

EARLY CONNECTIONS:

News from the Office of Early Learning

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~ Letter from Director ~

My daughter started preschool this month, which included some tears (on my part, not hers) and reflection on access that Minnesota families have to preschool experiences. Sitting in my car in the parking lot after dropping her off, I thought about my experience as a parent of a four-year-old, compared to my mom's experience forty years ago when I was a preschooler. I live in the metro, she lived in Greater Minnesota; I have an advanced degree, she had her GED fresh in hand; I'm an "older" parent with 20 years of career behind me, she was young and unemployed. The important similarity, though, is that we were both lucky enough to access a quality early childhood program for our children. I shopped around for a program and paid for it out of pocket; she was approached by a Head Start teacher and offered a spot for me.

Luck shouldn't be the deciding factor in a family's ability to access a quality early childhood program, but over the last 40 years, that's often been the case. The good news is that the past two plus years have resulted in smart new collaborative relationships, public and private investments and strategic planning that positions us to create an early childhood education system that is accessible to more of our state's youngest learners.

This watershed moment, with public and private leadership that prioritizes early learning, Race to the Top Resources to help carry out those priorities, and Parent Aware and Early Learning Scholarships serving as key pillars, provides Minnesota with unprecedented opportunities: to empower parents with information and resources so they can make informed choices; to support all providers, not just a few; to provide data that provides accountability to show that our public resources are well-used; and to highlight places where the private sector can leverage additional impact and investment.

Of course change can be challenging. As Maya Angelou said, "Stepping onto a brand-new path is difficult, but not more difficult than remaining in a situation." Working together, we are

stepping onto a new path where we will build on the past, learn from the present, and work toward a brighter future for more of our state's early learners.

This issue of Early Connections focuses on some of the programs, services and news surrounding preschool age children. In the next issue, we'll highlight the path we are walking for infants and toddlers.

Onward,

Dr. Karen Cadigan, Director, Minnesota Office of Early Learning

~Welcome the New Deputy Director of the Office of Early Learning~

We're pleased to announce that Bobbie Burnham is joining the OEL team as Deputy Director.

Bobbie has been leading the K-3 work of the Office of Early Learning. Her skills and expertise will enhance OEL's efforts to fully integrate early learning into a comprehensive system of high-quality education throughout the state. Bobbie's work will focus on connections among the early education and K-3 components of the early learning system, and in particular will focus on creating effective instructional practices, programmatic and policy alignment across the 0 – 3rd grade continuum.

Welcome Bobbie! Bobbie can be reached at Bobbie.burnham@state.mn.us

~ Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grant ~

Minnesota is currently faced with one of the widest achievement gaps in the nation and too often youth who begin school behind their peers academically, remain behind or drop out. In the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant awarded to Minnesota earlier this year, we are committed to addressing this issue.

"I've always believed that change can happen quickly if it is purposeful, collaborative and grounded in effective strategies," said Commissioner Cassellius. Early learning strategies are a critical piece of Governor Dayton's [7-Point Plan for Better Schools for a Better Minnesota](#). For further information about Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grant contact Lisa Barnidge at lisa.barnidge@state.mn.us

Parent Aware

Parent Aware helps early childhood programs build quality, helps parents find these quality programs and helps ensure that children access quality care. It is one of the key pillars of Minnesota's Race to the Top: Early Learning Challenge plan which provides a new way to ensure access to high quality care for all children, with a specific focus on children with high needs.

There are two pathways for providers to earn a Parent Aware rating, the first is called the Full Rating Process and the second is known as the Accelerated Pathway to Rating. Licensed child care providers, with no current negative licensing actions, are eligible to participate in the

Full Rating Process. The Full Rating Process is rolling out statewide, to be fully implemented by 2015. In 2012 the Parent Aware statewide expansion kicked off in eight Minnesota counties (Clearwater, Mahnomon, Becker, Itasca, Hennepin, and Ramsey, Nicollet, and Blue Earth). In January 2013, Parent Aware will expand to include 14 additional counties, (Polk, St. Louis, Cass, Wadena, Pine, Stearns, Meeker, Chippewa, Anoka, Scott, Dakota, Nobles, Watonwan, and Olmsted). For information about the Parent Aware rollout and how early childhood programs can participate, go to the [Parent Aware website](#).

Accredited child care providers, Head Start providers, and school-based preschool providers are eligible for a streamlined pathway to a Parent Aware rating. This is referred to as the Accelerated Pathway to Rating and is available statewide. Information on this accelerated pathway is also available on the [Parent Aware website](#). In addition, accredited child care providers can call Val Peterson at the MN CCR&R Network at 651-290-9704 x107 and Head Start and school-based preschool programs can call Mary Owen at the Minnesota Department of Education at mary.owen@state.mn.us

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 or 651-431-4880 for more information.

Early Learning Scholarships

Early Learning Scholarships give low-income families resources they need to choose quality programs, and provide additional support and incentives for high quality providers. There are currently two kinds of scholarships: state-funded and Race to the Top federally-funded.

A two year exception to the 3 or 4-star Parent Aware rating program requirement will allow flexibility in state funded scholarships. Programs at all rating levels and programs that have signed a Parent Aware participation agreement form can receive state-funded Early Learning Scholarships at a tiered rate if chosen by an eligible family. This increased flexibility recognizes that by participating in Parent Aware, early childhood providers have shown a clear commitment to quality. All programs receiving a scholarship will be required to continue participation in Parent Aware and commit to continuous improvement of their quality. At the end of the two year exception, scholarships will only be available to those programs that have received a 3- or 4-star rating.

The tiered state-funded scholarship maximum rate will be as follows: up to \$4,000 per child for 3 or 4-star ratings; up to \$3,000 per child for 1 or 2 star ratings; and up to \$2,000 per child for those signed up for Parent Aware but haven't received a rating. Total resources for scholarships remain very limited such that less than 2% of all low income children will benefit.

The two year exception applies only to the state-funded scholarships. For the federally-funded scholarships in the White Earth Reservation, Itasca County, St Paul's Promise Neighborhood and Minneapolis' Northside Achievement Zone, Transformation Zone leaders will determine the maximum scholarship amounts and will determine if programs that do not have a 3 or 4-

star rating will be eligible to accept scholarships. Local administrators will be responsible for outreach and supporting families in accessing scholarships. For a list of these administrators, or for further information about early learning scholarships contact Lisa Cariveau at the Minnesota Department of Education, 651-582-8332 or lisa.cariveau@state.mn.us

Early Learning Challenge (ELC) Title I PreK Incentive Program

The Title I PreK Incentive in the Early Learning Challenge grant provides school districts in the four Transformation Zones with additional resources to increase access to high-quality school readiness programming throughout their communities. Applications received are going through the final approval process. Innovative programs being implemented this fall include creating intentional transition programs for preschoolers entering kindergarten, adding classrooms, creating an Early Childhood Academic Intervention Team who will work across preschool classrooms in the district, and hiring intervention teachers to support the most at-risk students. Other creative programs include creation of an Early Childhood Network led by an Early Learning Community Partnership Coordinator who will connect school staff, child care and Head Start directors, and family child care providers to ensure that curriculum, instruction and assessments are aligned across programs.

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

Kindergarten Entry Assessment

As a part of the Race to the Top- Early Learning Challenge Grant, Minnesota is committed to evaluating the current statewide Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA), the School Readiness Study, and refining our system. To support this work, Dr. Megan Cox has been hired as Comprehensive Assessment Coordinator at the Office of Early Learning.

In August, nearly one hundred early childhood and K-12 practitioners from around the state gathered to discuss KEA. This seminar, co-hosted by Bloomington School District and the Minnesota Department of Education was the first of a number of conversations as Minnesota evaluates the direction of a statewide KEA. Bloomington, Minneapolis and Deer River were among the three districts presenting on their local KEAs. [A recording of the seminar may be viewed on the Bloomington Educational Cable Television station website.](#)

If you have any questions, suggestions or would like to share your KEA story, please contact Amanda Varley at Amanda.Varley@state.mn.us

~Screening for 3 and 4 year-olds~

Screening is an important part of making sure that 3 and 4 year-old children are ready to learn when they start kindergarten. Screening is a brief, simple procedure to identify children who may need more educational evaluation, health assessment or connection to community resources or supports. Comprehensive health and development screenings are recommended for children 3 or 4 years of age, and may be done by school districts, clinics or public health providers or Head Start programs. Anticipatory guidance, referral and follow up is provided as appropriate. The Departments of Health, Human Services and Education are

working to ensure earlier health and developmental screening for children who are three years of age.

1. Earlier is better! The earlier that hearing, vision, social-emotional or other developmental issues are identified, the sooner the child and family can receive support and services, in order to be successful in kindergarten.

2. The challenges of screening younger children are surmountable! To help young children be as successful as possible during screening:

- Parents may come along and provide moral support to their child but may need to be coached to allow the child to answer/do for themselves
- Professionals can make screening a game
- Professionals must use age-appropriate screening tools. For recommended instruments, refer to the [Minnesota Department of Health \(MDH\) Hearing and Vision Screening website](#) and the Interagency Developmental Task Force web pages hosted by [MDH -Developmental and Social-Emotional Screening website](#)
- The Departments of Health, Human Services and Education offer periodic training and technical assistance to health and educational professionals providing screening in their community

~ The Early Learning Council ~

The Governor's Early Learning Council is forming five work groups made up of council members and drawing on the expertise of stakeholders and thought leaders. The work groups and their focus follow.

- Rural and special populations will increase attention to special populations and vulnerable children prenatal to 8
- Access will focus on increasing the availability of resources to provide access to high quality early childhood programs and will consider how to assure the simplest and most complete access to resources that already exist
- Accountability will find out where Minnesota is in meeting the needs of young children and will let people know about it
- Work Force will assess the capacity and effectiveness of 2- and 4-year institutions of higher education in preparing early childhood educators and develop recommendations regarding statewide professional development as well as career advancement
- PreK to Grade 3 will make recommendations to assist in meeting the goal that children read well by third grade

The Early Learning Council meetings are open to the public and the public is welcome. For further information contact Debbie Hewitt at debbie.hewitt@state.mn.us

~Stay Connected~

Stay connected to the Office of Early Learning by subscribing to the page below on the MDE website. As a subscriber you will receive notification of web page updates including when a new edition of Early Connections: News from the Office of Early Learning is posted.
<http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSuc/EarlyLearn/index.html>

For more information about the Office of Early Learning, contact Karen Cadigan at karen.cadigan@state.mn.us

Minnesota Department of
Education

