



## Minnesota's Birth-4 Care and Education System

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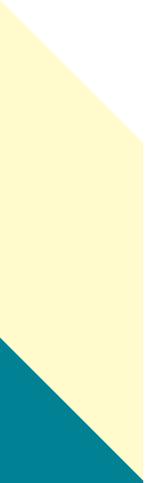
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# Executive Summary: Minnesota's Birth-4 Care and Education System

Minnesota's system of care and education for our youngest citizens is chaotic, inequitable, and in urgent need of dramatic overhaul. We believe that all children have a right to equitable and high-quality care and education. Minnesota's policies and practices have created gaps in outcomes for children that are detrimental to our children, our communities, and our future. We have created an educational system that yields deeply inequitable outcomes. And we have created a child care system that is vastly underfunded and that relies on a workforce that includes many full-time workers who earn poverty-level wages, and that doesn't have nearly enough capacity to meet the needs of Minnesota's families.

This paper reflects the work of a partnership between ISAIH's Kids Count On Us coalition and Education Minnesota's Educator Innovation Policy Center, or EPIC.

Clearly Minnesota needs a dramatic overhaul of the early care and education system. We need to raise revenue to build a new, desperately needed system for our youngest learners and the workforce that cares for and educates them.

Our team has spent 18 months listening to one another. We understand the historical damage done by the artificial distinction between care and education, a distinction that is reflected not only in the ways we talk about young people's needs, but also in the very governance structures charged with oversight. We have collected data via both academic research, family surveys, and interviews with policy makers and practitioners all across the United States. We have looked carefully at programs in other states and municipalities that offer more comprehensive, equitable care and education to their youngest learners, and we have learned some critical lessons along the way.

We have examined programs and interviewed practitioners in West Virginia, New Jersey, Washington, Washington DC, New Mexico, Wisconsin, as well as county and city-wide initiatives such as those in San Antonio, Boston, and Seattle. We have been in conversation with and/or relied heavily on the work already provided by Head Start, Power to the Profession, the National Institute on Early Education Research, Christa Anders of Transforming Minnesota's Early Childhood Workforce, and the labor economist, Aaron Sojourner, at the University of Minnesota.

## Our Key findings

- The argument children ages birth-4 need nothing more than a safe place to be while their parents are in the workforce, commonly thought of as “care,” is false.
- The argument that holds that K-12 is strictly about “education” and not about “care” is false.
- Minnesota has ignored the critical needs of our birth-4 year olds and suffers damage that will last for decades because of it.
- We must find a way to create access to equitable and high-quality care and education for all our state’s birth-4 year olds who need it.
- The birth-4 care and education workforce has been historically maligned, under-compensated, and unsupported, and these conditions are currently at crisis levels.
- We must, both immediately and over time, address the needs of the workforce dedicated to caring for and educating our youngest citizens.
- Doing so will require Minnesota to raise revenue and to commit to a complete overhaul of its birth-4 system

## Our Recommendations

- Create a new state agency, the Minnesota Department of Early Care and Education, so that the state’s governance system can use the same vocabulary and align practices.
- Create regional Early Care and Education Hubs which are overseen by boards representative of public schools, special education practitioners, child care centers, home care centers, and community members.
- Create a mixed-delivery pre-K system aligned with the early indicators of progress and built on equitable practices that excludes no family wanting access.
- Create a sustainable funding source so that low-income families pay nothing and all other families pay up to but no more than 7% of family income, regardless of number of children in birth-4 system.
- Create a community needs assessment tool to be used on an ongoing basis by the Early Care and Education Regional Hubs.
- Fund the regional hubs sufficiently so that they can respond to the community needs assessments with the appropriate services needed by the families in their communities.
- Create a funding mechanism to immediately raise the wages of the birth-4 workforce, and to increase compensation, benefits, and professional development via a career-wage ladder on-ramping process.

## Cost Benefit Analysis

- Researchers have correlated investments in high-quality, early childhood programming with future revenue generation for local communities. Scholars have argued that, “estimated long-term savings range from three to seven dollars for every dollar spent on such programs” because they help build “a U.S. workforce better prepared to meet the challenges of the 21st century” (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014, p. 8).
- Local education agencies can predict to see a greater return-on-investment from early childhood programming than other popular policy changes such as a reduction in class sizes (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014, p. 8).
- State and local education agencies that invest in high-quality, early childhood education and care also report a decrease in the reliance on public assistance programs (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014, p. 56).
- A true investment in early childhood education and care “would expand Minnesota’s economy by 1.1% which equates to \$3.7 billion of new economic activity in the state” (Economic Policy Institute, 2019).
- Economic researchers have “demonstrated the cost-effectiveness of investing in preschool, showing states that investments in early childhood education lead to reduced spending in multiple areas, including education, social welfare, and criminal justice” (Huntington, 2020, p. 348).
- Several studies have confirmed that every dollar spent on early childhood education can be associated with a return of \$7 to \$17 a year in the areas of education, health, and social/economic outcomes. Early investment is also linked to a decrease in state spending on social programs (Bartik, 2014; Whitebook, Phillips, and Howes, 2014).

COVID did not create the current crisis in our birth-4 care and education system. But it has certainly lifted the veil that kept many from understanding the severity of the state’s neglect of it. This is our opportunity to usher Minnesota into a better future. We call on Minnesota’s leaders, especially our elected officials, to have the courage to acknowledge the severity of the injustice embedded in the current, fragmented system, and begin the work toward a more just system designed to support Minnesota’s youngest learners so that they might reach their full potential.

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# Minnesota's Birth-4 Care and Education System

Let's take a moment to imagine a future. In this future, every child in Minnesota gets the loving care and quality education they need to thrive. Every family gets the support they need to provide and access this care and education. And every caregiver and educator is able to pursue this crucial labor with the fair compensation and abundant support they deserve.

We know our current early childhood "system" is broken. Prices are too high for families. Supply of care and learning opportunities is too limited. Caregivers and educators struggle to make ends meet or are forced to find other work due to inadequate pay and benefits.

In 2019, Education Minnesota's Educator Policy Innovation Center and ISAIAH's Kids Count On Us Coalition created a partnership to develop policy proposals to create an equitable and sustainable approach to building a care and education system for all Minnesota children from birth-4. This system must include a pre-kindergarten option for families who want to access the program, but it is critical for Minnesota lawmakers to consider pre-K as only part of a larger system of early childhood care. Any successful early education system will also raise up the workforce that cares for and educates our youngest learners. Grounded in a myth of scarcity, in which wealthy interests and those focused on the "politics of the possible" have blocked our polity and even our collective imagination from building the early care and education system we need, we have pitted stakeholders with similar objectives against one another for far too long.

## What is EPIC?

The Educator Policy Innovation Center, or EPIC, is the practitioner-driven think tank of Education Minnesota. EPIC brings together teams of experienced educators to provide research-proven solutions to the challenges facing Minnesota schools. Each EPIC team performs a comprehensive review of academic literature on a given issue and adds to our understanding by sharing classroom experiences. After discussing the academic literature and its real-world implications for students, the educators recommend policies to meet the challenge. The coupling of sound academic research with actual classroom experience means EPIC's policy recommendations are uniquely valuable because they combine the best from academia and real-world practical experience.

The EPIC research teams are open to all members of Education Minnesota because although practicing educators are the experts when it comes to education policy, the voice of the educator has often been absent in education policy discussions. Academics, politicians, and CEOs proclaim what is best for education, often with no grounding or experience in how their proposals affect real classrooms with actual students. As a result, lawmakers enact disjointed, inefficient state and federal policies that hamper our schools, limit our educators, and stifle the learning opportunities for all students.

Educators see every day how these policies affect Minnesota's children. EPIC ensures policy makers will now have access simultaneously to the best academic research as well as to the thinking of front-line educators on the most pressing issues in education.

## What is Kids Count On Us?

Kids Count On Us is an initiative of ISAI AH and a coalition of over 300 child care centers with hundreds of providers and parents statewide dedicated to fighting for full funding of Minnesota’s future through early childhood education. ISAI AH is a multi-faith, multi-racial, statewide and nonpartisan faith-based community organizing coalition in Minnesota.

## The EPIC/KCOU Partnership

In early 2019, members, staff, and leaders at Education Minnesota and ISAI AH began to wonder about the potential to partner together to explore how Minnesota can improve equitable outcomes for birth-4 year olds and at the same time lift up the workforce that cares for and educates those children, a workforce that has been systematically denigrated, under-compensated, and lacks access to the kinds of professional development our children need them to have. For too long, both parties agreed, public funding for early care and learning has been stymied by the false premise of a scarcity of resources. With a dearth of public funding, early childhood advocates often found themselves at odds, when the real problem was the unwillingness of policy makers to raise the needed revenue to adequately fund our future. Thus, the EPIC/KCOU partnership was born.

This paper is the result of 18 months of conversation, exploration, relationship-building, research, and circle time together with a team comprised of members of both Education Minnesota and Kids Count On Us, and five staff members from the two organizations. From the first retreat, held in December of 2019, our goals have been held firm: We aimed to find a way forward that raises up both the quality of care and education for our youngest learners and the workforce dedicated to that complex and critical work.

## The EPIC/KCOU Team

**Lynn Hoskins** is a child care center director and has been in the field for over 40 years. She worked for many years with low-income children and has been passionate about the need for evening the playing field for all families. She has a Master’s Certificate in Early Childhood Policy and interned with Minnesota State Representative Nora Slawik. She volunteered her time as Greater Minneapolis Day Care Association Board Chair, Committee Chair of Cedar Riverside Family Opportunities for Living Collaborative, a member of Child Care Works and Care Fellowship Advocacy Group and a number of other early childhood related advocacy groups. She continues to work on behalf of families with young children, working as part of the Kids Count on Us advocacy coalition.



**Mary Solheim** is currently director of the Explorer Club Summer Camp and Recreation Program in Maplewood, Minnesota. She holds a B.A. in Education from St. Mary’s University, an M.A. in Liberal Studies from Hamline University and an M.A. in Education from the College of St. Catherine. Mary was an elementary classroom teacher in grades 3 and 5 and taught science for the middle school years in the St. Paul and Minneapolis Public Schools. She also taught science at Crosswinds Art and Science School in Woodbury, MN and New Spirit Charter School in St. Paul, MN. Mary has published poetry in “Theatre of the Mind” and “The Storm Within” and is also an avid photographer. In her life outside of work, Mary loves to be home and focus on her family.



**Debra Messenger**, All Ages & Faces Academy in St. Paul.

**Kiarra Zackery** is an equity and inclusion manager for a west metro suburb. Before starting this position in the fall of 2020, she was an educator and equity specialist for Robbinsdale Area Schools for five years. Kiarra holds a B.A. from the University of St. Thomas in Sociology, with a concentration in Race, Class, and Gender and an M.Ed. from University of Minnesota, Twin Cities in Elementary Education. In her most recent position, Kiarra facilitates racial equity based training for city staff, as well as examines and develops processes, practices, and procedures for more equitable outcomes. Kiarra is passionate about all aspects of social justice but has a deep love for education and inspiring the next generation of thought leaders. In her free time, Kiarra enjoys spending time with her two daughters and large extended family, traveling, and watching movies.



**Zach Johnson** is a high school science teacher at Columbia Heights Public Schools. He holds a B.S. from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities in Plant Biology and a M.A. in Science Education from Western Governors University. Zach coaches track and field and serves as the high school labor management representative for Local 710. He enjoys spending time outdoors with his family and canoeing in the Boundary Waters.



**Kimberly Antonsen** is an early childhood educator in the Waubun/Ogema/White Earth School District. They currently have all day, every day programming which gives her a full-time teaching position. She has been an early childhood educator in Minnesota for 20 years. She has a B.A. from Minnesota State University, Moorhead and a Master's Degree in Early Childhood Education from Concordia University, St. Paul. She is in her first term as a school board member for the Frazee/Vergas School District. Kimberly has held a number of positions within Education Minnesota including, chairperson of the ECFE/ABE task force, Western North Governing Board member, and co-president of her local union. She has always been interested in policy and practice in education. If you see something that needs to be fixed, you need to speak up and do everything in your power to make the change. Kimberly enjoys being that voice and hopes she can continue advocating for not only for her colleagues, but for all early childhood professionals across Minnesota. She lives in the Frazee, Minnesota with her husband and two children. Kimberly's free time is spent watching her kid's extra-curricular activities especially softball and baseball in the summer. She never misses a game.



**Rachel Reinfeld** is an early childhood special education teacher, birth to three. Rachel has a B.A. in Anthropology and a Master's in Education from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. She believes in ensuring access to quality care and education for children of all abilities and backgrounds. Rachel lives in Minneapolis and in her free time enjoys traveling, reading, and spending time with family.



**Rachel Johnson** is a kindergarten teacher in the New Prague Area School District. She holds a B.A. from Winona State University in Elementary Education and a M.A. in Education with Early Childhood Education emphasis from Concordia University. She has a passion for teaching and recognizes the importance of providing support throughout the foundational years of a child's early childhood development, including investing in initiatives to support children in health, education, and social-emotional growth. In her free time, she loves spending time with friends and family, running, reading, and traveling.



**Suad Hassan** is a child care director and owner at Ayeeyo's Childcare and has been in education field for more than 15 years. She continues working in this field because she believes that every child deserves an equitable education. She currently works for Minneapolis Public Schools as School Success Program Assistant Family Liaison. Her passion is to advocate for early childhood education and empower families. She has B.A. in Human Services and Health Care Management from St. Mary's University. She also has many years of experience working with refugees and diverse populations. She has worked on projects such family engagement workshops and involvements in early childhood development communities. Also, she has engaged MPS district employees and other city employees in professional developments around cultural competence and how to better serve the community. All these positions taught her the importance of being proactive, and priding herself on the ability to adapt to all kinds of situations as they arise.



**Kirsten Ragatz** taught kindergarten and pre-kindergarten in the Minneapolis Public Schools for 24 years. She holds a B.A. in History from Smith College, and a M.Ed. in Early Childhood Education from Boston University. Ragatz started her career in child care centers in both Massachusetts and Minnesota, and was proud to finish it as a High Five teacher at Jefferson Community School in Minneapolis. She is an avid reader, and has more than 1,200 books on her "read" list on Goodreads.



**Karin J. Swenson** is the executive director of Meadow Park Preschool and Child Care Center in Rochester, Minnesota. She has been in her current position since 1993. She holds a B.S. from Winona State University in Education, with an emphasis in Elementary Education, Special Education, and Theatre Arts, and a M.S. from Winona State University in Counselor Education. In her free time, she enjoys music, theatre, and crafting in many different mediums. Her current crafting projects include wire-wrapped jewelry and needle felting.



## Special Thanks

**Ikram Mohamed**

**Nasro Abshir**

## Project Staff

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**Robin Wonsley Worlobah**, EPIC, Education Minnesota, community organizer.

Education Minnesota's EPIC team and ISAI AH's Kids Count on Us Coalition based our work on the following team values:

1. Increase access to equitable and appropriate care and education for all of Minnesota's children under the age of compulsory education.
2. Lift up the profession, robustly addressing compensation and professional development levels of the workforce that cares for and educates our youngest learners.
3. Support no proposal unless it aligns with both Value 1 and Value 2.

## A Special Note from Education Minnesota

We are tremendously grateful to ISAI AH, for it has been through this partnership that we have been better able to understand the vastly complex ecosystem that is Minnesota's birth-4 care and education system. Our collaboration allowed Education Minnesota to refine its calls for a better early childhood education system in Minnesota.

# An Equitable, Transformative Policy Shift for a Better Early Childhood Care System

In what follows, the joint EPIC and Kids Count On Us policy team offer a bold vision for building a truly equitable early child care system in Minnesota. Children are diverse at many levels and need to see themselves reflected in their care and education system. We propose that the state adopt research-based frameworks paired with a regional governance structure that can create a better system for educators, children, and communities. We present our case in the following sections:

## Part 1: The Current System of Early Childhood Education and Care

- I. Statement of Commitment to the Rights of Young Learners
- II. The State of Early Childhood Education and Care in the United States
- III. The State of Early Childhood Education and Care in Minnesota
  - A. *lack of public awareness*
  - B. *access and equity*
  - C. *labor concerns*
  - D. *faulty governance*
  - E. *market-driven complications*
  - F. *cost*

## Part 2: Minnesota's Path to an Equitable, Early Childhood Education and Care System

- IV. Pre-Kindergarten Access Is Only One Piece of the Total System
- V. The Proposal
- VI. How Will Minnesota Afford This Program?
- VII. The Financial Benefits Associated With Early Childhood Care and Education
- VIII. A Call to Action

# Part 1: The Current System of Early Childhood Education and Care

## I. Statement of Commitment to the Rights of Young Learners

It is our profound belief that every child has a right to culturally relevant, trauma-informed, high-quality care and education, and collectively we have the resources we need to provide that care and education. In Minnesota, political parties and divergent stakeholders have differed over whether any such care and education should be universally available, or whether the state's only commitment should be to offer subsidies to low-income families to help them pay for some level of care. Stakeholders fight over whether the small amount of money that Minnesota dedicates to our youngest citizens and learners should go "with" the families, in the form of scholarships and vouchers, or into the public school system, slowly increasing the number of seats available in the state's pre-K system. This allows the student and family to use the funding at whatever care and education settings they can find. Unfortunately, scholarships do not help nearly enough families. In addition, many of the families that do use the scholarships often cannot cover the remaining costs of care, and this forces the centers operating on razor-thin margins to decide whether to cover the remaining costs or kick families out mid-year, or not take on the children at the beginning of the year. Equally troubling is the fact that there are not nearly enough pre-K seats available statewide to meet the need.

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***Every child has a right to culturally relevant, trauma-informed, high-quality care and education, and collectively we have the resources we need to provide that care and education, grounded in a mindset of scarcity which is advanced to protect the interests of a wealthy few.***

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Meanwhile in other parts of the world, states have long-since recognized the value of investing in young people, and they are reaping benefits unseen in the United States and Minnesota. In Norway, "kindergartens" (which encompass care and education for all birth-5 year olds) provide children under compulsory school age with good opportunities for development and activity in close understanding and collaboration with children's homes. In fact, the Norwegian law that guides these services acknowledges that the care and education of birth-5 year olds is fundamental to the country's democratic system:

The Norwegian Kindergarten Act acknowledges the care and play "promote learning and formation as a basis for [...] all-round development. The children shall be able to develop their creative zest, sense of wonder and need to investigate. They shall learn to take care of themselves, each other, and nature. The Kindergarten shall promote democracy and equality and counteract all forms of discrimination (Haug & Storø, 2013, pp. 1-2).

We know that high-quality early childhood education leads to lifelong, profound benefits for children and communities, and that the cost of such programming is far surpassed by the financial benefits reaped by the state over the long term. We have "better evidence for the effectiveness of early childhood education than for almost any other social or educational intervention" (Bartik, 2014, p. 20).

## II. The State of Early Childhood Education and Care in the United States

We know that high-quality, early childhood care and education leads to lifelong, profound benefits for children. In addition, states reap significant financial benefits that more than account for the costs of such programming. Unfortunately, state and federal governments still have not prioritized this vital part of our civic infrastructure. Lawmakers must reverse this trend to build a successful, engaged citizenry and lower the costs spent later because of failure to invest in best practices for children in their earliest years.

We know it could be easy to blame this problem on the global pandemic caused by COVID-19. Unfortunately, the birth-4 care and education industry was “broken and unsustainable long before COVID-19 came along. But the pandemic has greatly exposed the problems that the early education system has been facing for years,” and, in fact, threatens its collapse (Transforming Minnesota’s Early Childhood Workforce, 2020, pp. 1-2). While the coronavirus has made the deficiencies in early child care and education even more damaging for families, communities, and industry, the pandemic has not created these problems. It just amplified the ways in which our system has failed.

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***We also know that effective pre-K experiences can close and eliminate gaps, and that appropriate interventions from birth-4 can lead to a lifetime trajectory that benefits both the student (higher graduation rates, lower violent crime and incarceration rates, higher lifetime incomes) and the communities in which they live (higher tax base, lower costs spent on criminal justice, addiction, and other social services).***

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Early care and education “and the policies, programs, and funding that support it have a long and complicated history in the United States. Unlike kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) education, the early care and education ‘system’ is a hodgepodge of different programs with different goals, constituencies, and requirements implemented with great variation across states and localities” (National Academies of Sciences, 2018, p. 45). The system of early care and education in the United States “has not kept pace with the rapid changes in family life and new scientific understandings about how young children learn” (Adams, et al., June 2017, p. 1). In addition, the nation is operating from outdated policies that are deeply problematic for children and families of color. Historically, “early care and education in the United States has been delivered through multiple systems with multiple goals, with the most marked bifurcation being between programs for middle- to upper-class children and programs for poor children” (National Academies of Sciences, 2018, p. 46).

Our current jumble of a “system” causes disparities for many children before they even reach the K-12 system. By the time many children enroll in kindergarten, lower income children are far behind high-income children, and “Black children are on average nearly nine months behind in math and almost seven months behind in reading compared to their White non-Hispanic peers” (Friedman-Krauss & Barnett, June 2020). Scholars have shown that “math and reading abilities at kindergarten entry are powerful predictors of later school success, and children who enter kindergarten behind are unlikely to catch up” (Friedman-Krauss & Barnett, June 2020). In addition, researchers have confirmed that lower income children who do not have early childhood care and education interventions are more likely to drop out

of school before graduation and more likely to be arrested as juveniles (Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001, pp. 2343-2344).

We know, however, that effective interventions during the birth-3 period can close the cognitive gap between low-income children and their peers (Duncan & Sojourner, 2013, p. 962). We also know that effective pre-K experiences can close and eliminate gaps, and that appropriate interventions from birth-4 can lead to a lifetime trajectory that benefits both the student (higher graduation rates, lower violent crime and incarceration rates, higher lifetime incomes) and the communities in which they live (higher tax base, lower costs spent on criminal justice, addiction and other social services) (Bartik, 2014; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001; Yoshikawa et al., 2013).

### III. The State of Early Childhood Education and Care in Minnesota

The early care and education system in Minnesota is fragmented, deeply and systemically underfunded, and fraught with inequity. This is the case in most states, though many are far ahead of Minnesota in their efforts to solve these problems. Minnesota's system is deeply underfunded. It yields profound achievement and opportunity gaps long before children reach kindergarten and at the same time relies on the exploitation of an overwhelming female workforce that lives at the financial margins of poverty. Lawmakers and advocates have justified the fragmentation of the system with the societal myth that caring for children birth-4 is nothing more than babysitting. Too many pundits and advocates spread this destructive narrative, which denigrates the labor performed by women. Many have also wrapped arguments in favor of the current system in a coded veil of systemic racism that permeates every corner of public education and public health programming in Minnesota. The first four years of life are the most dynamic and important years for brain development and learning. Thus, Minnesota needs to sustain the development of knowledge and skills for all employees working with this delicate population of children.

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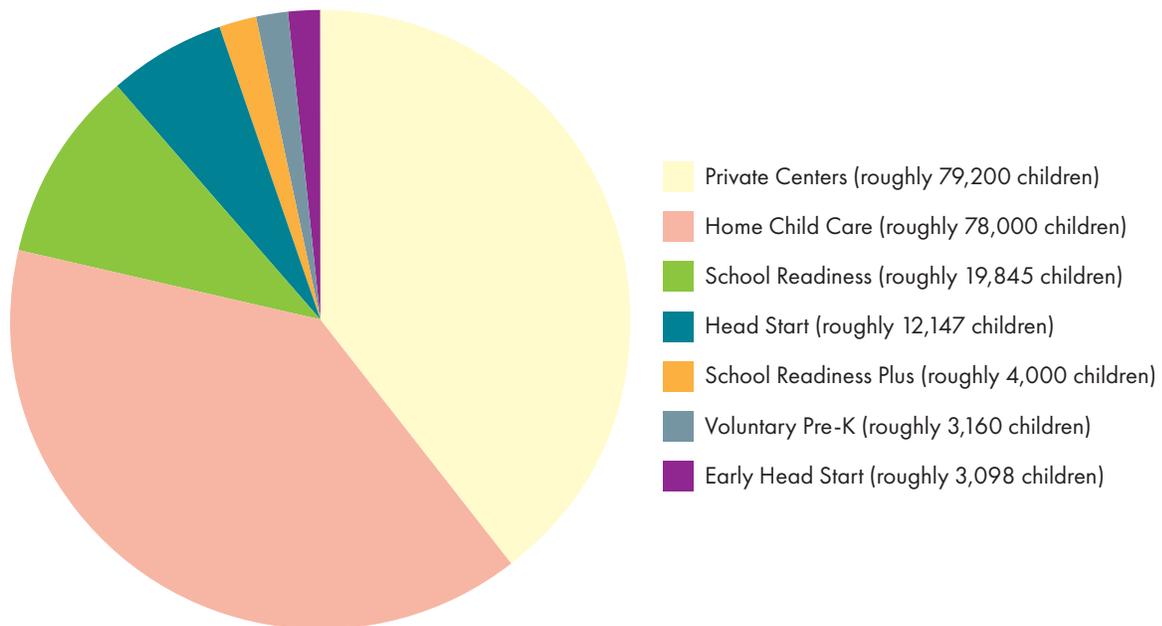
***Minnesota relies on its lowest paid education workforce to power this fraught system while lawmakers do not acknowledge that most child care teachers earn poverty-level wages.***

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One of the greatest losses that results from our fragmented system is that we fail to uphold best practices, such as culturally relevant care and pedagogy. The Parent Aware system, for example, recognizes many important practices but devalues those that are critical by giving the highest possible ratings to centers that follow most but not all of their espoused standards. Minnesota's policy-level decisions related to early care and education have not emphasized the centralized, critical nature of care and educating being culturally relevant and anti-racist. We support and encourage and adoption of Ibram X. Kendi's method for defining what is or is not a racist policy: "A racist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups. An antiracist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial equity between racial groups" (Kendi, 2019, p. 18). Culturally relevant practice, or pedagogy, is central to learning for all children. It plays a role "not only in communicating and receiving information, but also in shaping the thinking process of groups and individuals" (Culturally Responsive Teaching, 2020). Minnesota has directed the bulk of its early child care resources to trying to expand pre-kindergarten. In Minnesota, only 55% of our birth-4 year olds are enrolled in any care or education program at all. Graph 1 illustrates where Minnesota's birth-4 year olds who are enrolled in programs go for care and education.

The United States Census Bureau, Rob Grunewald from the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, and Aaron Sojourner from the University of Minnesota calculate that there are roughly 350,300 birth-4 year olds in Minnesota. If we include all seats in child care centers, home child care centers, Head Start, voluntary pre-K, school readiness, and school readiness plus, Minnesota has space for roughly 194,000 children. If Minnesota fills all available pre-K seats, in all of our licensed public and private care centers and pre-K programs, the state is accommodating only 55% of Minnesota’s birth-4 year olds.

Only 8,237 of the roughly 87,500 4-year-olds in Minnesota are enrolled in a state pre-K program. We do not want to suggest that the remaining 79,000 4-year-olds are getting no educational preparation for kindergarten, though that is true for many. The rest get a disparate level of care and education via a fragmented system where the word “quality” means something different to each stakeholder. The results are an achievement gap that leaves tens of thousands of children unprepared for kindergarten and lacking earlier interventions that are both cheaper and more effective than later interventions. The results include parents who cannot join the workforce because they have no access to care and education for their children. Finally, Minnesota relies on its lowest paid education workforce to power this fraught system while lawmakers do not acknowledge that most child care teachers earn poverty-level wages.



*Minnesota Department of Education, 2019*

In what follows, we explore the tensions and inequities embedded in Minnesota’s early child care system. All stakeholders will need to account for and help remedy these problems in order to provide Minnesota’s youngest learners with a system that meets all their needs. Chart 1 provides a summary of each inequity we discuss in remainder of section.

## Chart 1: Tensions and Inequities Embedded in Minnesota's Early Child care System

### Public Awareness

- The science of brain development is lost in public discourse.
- We treat early childhood care and education as “simply keeping kids safe.”

### Access and Equity

- Minnesota does not provide enough funding to offer every child access to high-quality care.
- Many families do not have the option to participate in high-quality early childhood programming.
- White students have more options than other demographics of children, especially children of color.

### Labor Concerns

- The labor of early childhood educators is significantly undervalued, and many educators make extremely low wages. Child care workers live on poverty-level wages.
- The systems of credentialing and licensing are inconsistent, illogical, and reinforce systems of sexism and racism.
- Labor conditions have led to high staff turnover among early childhood educators. Researchers have documented the harm educator attrition causes children.
- Staff attrition is often the highest at centers serving students most in need of early education programming, especially students of color.

### Faulty Oversight

- Minnesota splits education and care in problematic ways.
- Minnesota's Parent Aware Rating System is not accessible to many child care centers, and it fails to provide appropriate information to parents.

### Market-Driven Complications

- Minnesota relies on market competition to drive a vast majority of early child care options.
- Too many centers, especially those serving children of color, close for solely financial reasons.
- A market-based system will never fix the broken birth-4 system, as the costs of high-quality care are greater than families can afford, and the amount families can afford, coupled with Minnesota's meager investment, leaves a labor force living in or near poverty.

As with most problems in public education, the stakeholders that designed, and continue to maintain, the current system were blinded by systemic inequities and largely ignored scientific evidence about what works best for children and educators. It is best to say, Minnesota arrived at this moment because of sexism, racism, ignorance to the complexity of the work, and a systemically inequitable governance system.

## *A lack of public awareness*

One of the reasons Minnesota’s birth-4 system is so lacking is that when our K-12 system was developed, we simply did not have access to the brain research or the advanced social science that we have now. We simply did not know that there was a critical developmental need for all children, ages birth-4. Early child care options were developed out a need for safe places for children to be so that their parents could join the workforce. We know now what we did not know decades ago: Earlier-age educational interventions provide more child development benefits than once supposed (Bartik, 2014, p. 5). Given that the brain is more malleable prior to age 5 than in later years, early childhood education can enhance cognitive, social, and emotional skills that will prepare children for later learning (Bartik, 2014, p. 5). We know now that the first five years of life are the years during which most brain development occurs:

The foundations of brain architecture, and subsequent lifelong developmental potential, are laid down in a child’s early years through a process that is exquisitely sensitive to external influence. Early experiences in the home, in other care settings, and in communities interact with genes to shape the developing nature and quality of the brain’s architecture. The growth and then environmentally-based pruning of neuronal systems in the first years support a range of early skills, including cognitive (early language, literacy, math), social (theory of mind, empathy, prosocial), persistence, attention, and self-regulation and executive function skills (the voluntary control of attention and behavior). Later skills—in schooling and employment—build cumulatively upon these early skills. (Yoshikawa et al., October 2013)

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***Researchers have confirmed that the early care of infants and young children has tremendous impact on child brain development which will influence all future literacy development and learning.***

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It is illogical to claim that education starts at kindergarten. Education starts much earlier, and the period of birth-4 “is the time when brain development is at its most vulnerable to external interactions. Such interactions, strongly influenced by the quality of the care and teaching and the learning environments that families and societies provide, co-determine over time the developmental, educational, biological, and health outcomes that progressively characterize individual lives” (National Research Council, 2015, p. 57). Conversely, we also know that young infants’ and young children’s exposures to adversity and stress, which are disproportionately prevalent in impoverished communities of low socioeconomic status—have direct effects on the structure and function of the developing brain (National Research Council, 2015, p. 58). Trauma in very early life becomes “biologically embedded” in the anatomic structure and function of the growing brain (Hertzman, 2012).

In other words, though child care has for years been thought of primarily as a way to care for children so that their parents could participate in the workforce, it turns out that the early years of infant toddler, and young childhood are the years when the young children’s brains most need careful attention. Scholars with the National Research Council (2015) have argued that “given the foundational and rapid processes of brain development during foundational periods of early development, this is a window of great risk of vulnerability to developmental disruption and a great potential for receptivity to positive developmental influences and interventions” (National Research Council, 2015, p. 60).

Researchers have confirmed that the early care of infants and young children has tremendous impact on child brain development which will influence all future literacy development and learning. In addition, once a child gets to kindergarten, the need for care does not go away. Unfortunately, public schools have been forced to focus primarily on standardized test scores. This has led to a harmful disinvestment in art, recess, physical education, social studies, social workers, counselors, and social-emotional learning opportunities. We cannot separate care from education, and when we pretend this is possible, we develop systems that fail our young people.

### *A lack of access and equity*

In our previous section, we presented the data on the number of children not served by the current pre-K system in Minnesota. However, 4-year-olds are only part of the conversation. Minnesota continues to focus on one aspect of the problem at a time and thus fails to make the kind of systemic change that will break the cycle of inequitable opportunities for children.

Minnesota stakeholders have long focused the early childhood conversation around three questions. They include:

1. How can the state increase its commitment to the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)?
2. How can the state increase the number of seats in Voluntary Pre-kindergarten (VPK) by a few hundred or a few thousand seats?
3. How much money should the state allocate for the early childhood scholarship program?

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***Most Minnesota families cannot afford high-quality care. Most care centers operate with very small budgets, and most early childhood educators live at the economic margins of society with approximately half of the workforce relying on public assistance.***

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First, by limiting ourselves to such a small array of options, we buy into and reinforce the false narrative that bolder action is impossible. Over the past several decades, Minnesota has disinvested in the public sector at an alarming rate. That is to say, the money made available to fund birth-4 care and education is not a fixed amount. It is solely the result of decisions made at the policy level. Lawmakers justify these decisions with a misguided belief that the markets can solve these problems. They also fall prey to sexism, racism, and a gross misunderstanding of the critical importance of high-quality care and education for birth-4-year-old Minnesotans, so many lawmakers fail to understand the complexity of this crucial work that requires a professional workforce.

Second, continuing to address the problem by tweaking the numbers in the fragmented and inequitable system we have only creates winners and losers. Any increases to the scholarship program will take money away from CCAP, from the ability to increase access to high-quality pre-K or school readiness plus and so on. In addition, calls to build a universal pre-K system for 4-year-olds ignore the financial harm such a change would lead to for the rest of the birth-4 care and education ecosystem. By taking 4-year-olds out of centers, we increase the costs of the center. This decreases the income for those learning centers and leads to higher costs for ages 0-3 care and education. Finally, this move often creates a system that results in even lower wages for an already under-compensated workforce.

The economic model we currently rely on for birth-4 care and education is fundamentally broken. Lawmakers cannot fix the system with a few minor tweaks. By spending 0.4% of our state budget on the system, we leave the rest up to the markets. As we will discuss in a section following this, Minnesota cannot provide high-quality care and education by solely relying on the free market. Infant care is expensive, precisely because of the low staff-to-child ratios that are required. Most Minnesota families cannot afford high-quality care. Most care centers operate with very small budgets, and most early childhood educators live at the economic margins of society with approximately half of the workforce relying on public assistance. Minnesota is one of 40 of the 50 states in which families pay more for child care than for mortgages or rent (Power to the Profession, March 2020, p. 9).

### *A workforce plagued with labor concerns rooted in sexism, racism, and low wages*

Minnesota has built a fragmented system that further sustains racist and sexist inequities. If we do not have the courage to re-envision birth-4 care and education and the labor force associated with it, we will never be able to challenge these inequities. The field of early child care and education is the lowest paying major among all Bachelor of Arts majors, and over half of the country's birth-4 workforce is reliant on public assistance to get by (Whitebook, McLean, Austin, & Edwards, 2018). It is not acceptable that tens of thousands of Minnesota families do not have access to early care and education programs. It is also not acceptable that the professionals who care for and educate our youngest learners are compensated so poorly that they overwhelmingly rely on state and federal public assistance (National Academies of Sciences, 2018, p. 192; Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014, p. 85).

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### ***Minnesota lawmakers must confront and improve the poor working conditions and the systemic sexism and racism embedded within the current early education system in the state.***

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We have a long way to go to build up our current workforce so that it has the appropriate knowledge, competencies, security, and compensation in order to offer effective care and education for our youngest learners. The professionals who provide care and education for our youngest learners have, historically, “had the weakest, least explicit and coherent, and least resourced infrastructure for professional learning and workforce supports” (National Research Council, 2015, p. 504). Minnesota lawmakers must confront and improve the poor working conditions and the systemic sexism and racism embedded within the current early education system in the state.

Researchers have taught us that a child's experience in early education and care is “directly linked to the well-being of their care givers” (Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1989, p. 2). Unfortunately, federal and state lawmakers have not used this important finding as a metric to guide how much financial support they allocate for early childhood educator compensation. In their pioneering study, Whitebook, Howes, and Phillips (1989) reported, “many Americans recognize that child care teachers are underpaid” but unfortunately “outdated attitudes about women's work and the family obscure our view of teachers' economic needs and the demands of their work. If a job is in child care it is seen as an extension of women's familiar role of rearing children, professional preparation, and adequate compensation seems unnecessary” (Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1989, p. 2).

The financial well-being of most early childhood educators is neither sustainable nor adequate. Chart 2 provides a summary of the wage gap experienced by a majority of early child care educators. Educators

working with children from birth-4 accounted for more Medicaid costs than any other labor demographic. In addition, the children/dependents of early childhood educators enroll in social assistance programs at higher rates than other demographics of children. Recently, federal agencies reported that approximately 127,000 children/dependents of early childhood care workers have enrolled in Medicaid and/or the Children’s Health Insurance Program.

The U.S. federal government also allocates \$328 million annually to provide child care workers and their families with food stamp benefits and that amount only covers 128,000 families at a cost of approximately \$2,580 each. Finally, we know that 41% of early child care workers are eligible for the Federal Earned Income Tax Credit. (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014). This figure reflects the labor force from 2007-2011 as reported in aggregated government administrative data, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the U.S. Census Bureau. In addition, lawmakers should remember these figures do not reflect the early child care workers participating in: nutrition program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), housing supports, free and reduced price lunch, child care subsidies and state-earned income tax credits.

### Chart 2: Federal Cost of Early Child Care Educator Wage Gap

Total number of U.S. child care workers*	906,000**
Households enrolled in 1 or more federal assistance programs***	311,000 (46%)
Average cost per enrolled household	\$7,860
Total cost	\$2.4 billion

*The figures displayed in this chart were obtained from Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes (2014) report: Worthy work, STILL unlivable wages: The early childhood workforce 25 years after the National Child Care Staffing Study.*

*\*Child care worker is defined as individuals working in “schools, child daycare services, religious organizations, and private households.”*

*\*\*This figure reflects the labor force from 2007-2011 as reported in aggregated government administrative data, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the U.S. Census Bureau.*

*\*\*\*Researchers only accounted for households participating or declaring: (1) the federal earned income tax credit, (2) Medicaid and Children’s Health Insurance Program, (3) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and/or (4) Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. This chart DOES NOT reflect individuals enrolled in: Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), housing supports, free and reduced price lunch, child care subsidies, state earned income tax credits, and/or Medicaid pre-ACA.*

Finally, educators will need professional development to do that work effectively. Other states and nations understand the importance of a better system, understand the return on investment, and prioritize early care and education far more robustly. The United States spends .04% of our GDP on birth-4 care and education. Other countries spend far more, up to 2% of their GDP, recognizing that their return on investment more than pays for the initial cost (National Academies of Sciences, 2018, p. 193). Minnesota is far behind,

leaving families and children at the whim of a system we know is deeply inequitable, and ensuring that the costs borne by an economy that fails to offer high-quality care and education when children are young are far higher when those children are older.

### *A problem rooted in faulty oversight*

Minnesota offers faulty oversight and allows too many state agencies to share governance of the early education and care system in the state. Lawmakers must start by examining the complicated, bureaucratic structures that have caused many of the inequities in the current system. The current governance structure operates from the premise that “care” is distinct from “education.” In Minnesota, the Department of Education oversees all things K-12, and a Department of Health and Human Services provides oversight for child care systems. This distinction, between education and care, is, of course, false.

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***We have incorrectly separated early childhood care and education in our governance system. In doing so, we have left early educators without the tools they need to be effective in their jobs and without the compensation needed to create the stable workforce our children need.***

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We have incorrectly separated early childhood care and education in our governance system. In doing so, we have left early educators without the tools they need to be effective in their jobs and without the compensation needed to create the stable workforce our children need. We justify paying so little for our state’s youngest learners with myths about the “simplicity” of the work. Young children need both care and education, and children in the K-12 system need both care and education. The false distinction between care and education leads to two different cultures, two different vocabularies, and two different agencies fighting at the Legislature for too few resources. It also creates an environment that fosters discord rather than collaboration between state agencies.

In addition, Minnesota relies heavily on the Parent Aware system as the primary mechanism for families to make informed choices about child education and care. The lens of the Parent Aware system is simply not broad enough, nor does it work from an intersectional, equity lens. Minnesota’s Parent Aware system does not take into account the vastly diverse types of centers and care that are a part of the early care and education landscape in Minnesota. Thus, many providers and families feel decision makers silence and ignore their concerns with this problematic measure of quality.

We recognize the utility of a rating system designed to help families navigate such a chaotic, underfunded, and inconsistent system. The notion is simple: State policy makers need to develop benchmarks of best practice, and give centers stars for meeting those benchmarks. This will help parents make decisions about where to send their children.

When we look at Minnesota’s current Parent Aware system with an equity lens, we run into immediate barriers. First, as discussed above, there are troubles with the definition of “quality” in this rating system. The system gives its highest rating to centers that fail to reach important benchmarks. If a family chooses a center based on a four-star rating, they can know that the center implements “most” of the following benchmarks:

- Responds to unique cultural customs and needs of children and families.
- Offers activities that encourage family participation and help children transition to kindergarten.

- Gives families opportunities to provide feedback about the program.
- Shares child development updates with families to set goals together.
- Makes accommodations for children with special needs and their families.
- Has highly qualified and trained leadership staff, teachers, and providers.
- Creates a program-wide professional development plan.
- Encourages healthy living through nutrition and physical activity, always evaluating to set goals for growth (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2020).

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***Given the racial opportunity and discipline gaps in our K-12 system, it is not acceptable that centers can earn the system's highest ranking without being in alignment with culturally responsive and relevant practices.***

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Families of color, however, do not want to know if a center might implement culturally responsive practices, or that it might use highly qualified and trained staff. Given the racial opportunity and discipline gaps in our K-12 system, it is not acceptable that centers can earn the system's highest ranking without being in alignment with culturally responsive and relevant practices. We have created a meaningless system if a center can earn a four-star rating by doing MOST of the items on this list. Only centers that meet all of these benchmarks should receive a four-star rating.

Further, the process of applying for a star rating is so cumbersome, that it is impossible for small centers that lack administrative staff to apply. Thus, many truly high-quality programs are not recognized or celebrated by this system, especially our most culturally responsive centers.

### ***A system riddled with market-driven complications and the problem of who defines "quality"***

It is true that there are definable, measurable ways to care for and educate young learners that lead to tremendous lifetime benefits for children. It is also possible to define quality in ways that honors the work of educators while providing financial benefits for communities. Unfortunately, many voices in Minnesota's long-running conversation about this issue have wanted to define quality in a way that ignores funding. Perhaps pretending that we can define "quality" without talking about money is the result of a desire to get lawmakers reluctant to spend taxpayer dollars to move legislation. Nevertheless, it is dishonest, and without including money in the conversation, we will not get to an equitable or effective system.

Our current birth-4 system relies on underpaid educators, leading to high turnover and high state expenditure on social services for members of this workforce. Continuing to rely on a market economy to hold up our child care and education system is continuing to expect extraordinarily inequitable results in terms of access, quality of care and education, professional development, and compensation.

Similarly, there are equity concerns at play as soon as anyone uses the term, "quality," as it relates to the care and education of young learners. As is the case with history writ large, those who get to tell the story get to define the terms, and the people who have had by far the largest say in how we develop care and education programs for our youngest learners have been White and middle class people. The history of the American public education system is a lesson in inequity. We have invested billions of dollars

in high-stakes tests, even when we know those assessments are racially biased. People coming into the teaching profession in Minnesota have to pass racially biased licensure tests controlled by large corporate interests. We have approached the teaching of students through a White lens, because White people have had the largest say in curriculum decisions. Stakeholders must confront and transform this reality to affect real change for Minnesota's youngest learners.

An equitable education does not mean that every Minnesota child gets the same thing. There is no way to develop a specific, scripted curriculum, for example that is universal, equitable, and high quality. Every Minnesota child does not have the same needs and does not experience the same cultural, religious, linguistic, or racial background. Every child does not carry the same burden of childhood exposure to trauma, or suffer from the same mental health challenges. In addition, not every child has experienced discrimination based on identity, though many have. However, ignoring this diversity of need creates even deeper levels of trauma. It is vital for children to see both themselves and others reflected in their curriculum. It is also important that they see their own identities mirrored in the way learning happens and in the workforce that cares for and educates them.

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***We need alignment with the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress, but we also need an equitable formal structure to bring community and parent voices to the tables that decide the particulars of that care and education.***

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Because our children are diverse and still need to see themselves reflected in their care and education system, we propose that Minnesota, through a Department of Early Care and Education, adopt state-approved frameworks for early care and education backed by research. State leaders should also develop a structure of regional governance that can create a formal process for defining "quality" within those state-approved frameworks.

Throughout this paper exists a tension—a tension between demanding each child have access to the care and education necessary for their development and the temptation to define exactly what that care and education will look like. The state can and should adopt a framework that mirrors what research shows makes a difference in the lives of kids. In fact, Minnesota already does this in its Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (Minnesota Department of Education, 2020). Smaller regional bodies, bodies that include teachers from public schools and child care centers, parents, special education experts, and Head Start directors, should be the ones adopting particular curricula and making decisions about nutrition, and needs for particular resources. We need alignment with the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress, but we also need an equitable formal structure to bring community and parent voices to the tables that decide the particulars of that care and education.

Not all early education programs yield lifelong or communal benefits; in fact, some states have spent a lot of money on large-scale, low-quality programs that yield little to no measurable benefit. Duncan and Sojourner (2013) caution against losing effectiveness when we increase the scale of programs (p. 962). We have to use a racial-equity lens in any attempt to define "quality," and we have to be exceptionally clear about the political context and culturally lenses used to label one program as "higher quality" than another program in a different ZIP code.

### *An expensive, inequitable system*

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines affordable child care as not exceeding 7% of a family's income. Unfortunately, Minnesota families are far outpacing that amount. According to the Economic Policy Institute's (2019) recent calculations:

- Minnesota ranks 4th out of 51 for most expensive child care in the nation.
- Minnesota is one of 33 states where infant care is more expensive than college.
- In Minnesota, infant care costs 30.8% more than the average cost of rent.
- In Minnesota, child care for two children—an infant and a 4-year-old—costs \$28,338 which is 60.7% more than the average rent.
- In Minnesota, infant care would take up 21.2% of a median family's income.

Chart 3 provides a comparison of the astronomical, and ever-growing, costs associated with early childhood education and care in the state.

**Chart 3: Minnesota Child Care Costs Compared to Other Large Household Expenditures \***

Household expense	Average annual cost	Cost per month
Infant care	\$16,087	\$1,341
4 y/o care	\$12,252	\$1,021
College	\$11,226	\$936
Housing	\$11,137	\$928

\*Figures based on reporting from the Economic Policy Institute's (2019) report *The Cost of Child Care in Minnesota*.

## Part 2: Minnesota's Path to an Equitable, Early Childhood Education and Care System

### IV. Pre-Kindergarten Access Is Only One Piece of the Total System

Another part of the equation that Minnesota has largely ignored and therefore deeply underfunded is universal access to appropriate and research-based pre-kindergarten for all families who need it. Moreover, we have far too much evidence showing the benefits of high quality pre-K to ignore the consequences of failing to provide it for all Minnesota families who want access to it (EPIC, January 2016; EPIC, May 2019). Not only are we leaving far too many students behind, but we are also ensuring higher costs for communities farther down the line, as the financial return on investment for universal-mixed delivery pre-K is substantial and highly persuasive.

In terms of benefits, we see the most dramatic and immediate benefits in the arenas of cognitive development and academic achievement. Yoshikawa and colleagues (2013) have shown that "robust evidence suggests that a year or two of center-based early childhood education for 3- and 4-year-olds, provided in a developmentally appropriate program, will improve children's early language, literacy, and mathematics skills" (p. 4). In addition, Gorey (2001) evaluated the results of 35 studies and argued, "preschool effects on standardized measures of intelligence and academic achievement were statistically significant, positive, and large; cognitive effects of relatively intense educational interventions were significant and very large, even after 5 to 10 years, and 7 to 8 of every 10 preschool children did better than the average child in a control or comparison group" (p. 9).

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***High school graduation rates also increase in populations of children who have participated in high-quality preschool programs.***

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Geoffrey Nelson, Anne Westhues, and Jennifer MacLeod (2003) integrated the results of 34 preschool experiments and found large cognitive benefits after preschool that remained significant through grade eight. Xiang and Schweinhart (2002) examined students who had participated in Michigan's School Readiness Program for a period of five years and found that the students who had participated in the preschool program had a higher percentage of satisfactory scores on the state tests for both reading and mathematics. They also reported that teachers consistently rated the students who had participated in the preschool program to be significantly more ready to learn than those who had not. Recent work in Boston shows similar gains in reading and math (Shaw, 2014).

High school graduation rates also increase in populations of children who have participated in high-quality preschool programs. Gorey's meta-analysis of 35 preschool studies also found incidences of school dropout to be substantially lower for those who had attended preschool (Gorey, 2001).

Perhaps the most important such study is the High/Scope Perry Preschool study. For five years, the Ypsilanti Community Schools district in Ypsilanti, Michigan tracked the progress of 123 low-income African-American children with characteristics often correlated with a high risk for school failure. The researchers split the children into two subgroups: the randomly assigned 58 children to the preschool program and 65 to the no preschool program. The researchers collected data on both groups from ages

3-11, and again at ages 14, 15, 19, 27, and 40 (Schweinhart, et al., 2005). A larger percentage of the preschool group (77%) than the non-preschool group (60%) graduated from high school. The difference was greater among female students. Among them, 88% of the students who participated in preschool graduated from high school while only 46% of female students from the non-preschool group graduated (Schweinhart, et al., 2005).

David Deming (2009) also compared children who participated in Head Start to their siblings who did not, and the researcher found the siblings who participated in the pre-K program were 8.5% more likely to graduate from high school than their siblings who did not participate in Head Start. In addition, Camilli and colleagues (2010) completed a meta-analysis of 123 studies on preschool benefits and found higher graduation rates among those who participated in high-quality preschool than in those who did not.

Two other academic benefits cited in many studies and confirmed in the larger meta-analyses are a decrease in the likelihood that children will be retained in the same grade from one year to the next and a decrease in the chances that children will ever require special education services. Bartik (2014), and the Missouri Department of Education both cite these findings, as do Gorey et al. (2001) in their meta-analysis of 35 individual studies of the benefits of preschool.

It is important from the outset to understand that the opportunity gap is “not a discrete gap, but a gradient—a steady decline in children’s ability as family income falls” (Barnett & Lamy, 2013). While researchers have established that children in poverty are far behind children of average income, it is also true that children of median income are far behind those in higher income families. One common point made in opposition to universally-available pre-K is that it spends money on children who don’t need it. This is simply not true (Barnett & Lamy, 2013).

## V. The Proposal

“The time is long overdue for society to recognize the significance of out-of-home relationships for young children, to esteem those who care for them when their parents are not available, and to compensate them adequately” (National Research Council, 2001).

Education Minnesota and ISAIH call for an overhaul of Minnesota’s birth-4 care and education system. That overhaul can begin as soon as we cease the practice of declaring that care is what happens with younger children, and that education is what happens with older children. This premise is, of course, false, and we do real harm by allowing this popular narrative to continue. We know that the first years of life are the most critical years for interventions that lead to a lifetime of learning, and that when we care for very young children with the skills and knowledge about the ways in which their brains are developing, we are doing more than just keeping them safe. We also know that once children enroll in kindergarten, or middle school, or high school, that they are not simply test subjects. They need more care—more counselors, more social workers, more social-emotional learning, more conflict management skills, more help processing their own traumas—than our current K-12 system gives them. We have to stop pretending that birth-4-year-olds only need care and that our 5-18-year-olds only need education. In the United States, more than 80% of workers have no access to paid leave through their employment, and 93% of low-income employees have no such leave, so “taking unpaid leave means losing much-needed income.”

We therefore propose an entirely new system, Minnesota’s Birth-4 Care and Education System. This new system approaches families through a lens of equity rather than sameness; it is built on an understanding

of the return on investment high-quality early care and education promises, and it is built to be inclusive of all of the stakeholders currently doing their best within the limitations imposed by this fragmented, underfunded, inequitable, system that exists today. It assumes that all stakeholders have important roles to play—schools, community child care centers, home child care centers, Head Start, family, friends, and neighbors caring for children, and more. To accommodate the needs of Minnesota families, we will need every program we have now and more.

The common narrative that is too often allowed to remain unquestioned implies that if one of these constituencies wins, the others lose. We fight over which dollars go to scholarships, and which to voluntary pre-K. We fight over tiny increments in CCAP funding, which we have dramatically, and to our own disadvantage, neglected. We have to do better.

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***In the United States, more than 80% of workers have no access to paid leave through their employment, and 93% of low-income employees have no such leave, so “taking unpaid leave means losing much-needed income.”***

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### *Paid Family and Medical Leave*

Before we get to our framework for birth-4 care and education, it is important to note that paid family and medical leave is an important part of this puzzle. A critical piece of good care for infants is allowing parents paid time off. Over 100 countries, “including virtually all industrialized nations, have adopted parental leave policies. Most ensure women the right to at least two or three months of paid leave around the time of childbirth. By contrast, the U.S. did not require companies to provide leave until 1993, when they were mandated to provide 12 weeks of unpaid leave” (Ruhm, 2007, p. 1). In the United States, more than 80% of workers have no access to paid leave through their employment, and 93% of low-income employees have no such leave, so “taking unpaid leave means losing much-needed income” (Cahn, 2019, p. 1). Paid family and medical leave offering 12 weeks of paid leave for each parent is critical, not only to Minnesota families who could therefore spend more intensive time with their infants, improving both child outcomes and parental mental health.

### *Minnesota’s Birth-4 Care and Education System*

The system we propose needs to be a singular system, from governance at the state level, and through oversight and decision-making at the regional level. Below, we outline a policy framework for Minnesota’s Birth-4 Care and Education System by explaining the following:

- The overarching Minnesota Birth-4 Care and Education Framework
- Birth to 3 Framework
- Pre-K Framework

### *Birth-4 Care and Education Framework*

- The state should create a Minnesota Department of Early Childhood Care and Education. Minnesota needs to move beyond relying on a mythical line between care and education, and we need an agency that oversee a statewide system.

- *The creation of a Minnesota Department of Early Childhood Care and Education aligns with Power to the Profession's call for a professional governance body. This new state agency would:*
  - designate the profession's guidelines
  - set parameters for quality assurance of individuals and professional preparation pathways and programs
  - serve as a liaison and collaborator with state and federal agencies and regulatory bodies
- We also propose a statewide commitment to support 0-3 and pre-K early care and education so that all families who want it can access it. This is not a call for compulsory care and education. It is a call for providing highly effective care and education for all families whose children are under the age of compulsory education who need it, and it includes providing relevant services available for those families who keep children at home before kindergarten, including home visits, parent education, educational resources, health screening, and special education services.
- Minnesota should follow federal regulation and widely adopted frameworks for defining affordability and ensure low-income families pay nothing for access. In addition, the state should provide the resources so no family pays more than 7% of their family income for child care, whether the family has one or more children in any level of the program at the same time (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016, p. 67440).
- The birth-4 ecosystem must include special education services. Children under the age of four who need special education must receive these services in the least restrictive environment possible, ideally the environment in which they are already receiving care and education. Finally, the staff caring for and educating birth to 4-year-old children need regular and consistent access to special education teachers and training, even if they do not currently care for a child with special needs.
- The new state agency would oversee the creation of Regional Early Care and Education Hubs. These hubs have already been envisioned by the Governor's Children's Cabinet, identified there as local cross agency hubs in the Minnesota Preschool Development Birth through Five Grant. These regional hubs would have the following characteristics and functions:
  - *They would be located in counties, economic development regions, MDE's Centers for Excellence, or the locations already established via Head Start directors to maintain continuity of systems already working.*
  - *They would serve as the hubs for community needs as identified by the community needs assessments where possible.*
  - *They would be the seats of Regional Care and Education Boards.*
  - *They would be the centralized source for special education services for all of their sites, as well as for Minnesota friends and family caregivers and parents who choose to care for and educate their birth to 4-year-olds at home.*
  - *They would be the centralized source for resources identified in the community needs assessment.*
- Each Regional Early Care and Education Hub would be guided by a birth-4 Care and Education Board from:
  - *community child care centers not run by the county or the public schools*
  - *representation from exclusive representatives of all birth-4 employees*

- *Public school pre-K directors or teachers*
- *Home child care center owners*
- *The local Head Start director*
- *A licensed special education director*
- *A licensed early childhood teacher*
- *A licensed early childhood family educator*
- *Two community parents, ideally one parent of a birth-3 child and one of a 4-year-old child.*
- These boards will:
  - *Conduct a community needs assessment every three years, the results of which will influence the ongoing continual improvement process of the early child care and education provided in the region.*
  - *Adopt and/or approve specific curricula used in pre-K programs according to the curricular guidelines adopted by the state.*
  - *Train their board members annually on updated information related to culturally relevant growth and development, play/inquiry-based learning, trauma-informed practices, and restorative practices.*
  - *Provide training for staff of all participating centers related to play/inquiry-based learning, trauma-informed practices, and restorative practices.*
  - *Adopt policies that replace exclusionary discipline with appropriate supports, including addressing trauma needs, creating appropriate accommodations, and, above all, developing a culture wherein diversity is the strength of the community and educators never use a deficit-lens to evaluate students.*
  - *Adopt fidelity assessments that will ensure a continual improvement system.*
  - *Create a formal infrastructure to put parents, educators, and providers at the center of creating and developing the curriculum that is appropriate for the students and families in the specific region and that follows the curricular guidelines, found below under the pre-K framework section.*
  - *Assist all sites in meeting compliance for safe and appropriate learning facilities and transportation, including providing bus passes for families in applicable regions.*
  - *Serve as a resource center for sites in need of translation services, nutrition services, social workers, mental health supports, and educator well-being assistance.*
  - *Provide resources for families who choose not to send children to child care or pre-K sites, but who still want information about best practices, brain development, play-based learning, and screening services.*
  - *Provide a mechanism for health, hearing, vision, and dental screenings.*
  - *Conduct home visits for families of newborns and family education classes.*
  - *Oversee birth-3 and pre-K sites to ensure developmental benchmarks are being met, using a continuing approval process.*
- The new state agency will assign licensed special education liaisons to all community centers, home centers, and pre-K settings and provide access to resources that will ensure early assessment and early interventions, family education, and compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of this new governance structure for early education and child care in Minnesota.



### *Community Needs Assessments*

Each regional center will need to conduct an initial community needs assessment (CNAs) to determine the best early childhood education and care model for the residents in their area. These CNAs would ideally be conducted on an annual basis and paired with evaluations across systems to provide stakeholders, educators, and decision-makers with the appropriate data needed to sustain and improve programming.

Researchers and government agencies regularly uses CNAs to improve the social services offered in a particular area. Public health experts have developed some of the most comprehensive CNA models used. Researchers with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have argued that CNAs provide “community leaders with a snapshot of local policy, systems, and environmental change strategies currently in place and helps to identify areas for improvement. With this data, communities can map out a course for health improvement by creating strategies to make positive and sustainable changes in their communities” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013, p. 6). Public health researchers develop CNA questionnaires that investigate needed (1) policy changes, (2) systems changes, and (3) environmental changes.

Advocates for full-service community schools have established the best models for conducting education-based CNAs. In a previous EPIC report, Education Minnesota (2019) argued that CNA data collection must be ongoing, so local educators and leaders have the ability to meet the changing needs of their communities. We reminded policy makers that “a community needs assessment might point to a critical need for mental health services one year, while five years later, that need might be diminished and replaced or eclipsed by new problems that the school can adapt to address, such as housing or immigration insecurity, domestic violence, food insecurity, and/or a growing need for vision and dental services” (Educator Policy Innovation Center, 2019, p. 218).

The regional centers will need to work with community partners to ensure equity is at the forefront of the developed CNA protocol for that area. Communities respond differently to government inquiry, and researchers need the most comprehensive picture as possible of a particular area in order to build the strongest early childhood system of early care and education for the students of that region. CNAs can help education stakeholders and government agencies evaluate community engagement. The Minnesota Department of Education regularly updates guidance on how to create CNAs that are culturally-relevant, equitable, and reflective of the communities being studied. A new Minnesota Department

of Early Care and Education can, likewise, provide assistance to regional boards in conducting the needs assessments necessary to provide the ongoing data they will need to shape and continually reshape their programming.

The Minnesota Department of Education includes a template needs assessment on their website, one that identifies ways in which a particular school could redesign itself to become a community center that does more than just educate students (Minnesota Department of Education, 2020). Figure 2 also provides a representation of an ideal CNA program.

Figure 2: The Community Needs Assessment Process



\*\*Reproduced from the CDC's Participant Workbook on Community Needs Assessments (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013, p. 9).

### *Birth to 3 Framework*

There is no question that we have denigrated the work of caring for and educating our youngest learners for decades; despite growing and now indisputable evidence that brain development is at its most dynamic from ages birth-4, and despite knowing that effective teaching of early learners is every bit as complex and requires as much professional development as teaching at any other age. One could argue that this level of teaching requires even more training and education than teaching at any other age:

The foundations of brain architecture, and subsequent lifelong developmental potential, are laid down in a child's early years through a process that is exquisitely sensitive to external influence. Early experiences in the home, in other care settings, and in communities interact with genes to shape the developing nature and quality of the brain's architecture. The growth and then environmentally-based pruning of neuronal systems in the first years support a range of early skills, including cognitive (early language, literacy, math), social (theory of mind, empathy, prosocial), persistence, attention, and self-regulation and executive function skills (the voluntary control of attention and behavior). Later skills—in schooling and employment—built cumulatively upon these early skills. (Yoshikawa, et al., October 2013)

Many of “the foundations of sophisticated forms of learning, including those important to academic success, are established in the earliest years of life” (National Research Council, 2015, p. 206).

Scholars like Bartik (2014) have taught us “earlier-age educational interventions provide more child development benefits than once supposed.” Given that the brain is more malleable prior to age 5 than in later years, early childhood care and education can enhance cognitive, social, and emotional skills that will prepare children for later learning (Bartik, 2014). In addition, Heckman and Masterov (2007) have explained that “a large body of empirical work at the interface of neuroscience and social science has established that fundamental cognitive and non-cognitive skills are produced in the early years of childhood, long before children start kindergarten [...]. Later remediation of early deficits is costly, and often prohibitively so” (p. 448).

Minnesota's birth-3 care and education programs must:

- Be aligned with the Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress, which describe the importance of play, exploration, and active learning (Minnesota Department of Education, 2020).
- Be universally available. We propose a statewide commitment to support early child care so that all families who want it can access it, both because of its cost caps relative to income and because it will be available throughout the state.
- Be grounded in culturally relevant practices. These practices include providing positive perspectives on parents and families, communication that is based on high expectations, learning that happens within the context of the cultures present in the room, student-centered instruction, culturally mediated instruction, and more (Culturally Responsive, 2020).
- Maintain appropriate ratios for children to staff and children to lead teacher.
- Develop highly trained and fairly compensated teachers. This will require the new Minnesota Department of Early Care and Education to establish and oversee a 12-year timeline for professional development support, as well as making determinations about what certifications, degrees, or licenses are needed for the different levels of work within this sector. (See Workforce Development section)

- Include all licensed child care centers in federal and state programs, including Head Start and home-based child centers.
- Provide centers with sustained state support that ensures low-income families pay no fees and all other families pay on a sliding scale so that no family pays more than 7% of their total family income in fees.
- Offer access to special education services, both for identification and for the appropriate assistance and support to keep children with special education needs in care and education settings as much as possible. Provides all sites with appropriate support so that no children are excluded.

### *Pre-K Framework*

High-quality pre-K leads to lifelong benefits for the children who participate, and financial benefits for our communities and industry. Pre-K can be offered in a mixed delivery model, by school districts, and by child care centers. There are cities and states that are doing this with great success: Boston, West Virginia, and New Jersey all offer lessons from which Minnesota can learn.

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***We believe, as Education Minnesota articulated in its 2016 paper on pre-K, that every Minnesota 4-year-old should have access to high-quality pre-K, because we know the benefits of such access, both for children and for communities.***

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Pre-K programs that meet high standards lead to profound benefits. Researchers have determined:

- High-quality pre-K improves children’s readiness for kindergarten and improves a wide array of lifetime outcomes, including increased graduation rates, lifetime earnings, and decreased incarceration, addiction, and social service dependency rates.
- Participation in high-quality pre-K improves children’s early language, literacy, and mathematics skills.
- High-quality pre-K can dramatically diminish the opportunity gap.
- While all children benefit from pre-K, poor and disadvantaged children make the most gains.
- Poor and disadvantaged children show better achievement when immersed among a diverse array of classmates.
- Middle-income students also benefit from pre-K.
- Children who are dual language learners show large gains from preschool, both in English proficiency and in other academic skills (Bartik, 2014; Yoshikawa et al., October 2013).

We believe, as Education Minnesota articulated in its 2016 paper on pre-K, that every Minnesota 4-year-old should have access to high-quality pre-K, because we know the benefits of such access, both for children and for communities. Where we depart from the 2016 Education Minnesota paper is in acknowledging that simply adding a grade to the K-12 system does not address the profound inequities at earlier ages, either for students or the workforce, and, in fact, could worsen the inequities underlying the problem.

Washington, DC, recently enacted a new, universal pre-K program without making any major changes to birth-3 options. In addition, what happened is what child care centers have been saying would happen: 4-year-olds, who are the cheapest to educate in child care centers, left for the public pre-K option, and the costs for birth-3 care went up while wages for those workers fell even lower. The ecosystem of birth-4

care and education is as complex as it is inequitable, and a systems-wide overhaul will ensure we are investing in our children equitably and compensating and developing this workforce fairly.

### *Minnesota Pre-K Framework*

- Universally available. Every family that wants access to pre-K for their 4-year-old should have it, regardless of income.
- Mixed delivery, offered in both school districts and through child care centers. Serving all Minnesota families with culturally relevant and high-quality pre-K will require the input and service of all of the stakeholders already working in the field, and more.
- Pre-K programming is delivered by licensed professionals. The Minnesota Department of Early Care and Education must develop a 12-year on-ramp system to ensure highly trained and fairly compensated teachers. This will require the new Minnesota Department of Early Care and Education to establish and oversee a 12-year timeline for professional development support, to make sure that at the end of the 12-year on-ramping process, all teachers in Minnesota's pre-K system, whether in public schools or in centers, hold early childhood or early childhood special education license, depending on assignment. (See Workforce Development section)
- Be aligned with the Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress, which describe the importance of play, exploration, and active learning (Minnesota Department of Education, 2020). We want to amplify the work already done in that critical work, which echoes Cook and Lieberman's (2017) argument that "a preponderance of research has shown that there is a false dichotomy between more rigorous academic learning and play.... Students are more likely to learn important academic skills and content through play than by having teacher-directed instruction outside of a playful context, as with, for example, the filling out of a worksheet" (p. 9).
- Be aimed at developing critical thinking skills, imagining, inventing, questioning, and investigating more so than top down instruction.
- Allow students to explore themselves and others (family, community) through examination of their own families, experiences, and cultures.
- Honor and centralize imagination, curiosity, and creativity.
- Operate with curriculum designed to allow space for children's exploration rather than pre-determined and inauthentic inquiry.
- Be grounded in culturally relevant practices. These practices include providing positive perspectives on parents and families, communication that is based on high expectations, learning that happens within the context of the cultures present in the room, student-centered instruction, culturally mediated instruction, and more. (Culturally Responsive, 2020)
- Utilize curriculum supported by rich and diverse literature and resources that are available to all programs and accessible across multiple languages. Included in the resources must be discussion of evidence-based practices, so that practitioners always understand the theoretical framework, the why, of what they are doing in the classroom.
- Allow children to explore, interact, and exercise their creative imagination through play. Curriculum that is inquiry-based, child-centered, and play-based involves changing a traditional view of instruction along a number of spectrums, but at its core, it involves posing questions and supporting the process of investigating them rather than focusing on simply arriving at the answers.

- Suspensions and expulsions are to be strictly prohibited. Programs must have access to the resources and supports necessary to practice trauma-informed, restorative practice that involves the family and all relevant educators in addressing harm and children’s needs.
- All pre-K programs must have access to special education services through the early childhood regional hubs.

### *Pre-K Classrooms*

Minnesota’s pre-K classrooms will be designed to encourage the curricular focus above. Both the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and Playwork Principles provide critical guidance on building appropriate spaces for early care and learning. Classrooms should be organized to invite children to explore, choose activities, and interact with others. The requirements laid out by the NAEYC are as follows:

- The facility is designed so that staff can supervise all children by sight and sound.
- The program has necessary furnishings, such as hand-washing sinks, child-size chairs and tables, and cots, cribs, beds, or sleeping pads.
- A variety of materials and equipment appropriate for children’s ages, skills and abilities is available and kept clean, safe, and in good repair.
- Outdoor play areas have fences or natural barriers that prevent access to streets and other hazards.
- First-aid kits, fire extinguishers, fire alarms, and other safety equipment are installed and available (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020).

Early learning classrooms look dramatically different than K-12 classrooms, as early learners learn through guided play. Classroom spaces need to offer textures, books, toys, simple machines, and other materials to encourage play-based exploration. Classrooms need plenty of space for children to be as children are—on the floor, on various furniture made for their small bodies, and connected to a space made for them.

### *Family Outreach Services*

It is essential that pre-K families have access to the same family outreach services as are available to the birth-3 care and education families. This should also include the services identified in the community needs assessment conducted by each Regional Birth-4 Care and Education Board. All young children, whether in birth-3 programs, pre-K, or still at home, must have access to the same social worker, mental health, vision and hearing screening, and special education screening and intervention that is to be available in the birth-3 system.

### *Teacher Credentials and Compensation*

We agree with the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment when they argued that as more public dollars are spent on early care and education through a mixed delivery system, the “increasingly common practice of paying teachers with equivalent qualifications on different wage scales should end. The time is long overdue to establish a coherent, rational, and equitable salary structure for the early childhood workforce” (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014, p. 82).

At the center of this issue is the undeniable fact that we have undervalued the workforce that serves our birth to 4-year-olds. A myth that is still very much alive in the minds of many holds that taking appropriate care of young people is little more than keeping them safe. Lawmakers and community members have

too often disregarded early childhood educators as nothing more than babysitters. How does that myth survive, given that brain science shows us unequivocally that the work of effective and appropriate care and education for young people is complex, difficult, and critically important? How does it survive despite decades of members of that workforce demanding better?

Science has “converged on the importance of early childhood, but that understanding is not yet reflected in recognition of the critical role of the professionals who work with young children from infancy through the early elementary years” (National Research Council, 2015, p. 483). This is a cycle Minnesota legislators need to commit to breaking. It is misinformed. It is sexist and racist, and it does a disservice to both our youngest learners and the workforce that cares for and teaches them. There is a growing base of knowledge “about how children learn and develop, what children need from their interactions and relationships with adults, and what adults should be doing to support children from the beginning of their lives. Yet that knowledge is not consistently channeled to adults who are responsible for supporting the development and early learning of children...This gap exists in large part because current policies and systems fall far short of placing enough value on the knowledge and competencies required of high-quality professionals” in this field (National Research Council, 2015, p. 483).

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***Members of Minnesota’s birth-4 workforce are far more likely to live in the communities in which they work; they are far more likely to be members of the same communities they work with; and they are far more likely to recognize and honor the different cultural backgrounds our students come from.***

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### *Cultural Relevance/Competency and a Hold Harmless Commitment*

Before we propose a way to break this inequitable and continually failing cycle, it is important to note that while the birth-4 workforce overall in Minnesota lacks the kind of professional development they and their work deserve and require, they do bring to the table strengths and experiences that we must hold onto. Our birth-4 workforce is far more diverse than our K-12 workforce; it far better reflects our student population, and students in many of our community-based centers are far more likely to see themselves reflected in their teachers and their curriculum. Over 32% of Minnesota’s students identified as people of color. Minnesota’s K-12 teacher workforce is 94.8% white. Members of Minnesota’s birth-4 workforce are far more likely to live in the communities in which they work; they are far more likely to be members of the same communities they work with; and they are far more likely to recognize and honor the different cultural backgrounds our students come from.

This kind of cultural relevancy and cultural connectedness is a fundamental necessity in every education setting, and we already have it in our birth-4 system. As we talk about raising up the professionalism of the birth-4 workforce, we must recognize and honor that they already bring to the table a level of cultural competency that our K-12 system has never achieved, and we must commit to a principal of do-no-harm to this incredible strength as we work to develop the workforce. One of our primary concerns with Minnesota’s Parent Aware rating system is that it does not consider cultural relevancy as a critical component of high-quality care.

Minnesota needs to invest boldly in this workforce, both immediately and over a period of time, so that the teachers who are already embedded in and committed to their communities have the support and the opportunity and the financial assistance to reach that level of credentialing they need to be as effective in their work as possible.

A comparison of Minnesota's Early Indicators of Progress and the level of education and professional development offered to child care workers offers helpful insights into the gaps we have created. The gap between what Minnesota says should be happening, which is well-researched and carefully delineated, and what we actually train our birth-4 workforce to be able to incorporate into their practice is a very wide chasm. The National Research Council (2015) has argued:

Much is known not only about what professionals who provide care and education for young children should know and be able to do, but also about what professional learning and other supports are needed for prospective and practicing educators. Although this knowledge and understanding has informed standards and other statements and frameworks articulating what should be, those standards are not fully reflected in the current capacities, practices, and policies of the workforce and their leadership, the settings and systems in which they work; the infrastructure and systems that set qualifications and provide professional learning in higher education and during ongoing practice; and the government and other funders that support and oversee those systems. (p. 484)

This proposal is designed to bridge that gap, to break the cycle of denigration of a workforce in such a critically complex field, and raise up the professionalism of the educators working with our youngest learners.

### *Building a 12-Year Workforce Development On-Ramp*

We recognize that the work of committing greater resources to early care and education and the simultaneous building up of the workforce and the quality of programming available to all Minnesota families will take time.

Significant differences exist in the settings, professional identity, expected knowledge and competencies, licensure and credentialing, organizational supports, and professional learning resources for professionals who work in roles and settings such as family child care and child care centers compared with those who work in elementary school settings. This divergence is dissonant with what the science of early learning reveals about the enormously formative growth in early learning that is already occurring from birth and about the core competencies that all care and education professionals should possess. Reducing this dissonance will require major changes to policies and practices that have evolved through historical trends and are entrenched in current systems. (National Academies of Science, p. 369)

We echo the recommendations made by Transforming Minnesota's Early Childhood Workforce that Minnesota commit to a 12-year on-ramping timeframe. We are also in alignment regarding the need to raise up professional credentials and a logical system of compensation while that on-ramp takes place. The scattered and fractured nature of the "system" in place requires time and care be taken while we raise up the workforce. That acknowledgement does not in any way diminish the urgency with which Minnesota must act. In fact, because this process will take time and a great deal of work by a great many stakeholders, it is imperative that Minnesota make this commitment now so that the thousands of people who will need to be involved in the process can get to work building consensus, formalizing

the structures that will need to be in place, building the necessary professional pathways, and doing the work of professional development.

The process of raising up the workforce cannot be as simple as demanding a new level of credentials. As stated above, the workforce we already have in place is the workforce our children need, and the process of getting that workforce in line with a more coherent system of credentials and compensation will have to be nuanced, thoughtful, and reflective of an equity lens so as to do no harm. It will also require that stakeholders involved in the process be knowledgeable about de-centering Whiteness.

The basic framework of how to approach lifting up the workforce over time has been developed already by the many organizations working on this problem over the past decade and more. Policy makers must commit to creating a sustainable source of public funding to:

- Upgrade the compensation of those who care for and educate our nation's young children. Immediate relief is needed, to be followed by a logical system of increased compensation tied to increased professional development.
- Support members of the workforce as they undertake the professional development necessary to implement equitable and high-quality care and education. This support must include tuition reimbursement, transportation, and child care.
- Create supports through the Minnesota Department of Early Care and Education for assistance with the licensure portfolio process for those with deep and broad experience in the field who already meet the standards of effective practice.
- Create a portfolio process for any other credentials determined to be necessary for birth-3 care and education for those with deep and broad experience in the field who already meet the expectations that call for those credentials.
- Upgrade the classrooms and centers to meet the needs of young children.
- Prepare a rational, equitable, and transparent set of guidelines for determining regionally-based entry-level wages and salary increases based on education and training, experience, and seniority within the early childhood field (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014, p. 83).
- Establish workplace standards for early childhood teachers that foster, rather than undermine, their capacity to provide children with emotional security, appropriate early learning experiences, and a responsive and caring social environment (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014, p. 83).
- Work with current members of the Minnesota child care workforce to develop professional development pathways for people coming into the profession as well as for people already in the profession.

The state needs to invest in systems of support to allow teachers in pre-K settings to work toward full licensure. We need to develop a system that will "ensure that the early care and education workforce has what it needs to deliver quality practice that will foster continuous progress in the development of early learning of children" (National Academies of Science, 2015, p. 357). Support can include free coursework, stipends to centers to pay for substitutes so the teachers involved in the professional development have paid time to do that work, and incentives such as debt relief in exchange for years worked in the program after achieving licensure. Public higher education will have to partner with the state to offer pathways toward licensure that allow teachers to continue to work and earn a living while working toward licensure. Higher education will need to innovate on how to provide credit for as much, on-site, on-the-job learning as possible. The credit could be offered for prior experience in cases where

higher education is necessary, and via a portfolio option where licensure is necessary, so that child care experts with years of experience in the field can earn licensure by showing how they have met the required standards.

It is critical that any standards for professional development are considered through an equity lens and honor the expertise of those already working in this field. What they bring to the table in terms of being embedded in communities, having trusting relationships in their communities, and being culturally embedded is the cornerstone of what our birth-3 care and education system needs. The goal is not to impose a new standard based on decades of White preparation models using curricula that center Whiteness. The goal is to find ways to recognize the expertise of the workforce already there and to create a more meaningful and coherent path into the workforce for people not yet doing the work.

We recognize the distinction between the needs of workers already working in the field and candidates who would like to enter the field. And, of course, the supports for each will need to be different. We support a range of no-cost, heavy-support pathways for current child care workers, and we support tuition reimbursement tied to years of service for those candidates looking to enter the field.

It is important to note that the do-no-harm principle dictates that raising up the current workforce is a burden that we share as a state, not a burden to put onto the shoulders of the poverty-level workers that are the heart of this system. As we develop on-ramping systems, we must be aware that the new expectations come with no cost to current employees, as well as the necessary supports, including transportation, child care for their own children and access to paid time off to complete their professional development.

## VI. How Can Minnesota Pay for a Better, More Just System?

A tremendous amount of work has been done to explore and propose solutions to this problem. We will not replicate that work here, but rather summarize it in order that we might amplify the detailed, painstaking care that has been taken to get to answers about how much it would cost, and even to draw up plans to get there incrementally. Most directly, we point to the work developed by the We Make MN project that reflects the work of ISALAH, Education Minnesota, and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). We Make MN worked with Eric Harris Bernstein to develop a set of ambitious revenue proposals. We also want to highlight and recommend the work of James J. Heckman, at the Center for the Economics of Human Development at the University of Chicago, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in their 2018 report, *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education* (National Academies of Sciences, 2018), and the work of Aaron Sojourner, labor economist at the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management.

Minnesota spends almost \$10 billion on E-12 education. Annually, we spend \$179 million on a public pre-K options, and \$290 million to supplement low-income families' child care costs. The public pre-K options are far too few, leaving out over half of Minnesota's families, and the amount of subsidy we pay to families to afford child care is far too little and given to far too few families. It is clear that our current early childhood model is broken—costs for families are too high, supply of high-quality care and education remains too low, while compensation and support for providers is also far too low. A market-based approach to this issue will never solve the problem. Using data from 2011, we know that the maximum CCAP reimbursement covered the full price for child care at only 16% of in-home businesses and 23% of child care centers—and we know the actual numbers now are even worse.

## VII. The Financial Benefits Associated With Early Childhood Care and Education

In 1989, Marcy Whitebook, Carollee Howes, and Deborah Phillips published the first National Child Care Staffing Study with coordination help from the Child Care Employee Project. (Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, *Who cares? Child care teachers and the quality of care in America. National Child Care Staffing Study, final report, 1989*). This foundational study began an important national conversation about the importance, an economic necessity, of investing in early childhood care and education in the United States. Whitebook and her colleagues published their findings before researchers had produced reports on information we now consider common knowledge in education-policy circles such as the Adverse Childhood Experiences that transformed how we understand childhood brain development. These pioneers transformed the national conversation on the importance of early childhood care and education and lawmakers started asking for more “return on investment.”

Following Whitebook and her colleagues, researchers with The National Institutes of Health Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development documented the “mediocre quality of child care across the U.S.” (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014, p. 5). In the early stages of this conversation, researchers were “parent-focused” and wanted to know how early childhood care and education programs could “improve job attendance and productivity” (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014, p. 7). Early childhood education was often seen as a tool to boost the work potential of parents and guardians.

It is fair to make the argument that early childhood care and education programs make it easier for some parents and guardians to enter, or sustain their place, in the national labor force. However, we must preface our discussion of the return-on-investment in early childhood programs with two caveats. First, we believe providing care and age-appropriate development opportunities to the youngest citizens of Minnesota is a good in and of itself, regardless of economic pay off. Second, some “returns-on-investment” cannot be quantified in economic market terms and are outside the frame of this section. We could make the case that early childhood education increases quality of life for parents, guardians, and children and that is enough reason to invest in these programs.

Economic return is a critical consideration. Whitebook and her colleagues spurred interest in this topic and now business stakeholders and researchers are making a “compelling case for the value of investing in a high-quality early care and education system, in order to ensure that all children are ready to attend school and to step onto a successful pathway of lifelong development” (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014, p. 8). Decades of researchers have shown us that the “return on investment” in early childhood care systems can be seen in the payouts for (1) business and industry, (2) local and state governments, and (3) long-term economic viability of individual citizens. What follows is a summary of some of the findings associated with each of these categories:

## *Economic Benefits for Business and Industry*

- Labor, industry, and commerce in a state will benefit when employees have “reliable child care.” Researchers have documented that businesses located in areas with strong early child care programming can report cost savings from “lower rates of tardiness, absenteeism and turnover, and greater concentration and productivity on the job among employees with children” (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014, p. 7).
- Local businesses are better able to recruit employees in areas with “high-quality child care” (Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1989, p. 7)
- The state of California issued a report in 2011 documenting “annual gross receipts from early care and education (including parent fees and government subsidies) of at least \$5.6 billion, and an additional estimated \$500 million per year in state and local tax revenues” (Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1989, p. 8).
- California also reported in 2011 that “every dollar spent on early childhood education (ECE) yielded two dollars in direct jobs (for ECE workers), indirect jobs (for ECE suppliers) and induced jobs (stemming from the purchase of goods and services by ECE workers), at an estimated \$ 11.1 billion in ECE-related economic output” (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014, p. 8).

## *Economic Benefits for State and Local Governments/Communities*

- Researchers have correlated investments in high-quality, early childhood programming with future revenue generation for local communities. Scholars have argued that, “estimated long-term savings range from three to seven dollars for every dollar spent on such programs” because they help build “a U.S. workforce better prepared to meet the challenges of the 21 st century” (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014, p. 8).
- Local education agencies can predict to see a greater return-on-investment from early childhood programming than other popular policy changes such as a reduction in class sizes (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014, p. 8).
- State and local education agencies that invest in high-quality, early childhood education and care also report a decrease in the reliance on public assistance programs (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014, p. 56).
- A true investment in early childhood education and care “would expand Minnesota’s economy by 1.1% which equates to \$3.7 billion of new economic activity in the state” (Economic Policy Institute, 2019).
- Economic researchers have “demonstrated the cost-effectiveness of investing in preschool, showing states that investments in early childhood education lead to reduced spending in multiple areas, including education, social welfare, and criminal justice” (Huntington, 2020, p. 348).

Several studies have confirmed that every dollar spent on early childhood education can be associated with a return of \$7 to \$17 a year in the areas of education, health, and social/economic outcomes. Early investment is also linked to a decrease in state spending on social programs (Bartik, 2014; Whitehouse, 2017).

## *Economic Benefits for Individual Citizens*

- Whitebook, Phillips and Howes (2014) reported that children in poverty who participate in “high-quality early care and education programs” are more likely to “acquire stronger skills associated with school success, greater educational achievement, and lower rates of grade retention and participation in special education classes” as verified by longitudinal evidence. Researchers can also correlate participation in quality early childhood education and “long-term benefits in adulthood include higher earnings, increased likelihood of college completion, better health, and lower rates of incarceration or use of public assistance” (p. 8).
- Researchers with the Economic Policy Institute (2019) predict that meaningful child care reform, capped at no more than 7% of total household income, would free up 17.3% of the household earnings giving the average Minnesota family an additional \$10,401 to be directed at other needs.
- Huntington (2020) reported that “research from several fields...established the profound and long-lasting benefits of preschool, which were measurable into adulthood (p. 348).

It is widely recognized that a strong system of early care and education “it is an important departure point for a strong economy. It is the foundation upon which reliable parental employment rests” (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014, p. 81).

## *VIII. A Call to Action*

Organizations working on any one of the problems inherent in Minnesota’s approach to birth-4 care and education either work within the current system or look to overhaul the entire system. In addition, many states are starting to realize the importance of providing early learning and care opportunities to all citizens. Unfortunately, none of the early adopting states have “emphasized racial equality as a justification for prekindergarten” (Huntington, 2020, p. 351). Minnesota has the opportunity to be a national leader in this area. Lawmakers can help educators close the opportunity gaps that persist in the state by allocating needed resources to build a robust and equitable early childhood care and education system.

Because of the problems outlined above, we call on Minnesota’s leaders, especially our elected officials, to have the courage to acknowledge the severity of the injustice embedded in the current, fragmented system, and begin the work toward a more just system designed to support Minnesota’s youngest learners so that they might reach their full potential.

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