

# EARLY CONNECTIONS:

## News from the Office of Early Learning

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 1: AUGUST 27, 2012



### ~ Minnesota's Office of Early Learning Turns One! ~

On August 29, 2012, Minnesota's Office of Early Learning (OEL) turns one year old. *Early Connections* was created to keep partners informed of the important work being done by the Office and its partners. Every other month, a new issue will be distributed to keep those working on behalf of young children and their families connected.

The Office of Early Learning leads a coordinated effort with the Minnesota Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, designed to align programs and services for young children. The primary goal of the office is to improve outcomes for Minnesota's young children and their families. The Office opened in late August 2011 with the hiring of Director, Dr. Karen Cadigan, who reports directly to the Commissioner of Education.

OEL brings together staff from multiple agencies and community partners around common goals. The Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Grant (see article on page two) and Minnesota's resulting State Plan complement and accelerate OEL's activities. Joining together Minnesota Department of Education's (MDE) early childhood education programs with other services such as the Department of Health's Minnesota Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems grant and the Department of Human Services' child development services and child care assistance allows for important connections for programs and services.

A floor to ceiling outline of the state of Minnesota in Dr. Cadigan's office is being filled with pictures of children from around the state. It serves as an inspiration and a reminder of why we have joined efforts in order to improve the lives of young children.

## **~ Letter from Director ~**

Minnesota summers are often filled with opportunities to enjoy our state's resources - our lakes, trails, parks, and snow-free sidewalks. It also gives us extra time to spend connecting with family and friends.

Resources and relationships are the active ingredients that define our experience - whether it's a golden moment during a family's summer vacation, the pride we feel as we watch a neighborhood's resilience in economic downturn, or the efforts made by child care providers to constantly do even better by the children and families they serve. The quality and quantity of these relationships and resources - financial and otherwise - create the foundational experiences for the young children who will someday be the adults leading our state.

This week we celebrate the one year anniversary of the Office of Early Learning - and what a year it's been. The singular goal for the Office of Early Learning is to improve outcomes for Minnesota's young children by supporting and strengthening the quality of important relationships, most notably those between parents and providers. We do this by targeting public resources in a way that is effective, accountable, equitable, and sustainable, and by constantly evaluating where we can turn our good work into great work.

Turning the curve on the numbers of Minnesota children who are ready for school is no small task. It will take all of us. Public leadership is critical, but so is leadership at all levels if we are serious about putting Minnesota's future, our youngest children, first. No matter your role, or as direct or indirect your connection to young children and their important adults may be, your efforts contribute to the collective effort and are needed now more than ever.

Do you know the story of Mrs. Rumphius? This children's book tells the story of a woman determined to make the world a better place by spreading lupine seeds. Lupine is tricky because it sometimes takes a while to take root. But once established, it stays put, spreading and blooming for generations to come. As we begin statewide opportunities for Parent Aware, early learning scholarships, Title I incentives, more robust professional development opportunities, and better data for decision-making, we are very much in the seed-spreading phase. Each of us is responsible for different parts of creating a better future for Minnesota. Some will till the soil to lay the foundation, some will spread the seeds, some will nurture the seeds and some will experience the joy of finding and sharing the first blooms. But make no mistake - we all play a role, and together, we will make Minnesota better - for our children, for our families, for the dedicated providers we depend on and for our state's future.

Onward,

Dr. Karen Cadigan

Director, Minnesota Office of Early Learning

## **~ Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grant ~**

In December 2011, Minnesota was one of nine states awarded a federal Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant of \$45 million for 2012-2015 to improve early learning and development opportunities for Minnesota's young children. The Early Learning Challenge grant addresses a critical need to provide more high-needs children from birth to five with access to high-quality early care and education programs.

In the months since receiving the grant, Minnesota has begun the work needed to implement an ambitious plan focusing on five main areas:

- increasing early childhood program quality and accountability
- building a skilled early childhood workforce
- increasing access to quality early childhood programs for children with high-needs
- measuring outcomes and progress
- aligning state infrastructure around these goals

Efforts are focused first on four high-need communities (known as the Transformation Zones) – White Earth Reservation, Itasca County, St Paul’s Promise Neighborhood and Minneapolis’ Northside Achievement Zone. Work in these areas will provide and test practices that can then be implemented in communities throughout the state.

Minnesota’s Early Learning Challenge plan benefits from the commitment of many partners actively working together to achieve better results for Minnesota’s children and provides a framework for all of us to work together on behalf of Minnesota’s youngest children. Much of the information included in this and future editions of Early Connections will provide you with updates on the activities of a variety of partners in this early learning reform effort. You will also find contact information for the lead staff.

For further information about Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grant contact Lisa Barnidge. [lisa.barnidge@state.mn.us](mailto:lisa.barnidge@state.mn.us)

## ~ Initiatives ~

### **Parent Aware**

Parent Aware, Minnesota’s voluntary Quality Rating and Improvement System, is a three-for-one tool that forms the backbone for early learning reform in Minnesota. It empowers parents to find programs that use school readiness best practices, supports programs in improving quality and connects young children to high-quality programs. Parent Aware is available now in Minnesota and many early childhood programs can join. Parents can also find rated programs on the [Parent Aware website](#). Across the state, accredited child care programs, Head Start and public school preK programs can enroll now. And in 2012, Parent Aware is also available Becker, Blue Earth, Clearwater, Hennepin, Itasca, Mahnomon, and Nicollet and Ramsey counties to child care programs with gradual expansion statewide planned by 2015. The rating tool is being introduced to programs and parents in coordination with the state, Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge funded scholarships and Title I incentive grants. Local Child Care Resource and Referral agencies are providing information and orientation session for programs as well supports for moving through the rating process.

For information about the Parent Aware rollout and how early childhood programs can participate, go to the [Parent Aware website](#). For additional Parent Aware resources designed for community leaders, find information from the business-led non-profit organization at [Parent Aware for School Readiness \(PASR\)](#).

Parent Aware is led by the Minnesota Department of Human Services in coordination with the Minnesota Office of Early Learning. The Child Care Resource & Referral system is coordinating local-level implementation. Parent Aware is also supported by a unique partnership with community leaders through Parent Aware for School Readiness and Greater Twin Cities United Way. Contact Nara Topp at the Minnesota Department of Human Services at [nara.topp@state.mn.us](mailto:nara.topp@state.mn.us) or 651-431-4880 for more information.

## **Early Childhood Scholarships**

The OEL is coordinating two types of early childhood scholarship opportunities: Early Learning Challenge Scholarships and State Scholarships. The primary goal of both types of scholarships is to promote access to high-quality early care and education for children with high-needs. Scholarships will support access to quality care and continuity of care by bridging funding gaps and decreasing financial barriers for families. In order to receive scholarships, early care and education programs must be involved with Parent Aware. Scholarships can be used toward the cost of adding program slots, extending a child's time, and/or to cover parent fees and charges for the child's attendance. Programs will be encouraged to braid and layer these funds with other existing resources in order to increase access for children with the highest needs. Scholarships will be available to families beginning this fall.

## **Early Learning Challenge Scholarships**

Early Learning Challenge (ELC) scholarships are made available by the federal Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant. Families who live in one of the four Transformation Zones and who have incomes below 200 percent of poverty will be able to access ELC scholarships. In addition to being involved in Parent Aware, early care and education programs must enroll the child for a minimum of 15 hours per week, and they must provide families with information about Early Childhood Screening. Leadership in each Transformation Zone is creating a plan for how scholarships will be used that match the community's needs including the maximum scholarship amount and the targeted age of children. The White Earth Tribal Council will administer the scholarships in White Earth, and MDE released a competitive grant opportunity for administration and coordination of the scholarships in the other three zones. The administrative applications are currently under review by the Office of Early Learning.

## **State Scholarships**

In 2011, the Minnesota Legislature established Early Childhood Education (ECE) Scholarships for children ages three to kindergarten entry. Families who are eligible for scholarships will have access to up to \$4,000 per year to use at a quality early child and education program. The Office of Early Learning, in consultation with the Minnesota Initiative Foundations, chose initial communities in which to roll out the state scholarships. These communities are: Becker, and Blue Earth and Nicollet, Clearwater, and Pine Counties, the Wayzata School District and the cities of Duluth, Minneapolis, St Paul, and Willmar. MDE released a competitive grant opportunity for administration and coordination of the state scholarships. The administrative applications are currently under review by the Office of Early Learning.

For further information about early learning scholarships contact Lisa Cariveau at the Minnesota Department of Education, 651-582-8332. [lisa.cariveau@state.mn.us](mailto:lisa.cariveau@state.mn.us)

### **Early Learning Challenge (ELC) Title I PreK Incentive Program**

Improving outcomes for children with high-needs through increased access to a high-quality early childhood program experience is the goal of the ELC Title I PreK Incentive program. To meet this goal, districts in the four Transformation Zones will receive additional resources to increase access and provide high-quality school readiness programming. Throughout the process, PreK to Grade 3 alignment of practices and policies will be supported and encouraged. In addition to financial supports, a toolkit will be available statewide that will provide guidance and technical assistance for participating Minnesota schools. In years two through four of the grant, this opportunity will be available to a limited number of school districts outside the Transformation Zones. In order to be eligible for the ELC Title I PreK Incentive, district programs must commit to becoming Parent Aware rated.

The application for districts in the four Transformation Zones to apply for the ELC Title I PreK Incentives is posted on the MDE website and has the initial deadline of September 1, 2012. Notices of that posting have gone out to the contacts for each district in the Transformation Zones. Additionally, area community meetings in Duluth and White Earth were held in the last month. These meetings afforded the communities and state staff the opportunity to share information, gather suggestions and questions, and allow districts and community members to brainstorm with one another on how best to use the funds.

Attendees at the meetings included staff from school districts, child care programs, resource and referrals and tribal Head Starts. As a result of the meetings, additional guidance is being developed to support district and community efforts to access and use the Title I PreK Incentive funds.

Primary state contact for ELC Title I PreK Incentive program is Bobbie Burnham at the Minnesota Department of Education, 651-582-8414. [bobbie.burnham@state.mn.us](mailto:bobbie.burnham@state.mn.us)

### **Statewide Plan for Birth to Three**

In recognition that every child deserves the opportunity to achieve his or her full potential, Governor Mark Dayton has created a Children's Cabinet (the Commissioners of the Minnesota Departments of Health, Human Services and Education) and outlined a bold agenda to ensure the success of children and families in Minnesota. A critical component in this effort will be a focused investment in infant and early childhood programs and services that support nurturing environments, and ensure positive early experiences that promote health and optimal achievement throughout the lifespan.

The Minnesota Department of Health has been charged with leading the development of a state plan to address the needs of young children in Minnesota, from the prenatal period to age three. The purpose of this effort is to align outcomes, policies, and activities that support Minnesota's youngest children and their families, creating coordinated systems that reach across systems, cultures, and geography to provide equity of access for all children especially for Minnesota's most vulnerable children. The Prenatal to Three State Plan will proactively

move the state to evidence-based strategies to improve programs, policies and systems. This process will build upon work that has already been accomplished. In bringing together a range of stakeholders and existing plans, the goal is to create a comprehensive integrated system plan that provides direction and identifies priority actions.

Primary state contact for the Prenatal to Three State Plan is Kelly Monson at the Minnesota Department of Health. [kelly.monson@state.mn.us](mailto:kelly.monson@state.mn.us)

## ~ The Early Learning Council ~

One important partner of the Office of Early Learning is the Governor's Early Learning Council. The Council was created by Governor Dayton's Executive Order 11-05. Its purpose is to make recommendations to the Governor, Children's Cabinet and Legislature, on creating a high-quality early childhood system that ensures all children arrive at kindergarten school-ready. The Council is also responsible for fulfilling duties required by federal and state statutes.

The Early Learning Council (ELC) consists of up to 30 members, including the state Head Start Collaboration director and representatives from the Minnesota Departments of Education, Health and Human Services. The Minnesota House of Representatives and the Minnesota Senate each appoint members. In addition, the Governor has appointed people from diverse backgrounds including business, higher education, service providers, parents and philanthropic communities.

All meetings of the council are open to the public. Meeting dates and agendas are posted on the [MDE calendar](#). Look forward to a newsletter coming out from the council this fall. For further information contact Debbie Hewitt. [debbie.hewitt@state.mn.us](mailto:debbie.hewitt@state.mn.us)

## ~ Stay Connected ~

Stay connected to events and happenings of the Office of Early Learning by subscribing to the Early Learning page on the MDE website. Receive notification when a new edition of Early Connections is posted. If you have ideas for future newsletters or questions contact: [mde.els@state.mn.us](mailto:mde.els@state.mn.us)

For more information about the Office of Early Learning, contact Karen Cadigan at [karen.cadigan@state.mn.us](mailto:karen.cadigan@state.mn.us)

**Minnesota** Department of  
**Education**

