minnesota's Early Learning Guidelines for Birth to 3 were first published in 2000 and 2007 respectively. These standards are comprehensive, covering all areas of development. The indicators are broadly applicable to children from diverse linguistic, economic and cultural backgrounds and to children with variations in developmental needs and abilities in different early childhood settings.

The guidelines for birth to three are aligned with the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress for three to five. These, in turn, are aligned with K-12 academic standards. The ECIPs are also aligned to the Head Start Outcome Framework. Currently there is no policy in place to guide a process for periodic review of the early learning standards.

The early learning standards are implemented inconsistently across early learning programs. The standards are a part of the curriculum for some teacher preparation programs but not all. Many parents have little awareness or understanding of how they might use the standards to support their child's growth and development.

Potential Next Steps:

- Adopt a cross-department definition of implementation of the ECIPs. Track child outcomes to inform system development. Work with curriculum developers to strengthen curriculum in domains where children are not showing sufficient progress. Train trainers, teachers, providers and parents on cultural variations in meeting standards.
- Develop and provide resources for technical assistance, training and mentoring to promote the integration of early learning standards into the work of early childhood practitioners across primary care settings.
- Develop resources for parents to enhance their child's growth and development that are aligned with the early learning standards. Materials developed need to be user friendly and translated multiple languages.
- Establish a periodic review process for Minnesota's early learning standards that ensure the standards reflect changes in research, needs of children and families, social context, and changes in K-12 academic standards. Once revisions are made,

provide technical assistance to support teachers, practitioners, trainers and institutes of higher education in implementing the standards.

3. Make recommendations for improvements in program standards. (Federal Duty)

Findings/Background:

Early Childhood Program Standards are defined as expectations for the characteristics of quality of all early childhood settings. Program standards identify the components and features that, based on research, have been shown to ensure the conditions in which children are more likely to learn. The Ten Essential Elements of Effective Early Care and Education Programs identify what must be present to ensure that children who are at-risk are fully prepared for school.

Minnesota's early childhood programs have separate sets of program standards designed for different purposes and implemented in different ways. The Departments of Human Services and Education are charged with developing a common set of program standards. Once they are developed, they will provide a foundation for a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS).

Minnesota's pilot QRIS, Parent Aware, evaluation will be completed by December 2011. Local Early Childhood Special Education/Early Intervention services are analyzed annually for compliance to federal performance targets that may serve as a model.

Potential Next Steps:

- Review state policy to determine the degree to which state funded early learning programs meet the 10 Essential Elements. Make recommendations on policies and funding levels needed to put 10 Essential Elements into place.
- Review final evaluation of Parent Aware to determine next steps. Determine the effectiveness of QRIS in improving child school readiness outcomes. Review the quality rating system in order to ascertain the degree to which Parent Aware system supports children with disabilities.