



Early Childhood Transitions

Moments of Opportunity in Michigan 2023



EARLY CHILDHOOD TRANSITIONS:

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Moments of Opportunity

INTRODUCTION

Children from low-income backgrounds often face early and persistent challenges to educational success.¹ By the age of three, children who grow up in poverty hear 30 million *fewer* words than their more economically advantaged peers,² a disparity which contributes to later differences in reading skills.

Children of color also face early and persistent challenges to attaining educational success. In addition to the barriers resulting from enduring systemic racism, Black and Latino children are more than twice as likely to live in poverty as their White and Asian counterparts.³ In Michigan, 47% of Black children and 23% of Latino children live in high-poverty areas, compared to 5% of White children.⁴

The Perry Preschool Project, a revolutionary program and study conducted in Ypsilanti, Michigan in the 1960s, demonstrated the significant and holistic lifelong benefits of high-quality early childhood education (ECE) and proved that high-quality early education could address and avert educational inequities for children of color and those from low-income backgrounds.⁵ The program—and subsequent programs modeled after it—have shown that high-quality ECE can positively impact socioemotional development, academic achievement, and graduation rates.⁶ Moreover, participants of high-quality programs experience lifelong benefits, including better health and employment outcomes, higher lifetime earnings, less justice system involvement, and more stable relationships in adulthood.⁷ ECE participants' children also grow up in more stable families and experience better school, health,

and employment outcomes.⁸ Recent research on the rate of return for kindergarten readiness suggests that, for every one child who is well-prepared for kindergarten and was otherwise at risk for academic failure, Michigan saves \$47,000.⁹ More recent studies confirm that, for ECE programs to have a lasting impact and benefit for young learners from low-income backgrounds, early childhood and pre-k learning environments must be high-quality.¹⁰

Undoubtedly, high-quality ECE serves as an effective tool for intergenerational empowerment and social mobility.

PREVAILING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CHALLENGES IN MICHIGAN

Despite profound benefits, early childhood education in Michigan and across the nation lacks sufficient funding. This creates an affordability barrier for both families and providers: the cost of high-quality care (hereafter referred to as “high quality”) is exorbitantly expensive for families and the cost of pursuing, providing, and maintaining that high quality is prohibitive for ECE business owners, given current subsidy and reimbursement rate structures. Further, aspiring early childhood educators lack an equitable and well-defined pipeline for entry into the workforce and do not receive livable compensation on par with their K-12 colleagues. Fragmentation in the ECE system also creates wide disparities in quality, educator preparation, and educator compensation, limiting the retention of talented ECE teachers.¹¹

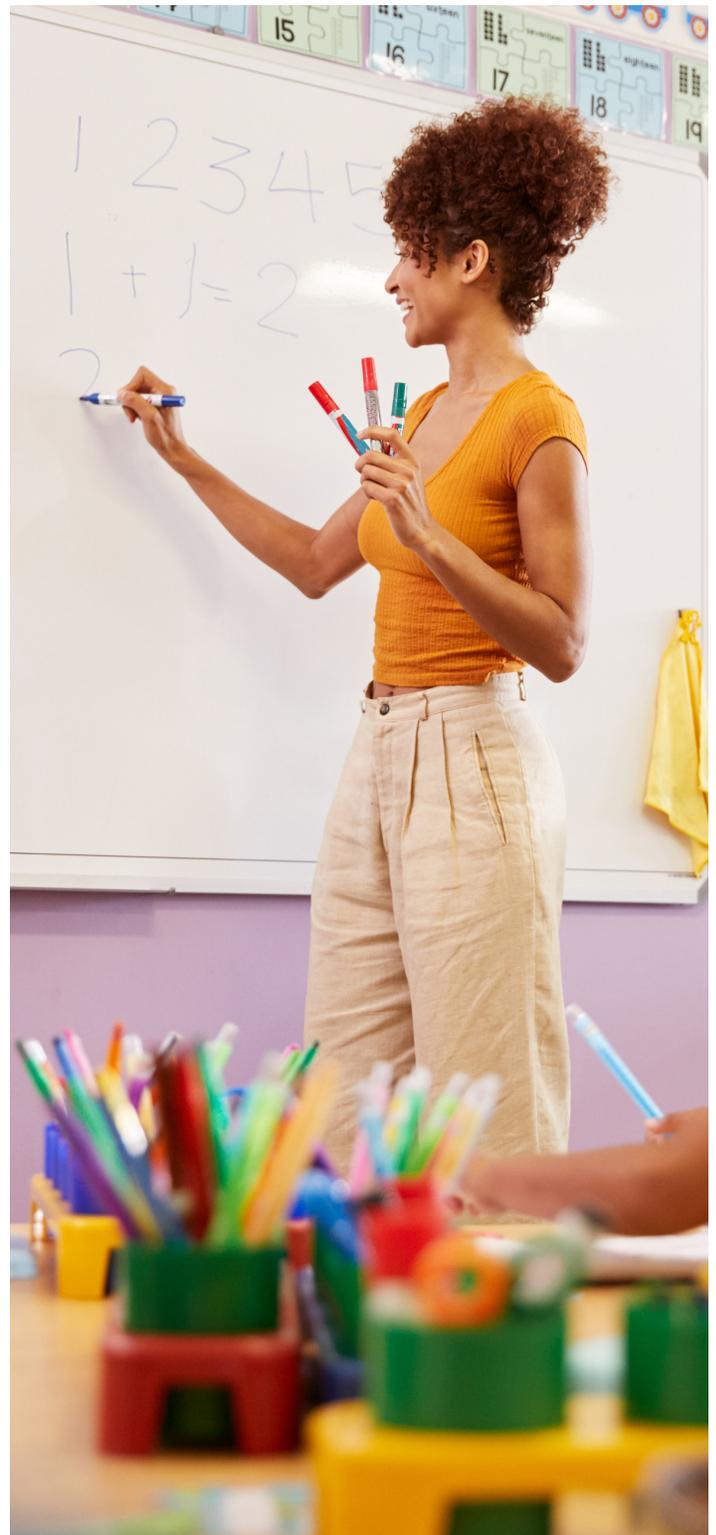
In 2021, Governor Whitmer signed legislation that raised the foundation allowance of Michigan’s public preschool program—the Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP)—

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to match the state's K-12 per pupil allowance for the 2022 fiscal year.¹² While the funds will go a long way towards improving quality of and access to the state-funded program, more comprehensive action will be needed to develop a sustainable ECE infrastructure that supports cohesion, workforce development, and high quality across all programs in the ECE system. For example, federally-funded programs such as Early Head Start and Head Start, private centers, and home-based programs should also receive the support needed to pursue high quality and alignment with the rest of the ECE system.

In addition to its lack of alignment across the ECE landscape, Michigan's ECE system also lacks vertical alignment with the K-12 education system. Instructional alignment between ECE and K-12 systems is especially important to sustaining the gains students make in preschool.¹³ Additionally, strong handoffs between systems ensure students who need additional supports are identified and accommodated at the beginning of their kindergarten year. Lack of alignment between ECE and K-12 systems also poses a threat to students' progress, especially for students with disabilities or multilingual students who benefit from the continuity of additional assistance. Students participating in GSRP programs housed within a school district benefit from a higher degree of alignment, but the current infrastructure, including a lack of commonly held data-sharing practices, does not support coordination and alignment for students in federally funded care, private center-based programs, and home-based programs.

Students of color and students from low-income backgrounds particularly **encounter many barriers** to accessing high-quality early childhood education. These barriers include a lack of available care in state-funded programs for infants and toddlers; lack of full-day, full-year programming; and conflicts between parents' work schedules and ECE programs' hours of operation.



THE FOUNDATIONAL FIVE ELEMENTS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

To provide every student with an equitable opportunity to reach their full potential, leaders and policymakers should focus on five foundational elements to fortify the ECE system and facilitate students' successful transitions from preschool into kindergarten and beyond:

1. **Quality**
2. **Access and Affordability**
3. **Funding Structure Improvement**
4. **Data**
5. **Workforce Recruitment, Compensation, and Retention Strategies**

The coordination of policies and programs across all five foundational elements, rather than a narrow focus on any single element, will foster progress and long-term benefits for historically underserved students. Together these foundational five elements provide the critical support that is needed to foster students' seamless transitions from ECE to elementary school.

TOWARD STRONGER SYSTEMS ALIGNMENT

Education is a continuous journey, not a set of discrete experiences. From funding to design, our systems must adapt to meet this reality: that from their earliest moments, children are learning, developing, and growing into the people they will become. Many organizations and advocates continue to carry out important efforts along the prenatal-to-20-year-old continuum, applying their expertise to ensuring children have what they need to thrive in their first 1,000 days of life—a critical time of development.¹⁴ Likewise, many fellow education advocates and stakeholders have created and continue to create momentum and change in the areas of equitable access and affordability, quality, and ECE's funding structures. Their work is urgent and necessary. Still more are focused on equitable postsecondary transitions and supports that usher young adults into careers and college.

In this report, The Education Trust-Midwest brings its equity lens and extensive work in K-12 data and teacher effectiveness to spotlight the preschool through third grade (P-3) period of that continuum, emphasizing alignment within the data and workforce development foundational elements. This report details the importance and critical features of a robust data infrastructure and practices as well as current challenges and potential leverage points for cultivating a strong ECE workforce to support that transition phase. This is not intended to be a comprehensive early childhood or preschool report. Rather, we focus on investment in key levers within the foundational five elements that could support stronger alignment between Michigan's early childhood education system and K-12 system, with a focus on connecting strategies between preschool and third grade. However, while we seek to "zoom in" on that period within the continuum, we do so with a regard for the bigger picture.



Highlighting Progress and Identifying Challenges: Quality, Access and Affordability, and ECE Funding Structure Improvement

Across the state, advocates and stakeholders have garnered attention and acted to improve quality, increase ECE access for Michigan’s children, and advocate for specific policy measures to strengthen Michigan’s ECE business model.

QUALITY

Studies show that high-quality Pre-K learning environments offer the highest benefits, and those benefits are highest for young learners from low-income backgrounds.¹⁵ While there is still work to be done, Michigan shines with its commitment to improving ECE quality by expanding access without sacrificing its focus on high standards and continual process monitoring.¹⁶ Michigan’s GSRP is aligned with the state’s kindergarten through third grade standards and Head Start frameworks, demonstrating the critical role that systems alignment plays in defining high quality and establishing the

structure for students to succeed in elementary school and beyond.¹⁷ As part of the GSRP, dedicated Early Childhood Specialists support teaching teams and site administrators in continuous quality improvement and also support children’s transition into kindergarten and partnerships with families as their ISD/RESA resources allow. Early Childhood Specialists also help teaching teams understand and implement community, school, and classroom transition plans.¹⁸

Beginning in 2019, the Michigan Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC) and the Office of Great



Start facilitated further study of and revisions to Michigan's ECE quality rating and improvement system (QRIS), known as Great Start to Quality.¹⁹ Recent studies of QRIS systems indicate that a high-quality rating does not consistently correspond to students' kindergarten preparedness.²⁰ Although student-teacher interactions are consistently linked to student outcomes, not all QRIS systems include student-teacher interaction observations at every quality rating level. Beginning in 2023, after completing a program self-reflection, Michigan's Great Start to Quality program will allow providers to pursue a thorough on-site observation using Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). This and other QRIS system improvements will improve both the equity and accuracy of quality levels for all participating early childhood environments.²¹

Michigan's Current Challenges to Next Level ECE Quality

While Michigan has shown admirable commitment to ensuring young learners have access to high-quality ECE programs across the state, state leaders must do more to move Michigan to the next level of ECE quality. Next steps include:

- **Addressing Challenges with Michigan's Market Rate Approach**

Many ECE advocates and stakeholders, including Michigan's Children, Michigan League for Public Policy, and Hope Starts Here, have advocated for changes to provider subsidies, reimbursement structures, and family eligibility thresholds.²² Some have also called for a move away from the market rate approach, which determines the cost of services based on the fee schedules of similar businesses in the same market. Market rates fall well below the cost of high-quality care, which increases the cost of ECE for families and considerably limits ECE providers' ability to achieve high quality, resulting in advocates calling for the state to move towards a model that considers the true cost of care.²³

As part of the requirements of the Child Care and Development Block Grant, MDE and the Office of Great Start commissioned two childcare market rate studies examining the cost of early childhood care in Michigan. The 2017 study identified gaps between the cost of high-quality care and the amount collected via subsidies or tuition.²⁴ Four years later, an April 2021 market rate study showed that subsidies continued to fall short, even when factoring in the 2020 Child Development and Care (CDC) rate increases for eligible children.²⁵ MDE and other key stakeholders are exploring other tools to assess the true cost of quality care.

- **Addressing Challenges with Pedagogical Alignment**

Further recommendations from national ECE and P-3 alignment thought leaders address the pedagogical and cultural rifts related to Pre-K to K-12 transitions, especially for young learners of color and those from low-income households.²⁶ For instance, ECE programs place considerable focus on social and behavioral skills, but the emphasis abruptly shifts to academic-based skills in kindergarten.²⁷ To address this disconnect, state leaders should:

- ❖ Develop frameworks for districts to offer shared professional development opportunities for educators across the P-3 continuum to meaningfully align on culturally- and developmentally-responsive classroom climates and pedagogy.²⁸ Ensuring that these opportunities are logistically, linguistically, and financially accessible to private centers and home-based ECE providers is vitally important to improving alignment.
- ❖ Ensure that curricular frameworks from preschool through grade three involve a gradual content and pedagogical shift into early elementary that bridges the gap for children.²⁹

INITIATIVES:

Developed by the global non-profit Education Development Center, the First 10 framework takes a holistic and comprehensive approach to fostering alignment across the first ten years of the educational continuum. Backed by strong evidence-based practices, First 10 combines highly effective components of well-studied national models, such as coaching programs, parent education and engagement initiatives, and community school models with wraparound physical and mental health services.³⁰ The First 10 approach centers culturally-responsive support for and relationship building with families starting in the prenatal period, with the understanding that a child's life outside of school is a critical factor in their optimal cognitive, socioemotional, and physical development. Focusing on collaborative improvement processes for teaching and learning, coordination of comprehensive services, and family partnership, the framework utilizes school hubs and community partnerships to empower and support students and families throughout ECE and the transition to kindergarten. Importantly, the First 10 approach is distinct from other “cradle-to-career” models in that it forms partnerships to work on all aspects of quality, coordination, and alignment across the full birth-to-elementary school continuum whereas many collective initiatives employ separate teams for kindergarten readiness and early literacy. It has been effectively implemented in over forty communities nationwide including Multnomah County, Oregon, Omaha, Nebraska, and York City, Pennsylvania, as well as communities across the states of Maine and Alabama.³¹ The program is being piloted in select Michigan communities, and both Maine and Alabama provide examples of how state leaders can effectively support the initiative for optimal impact.³² For example, in collaboration with the Education Development Center, Alabama produced a robust **Transitions to Kindergarten** toolkit that offers strategies and resources to guide communities in their implementation of effective transition programming.

ACCESS AND AFFORDABILITY

Along with GSRP foundation allowance parity, the fiscal year 2022 budget incorporated modest increases to reimbursement rates and temporary increases to eligibility thresholds. As a result, all income-eligible four-year-olds will have the opportunity to attend a GSRP Pre-K by the end of the three-year rollout.³³

Additionally, locales across Michigan have made notable progress in expanding ECE access. **First Steps Kent** led a successful ballot initiative for its Ready by Five program in November of 2018, which increased ECE access in community-based programs across Kent County and supports the health of young children and their readiness for kindergarten.³⁴

Advocating for system-wide equity, **Hope Starts Here** has consistently called for an equitable increase in access and for all providers—whether home-based, community-

based, or government-supported—to have the opportunity to participate in the growing GSRP program within a mixed-delivery system.³⁵ Given consistent disinvestment in communities of color and low-income communities, equitable allocation of new funding that increases access for students in those neighborhoods must remain a priority.

Some research suggests that the short-term academic benefits of ECE wane with a fadeout effect by third grade.³⁶ This troubling finding has led researchers and advocates to turn increased attention towards the role of vertical alignment in sustaining academic gains accrued in preschool. Indeed, while access to high-quality ECE is critical, access to high-quality ECE that is well-aligned with the K-12 system could protect the benefits from the “3rd grade fade.”³⁷ Therefore, sustaining equitable outcomes requires that “access” also encompass ECE providers’ access to and inclusion in alignment initiatives across the mixed delivery system.

ECE FUNDING STRUCTURE IMPROVEMENT

At present, diversified funding streams are important to an inclusive and sustainable ECE system for two main reasons: first, utilizing funds from different public and private sources, known as braided and blended funding, allows programs to serve children from a variety of backgrounds in a single classroom. Secondly, it fosters ECE system alignment that contributes to increased quality and access for children from low-income backgrounds in a business model that otherwise disincentivizes serving children from low-income backgrounds.³⁸ The economic stability of families also relies on an accessible early childhood education system, as the COVID-19 pandemic illuminated that high-quality childcare is critical to a thriving workforce.³⁹ However, the need for braided and blended funding stems from a lack of sufficient public funds to sustain a high-quality ECE system. It places an undue burden on program operators via complicated accounting processes, paperwork, and restrictive service delivery depending on who is in their classrooms and where each child's funding comes from. More—and more streamlined—funding is critical.

In recognition of this, a coalition of state leaders, businesses, legislators, researchers, and advocacy groups are piloting the Tri-Share Model in regions across the state to provide access to affordable ECE for more Michigan families.⁴⁰ This promising new approach broadens the table to include employers as key stakeholders and financial partners in ensuring that working parents and their children have access to high-quality ECE.

To reduce operational and administrative burdens for ECE providers, the Battle Creek Shared Services Alliance provides administrative and professional development support, interpreter services, behavioral specialists, and more.⁴¹ This allows providers to focus their efforts on high-quality experiences in the classroom. Likewise, First Steps recently secured funding to implement a shared services network, connecting Kent County ECE providers with services to reduce the burden of operations, streamline processes to make them more efficient, promote business sustainability, and free up capacity to focus on quality.⁴²

Challenges to the ECE Small Business Model

While these examples demonstrate great progress towards

universal access for young learners, we must also pay attention to the business consequences incurred by providers not yet included in the GSRP program.

Many private and community-based ECE providers provide services to infants and toddlers in addition to three- and four-year-olds. Recommended teacher-student ratios for high-quality infant and toddler care are lower than ratios for the care of three- and four-year-olds, resulting in higher cost of care expenses for businesses caring for infants and toddlers. Therefore, the enrollment of three- and four-year-olds is critical to the financial stability of running an ECE small business.⁴³ The expansion of GSRP has the potential to increase alignment between early childhood and K-12 systems as more four-year-old children will concentrate in public schools administering the program. Unfortunately, it also makes alignment difficult and business unsustainable for many private center-based programs and home providers. This has the potential to impact families of color and families living in poverty hardest. Many of these families have an especially hard time finding affordable, high-quality care for their infants and toddlers.⁴⁴ Moreover, those who prefer to send their young learners to community-based or home-based Pre-K programs that align with their cultural or religious preferences may face a dearth of options.

As such, maintaining a mixed delivery ECE system—a system in which all models of ECE are sustainable and have access to quality improvement resources—is critical to maintaining equity in alignment between the ECE system and the K-12 system. A well-supported and horizontally-aligned mixed-delivery model would adequately equip providers and fully consider the kindergarten preparation of young learners transitioning from every ECE setting.

DATA

For Michigan to achieve stronger alignment and successful transitions across the P-3 continuum, Michigan must prioritize a robust data infrastructure that treats a student's educational career as a progressive continuum rather than a sequence of discrete experiences.

Enhancing data governance and infrastructure and engaging stakeholders in ongoing data systems alignment would allow educators and policymakers to answer important policy questions.

The Case for Strong Data Alignment Across P-3 Systems

Kindergarten Entry Observations and Data Alignment

Kindergarten observation data via a common, holistic observation tool could further inform curricular alignment between ECE and K-12 programming and offer insight into potential shared professional development opportunities. An ongoing, holistic, linguistically- and culturally-responsive kindergarten entry observation could also provide a strong academic and socioemotional baseline for kindergarten. This is especially helpful for students that need additional supports as they begin their elementary career.⁴⁵

It is vitally important that this tool be paired with proper professional development. A well-implemented kindergarten entry observation could aid in closing the existing philosophical and pedagogical rifts between Pre-K and Kindergarten. Educators need rigorous training on the collection and use of observational data in culturally- and linguistically- sensitive ways to lay the groundwork for smooth and supportive transitions for early learners. Such training can ensure all educators on both sides of the transition share a common understanding of their students' developmental stages, needs, and progress.

Likewise, early educators would benefit from feedback on how well students were prepared for grade-level content as they enter kindergarten. An aligned kindergarten entry observation tool could provide early educators with opportunities to strengthen their process, structures, and pedagogy for future students. Integrating data from a kindergarten entry observation into a statewide data system also has potential to inform ECE quality improvement by linking trends in students' strengths and weaknesses.

Disaggregated Data to Support Multiple Levels and P-3 Alignment

Aligned and disaggregated data could also help to more accurately identify and address racial and socioeconomic disparities in kindergarten readiness for more targeted

support at the program and individual levels. An aligned data system also supports districts, as it allows district leaders to regularly examine feeder patterns—that is, where their kindergarten students are coming from—and could facilitate more intentional outreach and alignment between schools, families, and community-based and home-based providers.⁴⁶

At a systems level, collecting comprehensive disaggregated data across many domains beginning in early childhood would allow recordkeeping of students' entire educational careers. It would also allow stakeholders and policymakers to see growth and achievement patterns from students' ECE experiences through grade school.

Furthermore, disaggregated data would allow policymakers to assess the impact of infrastructure investments, provide insight into scaling effective programming, and address ineffective policies and practices that impede equitable outcomes particularly for students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and students with disabilities.⁴⁷

Data to Support Recruiting and Retaining ECE Professionals

At present, ECE programs nationwide face significant challenges in recruiting and retaining ECE professionals. Low wages and poor or non-existent benefits, combined with limited career opportunities and trajectories for ECE professionals, disincentivize talented educators entering and staying in the field as a long-term career.⁴⁸ In addition to improving ECE professionals' compensation and access to professional development and long-term career stability, disaggregated data on the pay, professional development, and qualifications of early childhood educators would allow policymakers to understand trends specifically related to:

- 1. Equitable distribution of effective ECE professionals across geography and ECE programs**
- 2. Equitable, culturally- and linguistically- responsive pathways to becoming an ECE professional**

Data to Support Quality and Resource Distribution for All ECE Providers

A lack of detailed information about the ECE workforce hampers alignment within the ECE system.⁴⁹ This, in turn, makes alignment between the ECE and K-12 systems more difficult. A comprehensive data system that routinely collects and synthesizes information across multiple domains could facilitate more effective policymaking and targeted strategies for improved alignment and more equitable outcomes. Relevant domains to compare data would include:

- The geographic distribution of ECE programs
- Types of providers (i.e., community or home-based) and their Great Start to Quality levels
- The conditions, educational attainment, and ongoing development of the workforce across programs
- Teacher credentials, training, demographics, and multilingual status
- Students' health and developmental screenings, and
- Snapshots of students' academic progress as they enter kindergarten

Great Start to Quality levels and other relevant data points such as staffing constraints, access to professional development, and access to professional and business support networks provide the state with valuable insight into the specific supports and infrastructure improvements needed to further elevate quality and streamline alignment with K-12 systems. A comprehensive picture allows stakeholders, community leaders, and policymakers to better assess changes and respond to unique needs in an informed and efficient manner. For example, Michigan's recently passed Family Childcare Networks Act requires data collection and evaluation that could shed light on the networks' and broader ECE system's efficacy in improving the sustainability, professional training, and QRIS participation of home-based ECE businesses.⁵⁰

Lastly, better and more comprehensive data would help policymakers understand the number and geographic distribution of high-quality ECE programs that can support multilingual learners and students with disabilities. Such information allows decision-makers to assess whether there are enough programs in the neighborhoods where students and families need them most. A better understanding of access could facilitate prioritized expansion.

How Michigan Can Get to Stronger Data Alignment Across Systems

As K-12 systems receive new kindergarten students, a well-aligned data system could support curricular alignment at the local level and enhance educators' ability to meet students at their individual academic needs. Michigan currently links children's demographic and family characteristics data between the ECE and K-12 for students in certain state-funded ECE programs.⁵¹ However, the state does not link program-level data or workforce data, nor does it link program participation or child development data to include if a child received development screenings or assessments.⁵² In their 2019 application for renewed Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five funding (a competitive federal grant designed to improve states' early childhood systems), MDE and the Office of Great Start proposed the use of unique identifiers to be able to follow a child through the ECE system.⁵³ Expanding the use of these identifiers to include comprehensive connection to K-12 would be a powerful step towards strong ECE and K-12 alignment.

Building a holistically coordinated data system with data sharing partnerships across the ECE ecosystem would ensure that students receiving early intervention services, special education supports, or public services for low-income families can seamlessly transition to kindergarten with no disturbance to their services. It would provide K-12 educators with a baseline understanding of their new students at the outset of their relationship, reduce burdens on parents, and eliminate time delays in students receiving critical accommodations.

To move towards a vision of stronger data alignment between ECE and K-12 systems, we recommend Michigan state leaders address three crucial needs:

1. Michigan needs a comprehensive, centrally-housed data hub that integrates ECE and K-12 data systems that allows for efficient, one-stop entry for programs and LEAs.⁵⁴

The state's ECE data collection and reporting should include the following:

- ECE provider information that interfaces with their Great Start to Quality data profile, such that ongoing participation and progress in the QRIS can be followed over time and gap analyses in access to high-quality ECE can inform resource allocation.
- Compensation and credentials of the ECE workforce across ECE settings, disaggregated by race and ethnicity.

- Longitudinal student-level data that utilizes unique identifiers through ECE and K-12 and is disaggregated by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, IDEA and/or Section 504 status, and multilingual learners and their languages, and that allows for monitoring outcomes over time to evaluate implementation and inform further iterations of quality and alignment initiatives.⁵⁵
- A user-friendly, publicly accessible dashboard that allows educators, leaders, policymakers, and advocates to view trends by examining correlations between ECE program type, program quality, geographic location, student subgroup, and assessment outcomes.



SPOTLIGHT: HOW IT'S BEING DONE

As of 2014, Pennsylvania was the first and only state to link ECE staffing, enrollment, QRIS, programming, and child-level ECE data to K-12 data.⁵⁶ A partnership between the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services and the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) facilitates Pennsylvania's Enterprise to Link Information for Children Across Networks (PELICAN).⁵⁷ PELICAN encompasses seven key data systems: Certification, Child Care Works, Keys to Quality, PA Pre-K Counts, Early Learning Network, Early Intervention, and Provider Management.⁵⁸ Agency administrators, providers, and other authorized users input data into their respective systems and, where relevant, data entered into one system is integrated into another. Further, PELICAN data, the state's K-12 data system, data sets related to higher education, and the Early Learning Network data are all connected through the statewide longitudinal data system. This comprehensive data hub allows authorized users to understand children's progress from birth to age 20 and analyze trends and outcomes over time.

Because Pennsylvania's Office of Child Development and Early Learning is under both the Department of Education and the Department of Human Services, students are assigned two unique identifiers, one for OCDEL and one for the Department of Education. This structure allows for seamless, individual-level data tracking from ECE through K-12.⁵⁹

Pennsylvania provides a model for what's possible with intentional data governance and infrastructure design.

Michigan's Family Childcare Networks Act, passed in June 2022, calls for "data collection and evaluation to measure success" of Michigan's newly formed childcare networks.⁶⁰ Given that many home providers also provide services to preschool-aged children, it will be important to ensure that the data structure serving the childcare networks is a part of or interfaces with this central data hub. In doing so, Michigan will be better positioned to support the transitions of all students in every ECE-related environment.

Michigan has the capacity to connect many elements of the data reporting structures in preschool and K-12, but no such link currently exists.⁶¹

To establish this link, Michigan's state leaders should:

- **Develop a strategic plan for enhancing existing structures and building needed capacity such that secure links between systems can be made.**
 - ❖ This plan should include strategies for data governance, privacy and security, access and use, quality, linking and matching across systems, cross-agency data sharing, and stakeholder engagement.⁶²
- **Further understand and leverage data collection already in place.**
 - ❖ At the regional and local level, Michigan should assess how existing data collection systems are working, where there are gaps in information, and how they can provide a foundation to what we need. Policymakers should also commit to designing policies that allow local communities to expand and adapt implementation to their students', families', and educators' needs.⁶³

2. Michigan also needs to fully implement and use a kindergarten entry observation tool.

In 2017, Michigan passed legislation requiring districts to implement the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment tool as part of the new Michigan Kindergarten Entry Observation (MKEO) system.⁶⁴ While statewide

implementation was set to begin in the 2020-2021 school year, ongoing pandemic conditions led to temporary suspension of the requirement. In 2021, the requirement was removed via legislation and implementation is now optional.⁶⁵

In the short term, and to ensure that all students benefit from the use of data in their transitions from Pre-K to K-12, we recommend policymakers:

- **Require that state leaders provide professional development regarding alignment as it relates to a kindergarten entry observation tool at the ISD, district, and classroom levels.**
 - To effectively and properly use the data, educators and leaders first need understanding and training on the value of observational assessments. The state should provide the capacity and funding necessary to train district leaders, principals, and kindergarten teachers on the importance of observational data and how it can help educators understand students' educational progress and needs. Strong implementation of a kindergarten observational tool also hinges on state leaders building educators' knowledge on the crucial relationships between observational data, pedagogical and philosophical alignment between systems, and the critical role kindergarten educators play in P-3 alignment.
 - State leaders should emphasize the proper interpretations of observational results to support instructional improvement. State instructional leaders must also help bridge a common understanding of the intended use of the data at the state and local levels.
 - As kindergarten observations and readiness assessments are not designed or suited for use as student placement or program accountability tools, educational leaders must not improperly apply insights gleaned from the data. Implementing the tool for measuring program or teacher efficacy are beyond the tool's intended use.⁶⁶ Kindergarten readiness assessments are

intended to provide critical information regarding socioemotional and academic readiness that can inform pedagogical and instructional alignment between ECE and kindergarten classrooms.

In the medium-to long-term, policymakers and state leaders should:

- **Require use of a common kindergarten entry observation tool.**
 - Understanding student progress at the beginning of kindergarten via a common tool is necessary to improve coordination, alignment, and continued supports to young learners. This would also allow for streamlined and efficient training and implementation for kindergarten teachers. Using one tool also provides all ECE programs and kindergarten educators with common definitions for measures and a uniform method for collecting data.
- **Provide funding for the administration of this singular assessment.**
 - Sufficient funding ensures that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status or schools' resources, will benefit from data regarding their developmental and academic progress being incorporated into their kindergarten transition.
- **Require Michigan's observation tool be culturally and linguistically inclusive and implemented with fidelity.**
 - It is critical the state ensures students of all backgrounds are accurately assessed. Moreover, the assessment system must distinguish the difference between multilingual children and primarily English-speaking children. This can lead to better infrastructure development to support English learner students, especially given the state's growing population of English Learners. Linguistic sensitivity in the assessment can also inform seamless carryover of identified needs from ECE to K-12.⁶⁷
 - To mitigate bias in observational data, leaders and educators at all levels must be well-versed in

cultural and linguistic sensitivities in implementing the tool. Implicit bias trainings should accompany professional development regarding the observational assessment.

3. Michigan needs a cohesive and well-defined ECE-to-Kindergarten hand-off process

To facilitate P-3 alignment and strong supports for students, Michigan must intentionally create a well-defined ECE to kindergarten hand-off process. To do this, we recommend Michigan's state leaders should:

- **Pilot a framework for a qualitative and quantitative handoff process from ECE classrooms to kindergarten educators.**

- This process would be carried out by communities and districts and could particularly benefit students with greater educational needs by reducing the time it takes to identify need in a new environment. Many states like North Carolina, West Virginia, and Oregon already have or are piloting such processes.⁶⁸

- **Encourage districts to establish meaningful and culturally-responsive engagement and partnership with families well before kindergarten entry.**

- By empowering advocacy, sharing assessment data, and putting transition teams in place, districts can especially support the unique transition needs of students of color, students from low-income households, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities. Engaging families within the context of their own neighborhoods, and identifying and addressing barriers such as transportation, health, and other wraparound needs will foster a smooth, well-supported transition. Likewise, availing parents and caregivers of the data relevant to their child allows each student to have a full team of experts on their development at the table. Students will benefit most when parents and caregivers are involved in the analysis and decision-making regarding their student's transition.



Additional Data Considerations

Multi-agency data-sharing agreements limit redundancy in systems and the overhead incurred in the administration and maintenance of data systems. This would also allow all stakeholders access to a more holistic picture of student needs. To this end, Michigan should seek to leverage federal funding streams to incentivize sharing across ECE, elementary, child welfare, and health systems.⁶⁹

It is also important that Michigan's newly aligned data system is strong and culturally sensitive enough to provide appropriate tools and supports to achieve high quality. While a common kindergarten readiness assessment will provide valuable information regarding students' readiness for kindergarten in a variety of domains, none are well-suited for use as an ECE provider accountability tool.⁷⁰ As such, structural and process quality and the cultural responsiveness of ECE programs should continue to be evaluated through the Great Start to Quality system, with associated support provided to educators and centers in need of quality improvement.

It is also important to note that policies and procedures that are primarily concerned with quality also impact the efficient use of data, and care should be taken to break down any siloed approaches to both. For example, collecting and evaluating data for the purpose of providing process monitoring and accountability is more feasible and more effective with fewer curricular frameworks.⁷¹ Administrators should seek to find the balance between philosophical diversity and the efficiency of process monitoring.



WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

The ECE workforce must receive support and investment that is on par with K-12. As current research provides limited examples of robust ECE career pathway programs, Michigan has the opportunity to lead the way with intention and equity.⁷² Three key areas of consideration can guide workforce development to improve and sustain P-3 systems alignment:

1. Create Equitable Opportunities to Join the ECE Workforce

Michigan's recent ECE needs assessment identified that the state lacks a well-developed pipeline to recruit and retain ECE educators.⁷³ Moreover, children served in the ECE system do not have enough educators who represent their diverse cultures, languages, and racial identities.⁷⁴ While the ECE professionals historically have been more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse than the K-12 professionals, there is still a critical need to maintain and retain the racially- and linguistically-diverse workforce ECE already has, as well as recruit for a more diverse ECE workforce.⁷⁵ Further, while efforts to increase the educational requirements in the ECE workforce have been successful, more can be done to ensure that future teachers of diverse backgrounds have access to the postsecondary and credentialing programs that allow them to enter—and stay—in the career field.

Without a well-developed and supported pipeline, P-3 alignment efforts will be hampered by the many challenges experienced within ECE systems and programs, including high turnover, limited professional development, and a lack of culturally- and linguistically-representative educators who can provide important insight to the transition needs of students of color and multilingual learners. This is especially true for programs that serve more young learners of color and those from low-income backgrounds.

Currently, Michigan offers the **T.E.A.C.H Early Childhood Scholarship program**, coordinated by the Michigan Association for the Education of Young Children. This program provides scholarships to



current early childhood educators to continue their credentialing and education. A variety of scholarships are available to applicants who work a minimum of 20 hours per week in an early childhood education setting.⁷⁶ The program is highlighted as a national best practice in cultivating a well-trained and diverse ECE workforce. Continued investment in the program is critical to breaking down financial barriers to ECE workforce entry.⁷⁷

In addition to building on this program, we recommend policymakers and the Michigan Department of Education continue to develop an equity-centered ECE pipeline through the following multi-pronged approach:

- **Enhance preparation and development supports for ECE teachers who are non-native English speakers**
 - A diverse ECE workforce should include educators whose primary language is not English. As such, coursework should be available in their primary

language.⁷⁸ Similarly, translation services and assistance with credit transfers from home country training could inclusively accommodate emerging ECE professionals.

- Once in the profession, ongoing support in the form of blended language professional development and easy access to continued education in reading and writing would cultivate stronger ECE teachers who can more readily collaborate across ECE and K-12 systems. The Education Trust and the U.S. Department of Commerce call on states and local chambers to strengthen connections with ethnic chambers such as the Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.⁷⁹ These organizations are well-positioned to conduct outreach in multilingual communities and serve as a connection point for professional development, networking, and increased visibility for families looking for multilingual early childhood programs.

- **Pursue more comprehensive wage supports**

- ❖ Michigan urgently needs to address the current financial constraints that the ECE workforce faces. A 2018 study of Michigan’s ECE workforce found that at least 91% of ECE professionals across all roles within the study (administrator, teacher, assistant, or family childcare provider) qualified for and received at least one form of public assistance.⁸⁰ Importantly, 90% of the respondents were White; however, approximately 64% of ECE educators nationwide identify as White. Given that Black early childhood educators earn an average of 78 cents less per hour than their White colleagues, Black ECE educators’ likely underrepresentation in this survey is an alarming concern.⁸¹

- ❖ Statewide programs such as WAGES\$, administered by the Child Care Services Association that also facilitates T.E.A.C.H. (a program Michigan already uses to support ECE educators) provides salary supplements to

ECE professionals.⁸² The Michigan Department of Education should apply to the Child Care WAGES\$ program and explore avenues for public and private funding streams to support its sustainability. Paired together, the Michigan ECE workforce could see an increase in retention rates, setting the foundation for the longevity and field expertise that could better serve alignment initiatives. While it does not achieve deserved compensation parity, this approach provides a more immediate—though short-term—solution to a critical need while long-term compensation parity policies are phased in.

- **Develop a registered apprenticeship pathway to certification**

- ❖ The passage of the federal **2014 Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act** broadened the frameworks for adult education programs to include career pathways for working adults. As such, states are required to identify in-demand occupations for targeted funding and are primarily



responsible for the planning and implementation of career pathway programs.⁸³

❖ While Michigan has made efforts to improve ECE quality **by increasing the qualification requirements of early childhood educators**, the state must also responsibly ensure aspiring ECE educators have the tools and pathways to attain those credentials. Leveraging federal funding, state leaders in Michigan should work together with higher education institutions and philanthropic partners to develop infrastructure for pathways such as Registered Apprenticeship programs. These pathways offer an “earn while you learn” approach for ECE educators to attain more advanced credentials as well as associates or bachelor’s degrees. Registered Apprenticeships strengthen the ECE workforce by equipping educators to achieve higher earning potential that can enhance workforce stability. Additionally, legislators should consider granting credit for prior learning for students who pursue degrees with prior work experience.⁸⁴

2. Professionalize the Workforce Across the ECE System

While standards and credential requirements for Michigan’s ECE educators have increased, their compensation has not. Currently ECE personnel are among the lowest paid working professionals.⁸⁵ As of 2019, the poverty rate for early educators in Michigan was 18.9%, and we know the COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened the economic conditions for providers and their families.⁸⁶ Moreover, between 2010 and 2015, Michigan was one of only three states that saw a 10% *decrease* in ECE wages.⁸⁷ Michigan ECE educators need a better long-term compensation solution, one where their wages are commensurate with their education, experience, and responsibilities.

Research has also pointed to ECE educators’ desire to be more involved in decision-making regarding policies that impact their classrooms and profession.⁸⁸ Meaningfully engaging early childhood educators as professionals with valuable expertise will also support talent recruitment and retention. Retention, in turn,

supports alignment as a seasoned ECE workforce can help sustain practices and connections between ECE programs, the P-3 continuum, and the K-12 system as a whole. Longevity in the field also fosters expertise that is critical to informed policy decisions.

To equitably and effectively professionalize Michigan’s ECE workforce, we recommend policymakers prioritize:

- **Compensation parity and wages that are commensurate with ECE professionals’ qualifications**
 - ❖ Despite the developmental and educational importance of a child’s first five years, Michigan’s ECE educators with bachelor’s degrees earn 21.5% less than degreed elementary educators, simply for choosing to work with students ages 0-5.⁸⁹ ECE professionals deserve a salary schedule and benefits that match their K-12 counterparts, with increases that are in step with experience and educational attainment. Michigan would encourage retention in the ECE workforce by offering wages that respect the educators’ education and expertise. It would also position K-12 districts for better alignment with ECE providers through partnerships built on collegiality and professional equality.
 - ❖ Alabama, New Jersey, and Georgia have policies that require full salary parity for lead teachers in every ECE setting.⁹⁰ While full compensation parity can present challenges, evidence from these and other states suggest that a phase-in period for compensation parity across the entire ECE workforce could mitigate tensions that often arise when policies instituting partial parity target certain segments of the workforce before others (e.g., public Pre-K teachers before private center-based providers with the same qualifications).⁹¹
- **Meaningful engagement of ECE educators in inter-system alignment**
 - ❖ Policymakers at all levels should engage ECE educators as experts to assist in the development and implementation of ECE and K-12 systems alignment policies and practices. Research shows that commonly used formal agreements

or memoranda of understanding often don't produce meaningful and ongoing coordination for successful transitions from Pre-K to kindergarten.⁹² Furthermore, successful transition programs require buy-in from both ECE and K-12 educators and a thorough understanding of early childhood development at the K-12 level.⁹³

3. Professional Development and Capacity Building

Interviews with educators and advocates engaged in systems alignment across the country indicate that it is critical for leaders at every level to be knowledgeable about early childhood education and alignment. Well-informed leaders increase the likelihood that ECE alignment implementation efforts will be prioritized in funding and resource allocation decisions.⁹⁴

In 2018, the Michigan State Board of Education approved a new certification structure that better serves alignment: teachers can now attain certification in PreK-3 and Grades 3-6, in place of the previous K-5 credential.⁹⁵ Ongoing professional development that reinforces this alignment between ECE years and K-12 is important to ensuring that educators in both the ECE system and the K-12 system are on the same page through children's transitions. Training for educators across the Pre-K to 3 continuum in all settings should be grounded in similar foundational principles, including the importance of socioemotional development into the early elementary years.

Michigan currently provides an extensive guiding document for educators to help build shared understanding of core competencies and core teaching practices across the Pre-K-12 grade levels.⁹⁶ Lansing School District in particular has taken alignment further by systematically engaging principals and teachers in each building to evaluate strengths and opportunities for growth in instructional practice that will serve students across Pre-K-12 grade levels. The district facilitates professional development for continued improvement based on data from within and across grades as well as from

classroom observations.⁹⁷

These effective practices provide a model for other districts in Michigan. To further build capacity and improve alignment in professional development statewide, Michigan should:

- **Explore how the state can leverage existing infrastructure**

- Entities such as the Office of Educator Excellence, ECIC, and regional Great Start Collaborative sites should explore the expansion of technical assistance to include capacity-building and professional development focused on alignment for districts and ECE providers. Many existing initiatives are limited to Pre-K programs housed within public school districts. Policymakers should capitalize on the infusion of federal and state ECE funds to expand and leverage this existing infrastructure. As regional, network-oriented support organizations, Great Start Collaboratives could provide an avenue to more inclusivity for all models of early education and foster comprehensive alignment between all ECE educators, parents, and K-12 schools.



❖ The Family Childcare Networks Act will scale regional shared service network programming statewide.⁹⁸ Passed in June 2022, the act requires MDE to establish family childcare networks to support home-based childcare providers in every region across the state. Equitable distribution of funding would facilitate supports related to business and operations, program quality, training and technical assistance, peer connections, and engaging new providers. Importantly, the Childcare Networks will be required to connect to the existing quality and licensing systems.⁹⁹ As a result, ECE educators across the mixed-delivery system will be better supported in pursuing high-quality and better positioned for alignment with the K-12 system. Fully funding these new networks and ensuring that the supports, technical assistance, and professional development are produced and implemented with a P-3 alignment lens would amplify equitable impact for students in private and home-based programs.

- **Adopt a leadership capacity-building program**
 - ❖ Providing meaningful opportunities for district, school, and ECE leaders to learn and reflect together on alignment within their communities underscores the value and importance of P-3 transitions. MDE should seek partnerships with philanthropy and businesses to develop, fund, and implement leadership development opportunities that will galvanize alignment efforts across the state. These efforts could show promise for sustained system alignment that is responsive to local community considerations along with regional technical assistance sites.

Michigan’s education advocates, state leaders, and policymakers have made great strides in pursuing ECE quality, access, and funding structure improvement. Further investment and collaboration can help the state in developing robust data infrastructure and equitable workforce supports, and in turn facilitate stronger alignment between ECE and the K-12 systems. With sustained commitment to improving these foundational five elements, Michigan can be a state where *all* children are well prepared for kindergarten and where kindergarten is well prepared for *all* children.



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THE KRESGE FOUNDATION



In 2015, The Education Trust-Midwest launched the Michigan Achieves! campaign to make Michigan a top 10 education state by 2030. Each year, we report on Michigan’s progress toward that goal based on student outcome performance metrics and opportunity to learn metrics. These metrics shed light on the health of education in our state – and the extent to which Michigan is succeeding at creating conditions that support teaching and learning in Michigan public schools.

Since then, a growing number of partners around the state have come to work together to advance the best practices and strategies from leading education states to Michigan, in order to close achievement gaps and ensure every Michigan student is learning—and being taught—at high levels. Join the movement at www.edtrustmidwest.org.

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The Education Trust-Midwest is grateful to the many funders, partners and supporters who are committed to lifting up public education as a top priority for Michigan.

About The Education Trust Midwest

The Education Trust-Midwest is a non-partisan, statewide research, policy and advocacy organization focused on what is best for Michigan students. Our mission is to close opportunity gaps, particularly for students of color, English learners, students with disabilities and children living in poverty — and to make Michigan a top 10 education state for all children.



The Education Trust—Midwest

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