

## School Readiness Funders Coalition

# Agenda to Achieve Learning Readiness by 2020

March 2010

*Coalition members: Blandin Foundation, Greater Twin Cities United Way, Grotto Foundation, McKnight Foundation, Minneapolis Foundation, Sheltering Arms Foundation, Social Venture Partners, Women's Foundation of Minnesota*



THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION



Blandin Foundation™  
STRENGTHENING RURAL MINNESOTA

*\*Note: This coalition list represents a starting point – our goal is to expand to include as many other philanthropic organizations as possible.*

# I. Introduction and Overarching Policy

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As members of the philanthropic community providing leadership and funding for early childhood efforts, we believe **every child in Minnesota needs to be ready for kindergarten by 2020.**

Our coalition funded an extensive review of research and perspectives on ECCE in Minnesota during the last year. We compiled a long list of critical ECCE needs – the same list of needs seen by legislators and other groups working on this issue. We determined that before these needs could be properly addressed, Minnesota would benefit by developing a framework within which to base ECCE decisions. To ensure that every child is ready for kindergarten by 2020, we believe Minnesota needs a comprehensive approach to early childhood care and education that establishes accountability for measurable and sustained progress. Such an approach must address three key elements to be successful: leadership, accountability and funding.

We acknowledge that there has been significant work undertaken by policy makers, the business and philanthropic communities, advocacy organizations and other nonprofits to address the issue of ECCE in Minnesota. Our proposed framework endorses and builds on many of the programs and efforts currently underway and reflects the sentiment and recommendations of other groups working on this same issue. We look forward to working in collaboration with all of our partners to implement our recommendations for critical ECCE initiatives that will ensure **every child is ready for kindergarten by 2020.**

We recognize and support the fact that parents are the primary teacher and educator for their children. Our efforts are aimed at providing a stronger/more coordinated network of services to support parents in this vital role.

As philanthropic organizations committed to our state's progress and our children's success, we propose the following policy framework for ECCE in Minnesota. We hope that these nonpartisan policy recommendations for improvement of early childhood care and education in Minnesota will contribute to a future that is substantively brighter for Minnesota's youngest citizens.

## II. Policy Agenda

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### *A. Leadership*

#### **Recommendation 1: Create a cabinet-level agency focused on ECCE**

Governance and leadership in early childhood care and education continues to be fragmented and not well-coordinated. Currently, ECCE regulatory and appropriating authority stretches across numerous state and local agencies and departments. The lack of statewide leadership is one of the main reasons that Minnesota's record as a leader in early childhood education has slipped.

**In order for the legislature and governor to meet the achievable goal of learning readiness by 2020, we believe that a single cabinet-level state agency needs to be accountable for ECCE.** A Minnesota Office of Early Learning (or state agency with same focus/role), similar to the Minnesota Office of Higher Education, should serve as the focal point for the state's strategy for ECCE. Such an office can serve to identify how current programs fit in to a "whole-child" framework such as the BUILD or PEW models. This office can determine how state-administered or state-funded programs contribute to improving readiness for kindergarten and can be a clearinghouse for data, research, analysis and funding decisions for Minnesota's early childhood care and education system. The Minnesota Office of Early Learning should consolidate existing agency responsibility and be held accountable for ensuring the quality of the ECCE system as the body responsible for assessing state progress towards the goal.

While we are reluctant to propose a new state agency due to the political environment and existing bureaucracy we believe coordinating, consolidating and streamlining the state's current patchwork of services and programs will greatly improve provider accountability and give policymakers and families greater access to important ECCE information. That is why we believe this agency must be carefully designed, but we strongly recommend that this new agency should be operational by fiscal year 2012.

The Governor is a necessary leader in ensuring priority is given to ECCE. Given that our current Governor will not be running in the 2010 election, it is the intention of this philanthropic coalition to brief all gubernatorial candidates and ask for their support of this ECCE agenda.

#### **Recommendation 2: Sustained and coordinated leadership from key groups**

In addition, sustained and coordinated leadership is immediately needed from six key groups. Clearly-identified roles and responsibilities must be determined for the following stakeholders in order to assure accountability for ECCE in Minnesota. We whole-heartedly believe that collective leadership from each group can make a significant impact in the lives of children and families.

High-level policy and funding leadership:

- The Minnesota Legislature
- The Executive Branch of State Government

Supportive leadership:

- The Minnesota Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC)
- The philanthropic community
- Advocacy groups
- Business community

## ***B. Accountability***

### **Recommendation 1: Adopt Accountability Principles**

We believe accountability is the most important issue facing ECCE in Minnesota. Therefore, we propose that the following principles be used to guide ECCE decision making:

1. Reinforce the statewide public policy objective already found in Minnesota law that ensures that 100% of children (ages 0-5) must be ready for school by 2020 and establish milestones each year to ensure meeting that goal. State budget allocations should be aligned with the policy goal.
2. Formally adopt the five domains of school readiness ((1) physical development, (2) the arts, (3) personal and social development, (4) language and literacy, and (5) mathematical thinking) already used by the Minnesota Department of Education as the metric for gauging success.
3. Develop culturally appropriate mechanisms for screening and assessment to ensure that every child, regardless of his or her race, gender, ethnicity or socioeconomic background, is fairly assessed and given the most appropriate supports to succeed. As culturally sensitive mechanisms are developed, they should be integrated into screening and assessment of the five domains of school readiness and other measurement systems.
4. Formally adopt a “whole-child” approach, such as the BUILD Framework, or the Early Childhood Accountability and Program Improvement Approach – created by PEW Foundation and recently adopted by the Minnesota Early Childhood Advisory Council.

### **Recommendation 2: Implement Accountability Measures**

In order to establish a climate of accountability to ensure every child meets the goal of school readiness by 2020, Minnesota must implement three critical accountability initiatives: a statewide report card, screening and assessment of all children, and a consistent quality rating system. These recommendations build on the current work and recommendations of other advocacy groups. We believe a proposed Office of Early Learning should be held responsible for each of the proposed initiatives from 2012 forward.

1. ***Statewide Report Card:*** A statewide report card is necessary to provide the accountability framework for ECCE in Minnesota. The report card will annually report the progress of all levels of the state’s ECCE system and should be used as a guide in decision-making for funding, regulatory policies and training by the state, families, providers and other ECCE funders.
  - *Responsibility:* The State and philanthropic community should take joint responsibility for developing and implementing a statewide report card. Once developed, an Office of Early Learning should take responsibility for annual reporting, dissemination, screening and assessment.

- *Measurement:* The report card should be an accountability framework to assess the effectiveness of ECCE across the child, family, community, system and school. Screening and assessment should be based on indicators such as: the five domains of school readiness, access, parental choice, and provider quality.

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2. **Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS):** Minnesota needs a consistent Quality Rating and Improvement System that tells us whether providers are meeting standards that are aligned with getting the results we want in our children's progress and parent satisfaction – i.e., the metrics on the report card. Pilot programs such as the Parent Aware QRIS have been tested with the assistance of funders and are ready to be implemented statewide.
- *Responsibility:* Funding for these initiatives focused on accountability should be seen as an integral part of the appropriation for ECCE and not as an add-on.
  - *Measurement:* The proposed QRIS should, and does, establish standards for providers. In order for this to be effective, it is critically important for training and development initiatives to be available for providers to ensure all providers have the opportunity and resources to improve services to meet QRIS standards.
3. **Screening and assessment of all children:** To adequately understand and address school readiness, ALL Minnesota children, starting at age 3, must be assessed for progress toward school readiness by 2020, with a milestone goal of screening and assessment of 50% of children by the year 2015. This will require extensive expansion of existing screening and assessment practices. Again, methods to assess children in a culturally sensitive manner must be developed to fully understand the progress of all the state's children in each of the five domains.
- *Responsibility:* For this to be successful, screening and assessment needs to be viewed as both a family and a state priority. Each family needs to understand the critical importance of screening and assessment and how the resulting information can help families help their children get ready for school. An Office of Early Learning should take the lead in reaching the screening and assessment goal, recognizing that there are a wide variety of approaches for executing this responsibility.
  - *Measurement:* Screening and assessment should focus on identifying and addressing the critical needs of children, beginning with those most in need of supportive ECCE services. It should also help to connect children and families to the most appropriate support resources available for ECCE.

*Note: We support current efforts of preschools and child care facilities to also assess children under age three to ensure their future success.*

## ***C. Funding***

While we strongly believe that additional public funding for long-term, sustainable investment in ECCE is necessary to ensure every child is ready for kindergarten by 2020, accountability and measurement principles must be established before additional funding is allocated. Establishing a climate of accountability will inform the necessary return on investment for effective, long-term funding for ECCE. Therefore, we believe that the state should make immediate investments to support accountability within ECCE.

Funding early childhood care and education is complex; and Minnesota faces an ECCE funding dilemma with no easy immediate solutions. Today, financial contributions from families account for more than 70 percent of ECCE spending in the state. The remaining funds come from the federal and state government, as well as other private and non-profit organizations. However, too many families are not being served by any of these funding sources, resulting in a funding gap that leaves some children without adequate ECCE. If we do not create a funding system that supports these children in the early years, the state will face more costly expenditures on these same individuals when they are adults.

**We recommend three areas of funding:** support of existing initiatives, support for new funding initiatives, and implementation of long-term funding principles.

### **Recommendation 1: Support Existing Initiatives**

**1. Quality Rating and Improvement System.**

This system must be implemented statewide and be funded by the state.<sup>1</sup> Pilot programs such as Parent Aware should be expanded statewide.

**2. Funder-sponsored programs.** Philanthropic organizations currently issue an estimated \$20 million annually in grants in the state for ECCE. The funder coalition members will seek to align our existing grant making with the priorities of the proposed ECCE framework.

### **Recommendation 2: Support New Funding Initiatives**

In addition to supporting existing initiatives, the state needs to commit funding for critical accountability initiatives in order for us to reach the goal of learning readiness by 2020. As philanthropic organizations committed to our children's success, the members of this coalition will also commit financial resources in partnership with state funding recommendations to create and launch several initial activities that we believe are critical to achieving this goal.

The following chart provides funding estimates for specific initiatives. Through further discussion with legislative leaders and philanthropic organization boards, priorities for execution and funding of specific initiatives can be refined to reflect the opinions and leadership of key stakeholders.

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<sup>1</sup> Work is underway commissioned by the Legislature and State Agencies to develop cost estimates for the implementation of various QRS models. The Alliance for Early Childhood Finance, national experts on costing QRS, is preparing a Minnesota-specific report on QRS cost-estimates. Investment decisions in QRS be brought together and coordinated at the appropriate time.

Support New Funding Initiatives: Funding estimates

Initiative	Estimated Total Initial Investment (beginning in 2010)	Estimated On-going Annual State Investment
<b>Establish a Cabinet Level Office for Early Learning</b>	TBD	TBD
<b>Statewide Report Card</b>	\$1 million  (for development and launch in 2010)	\$200,000 annually  (On-going production, dissemination)
<b>Statewide Screening and Assessment of Child Development</b>	Estimate for 50% of children aged 3,4 and 5: \$6.1 million annually	\$9.4 million annually
	Estimate for 100% of children aged 3,4 and 5: \$9.4 million annually	

### Recommendation 3: Implement Long-Term Funding Priorities

Existing and proposed initiatives listed above will help establish a system for ECCE in Minnesota, but will not adequately address the *funding gap* that lets at-risk children slip through the cracks and contribute to Minnesota’s lagging school readiness. Minnesota experts such as Richard Chase, Arthur Reynolds and Art Rolnick estimate that to adequately cover the development of the whole-child through *early learning needs* as well as the *mental health, nutrition and special needs* of families that do not have adequate resources will require an additional **\$250-\$290 million dollars annually**. This investment level is necessary; providing services that address all of these factors is essential to the successful development of children. Long-term funding decisions need to be made by the Legislature to ensure funding is available for all children in Minnesota to have access to quality ECCE.

### **III. ECCE Coalition Commitment**

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As one of the sectors responsible for ensuring that Minnesota's children are ready for kindergarten and life, we take our role very seriously. We believe the framework and policy recommendations outlined in this document, prepared for consideration by the Legislative and Executive branches of our state government, are critical for developing a successful ECCE system. That is why we are committed to following the set of principles proposed herein. Investments in ECCE must focus on the whole child and help families obtain access to quality early childhood care.

Consistent with these principles, the School Readiness Funders Coalition will support efforts to address ECCE - specifically to contribute to the initial development of a statewide ECCE report card, and to fund a statewide public information campaign to educate Minnesotans about the importance of investing in ECCE for Minnesota's future. In addition, consistent with our respective missions and grant guidelines we will seek to align our existing grant making with the priorities of the proposed ECCE framework.

To accomplish our 2020 goal of having all children fully ready to learn when they start kindergarten will be challenging. It is doable if we all join in the task and begin now.

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