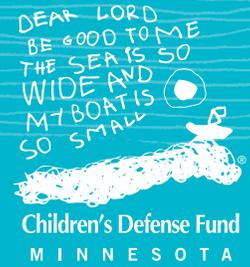


# Evaluating Early Childhood Program Access:

*An Analysis of Participation Data for Lower Income Children, Children of Color and American Indian Children from the Minnesota Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System*



## **The potential for a future productive workforce, prosperous economy and thriving communities in Minnesota is being formed right now in the experiences and opportunities provided to the state's youngest citizens.**

During the first years of life a child's brain goes through its most rapid development with 700 new neural connections occurring every second.<sup>1</sup> Those neural connections are the building blocks of the brain, which is constructed from the bottom up starting with simple skills that provide the foundation for more advanced skills later in life. That's why providing a stable foundation for brain development in a child's earliest years through strong caregiver relationships, early education for all young children and early intervention when development is disrupted by adverse experiences (such as poverty, hunger, exposure to violence, or parental mental illness or addiction) is essential to ensuring positive outcomes later in a child's life. Investments in early education and intervention programs not only support future learning and development, but also reduce the need for remedial services like Special Education, justice systems, and public work support programs, and can result in societal returns on investment of up to \$16 for every \$1 spent on prevention and intervention.<sup>2</sup> This is the best possible investment communities can make in their children's futures. The state's future workforce and economy depends on how we treat children now because today's preschoolers are tomorrow's workforce.



## **Early Childhood Investment in Minnesota**

State and federally funded programs provide and support access to education, prevention and intervention services for young children and families in Minnesota. The purposes of these programs include supporting access to basic needs and work supports such as food, health care, and child care and promoting healthy child development and family stability through parental support and education, and access to high-quality early education. Effective early childhood programs and supports are safe, accessible and developmentally appropriate and include appropriately trained and compensated staff, parental support and involvement, language development support, small adult-child ratios, comprehensive supports to address the needs of the whole child, and responsive

adult-child interactions. These programs can tip the scales toward positive development for children by preparing them socially and academically for school, providing emotional support to build resilience, and including cultural support to develop a secure identity. Evidence has shown that children at greater risk of developmental concerns, like children of color, American Indian children, and lower income children, experience even greater positive effects from participation in rigorously evaluated early childhood programs that incorporate these high-quality components. Gains include improved school readiness, increased reading comprehension by third grade,<sup>3</sup> improved health outcomes,<sup>4</sup> and supported development of executive functioning skills like self-control, memory, leadership skills and mental flexibility.<sup>5</sup>

The benefits of early childhood programs have become widely known and recognized through public investment at the national, state and local levels. In recent years, Minnesota has invested millions of dollars into programs like Early Learning Scholarships, School Readiness, Voluntary Pre-K, Head Start and the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) because lawmakers, parents and citizens understand the long-term return on investments of these programs. However, it has become increasingly difficult to track data on children's early childhood program participation, particularly across programs, and long-term outcomes based on that participation primarily because early childhood programs are administered by different state agencies, have various levels and sources of funding, and track participation data and outcomes differently. This multi-services delivery approach that also allows for often necessary layering of services is beneficial to young children and families who have varying needs and access to services. However, it does make it difficult to track how services are layered, compare results and outcomes of services, and determine gaps in services for specific populations and geographic areas.

## **Minnesota Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System**

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of early childhood and social program participation and use patterns to identify gaps in services and opportunities for investment and outreach, integrated data between administrative agencies has become necessary. Minnesota began to embark on the creation of such a system in 2010 through Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant Funding. Minnesota Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System (ECLDS) was launched in early 2016. The ECLDS is an interactive and accessible data tool that combines and links data collected by the Minnesota Departments of Education, Human

Services and Health. The system protects the privacy of individual children by showing population results only. The integrated data system provides the ability to show children's growth and achievement with outcomes data (such as educational outcomes like attendance and reading test scores) in relation to their participation in a variety of educational and social programs over time. The goal of the tool is to provide comprehensive data for policymakers, educators, and data analysts to evaluate the collective and long-term participation and potential effect of early childhood programs across sectors. This report will analyze findings using the ECLDS data to assess access to early childhood programs for children of color and low-income children enrolled in the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and the School Meal Program. The ECLDS is a public website and is accessible at [eclds.mn.gov](http://eclds.mn.gov).

Currently the ECLDS includes integrated statewide participation data for four early childhood programs: CCAP, Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE), Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) and District Preschool. Full descriptions of each program are included in the glossary. The ECLDS governance groups and staff at the Minnesota Departments of Education, Health and Human Services are working to integrate data for additional early childhood programs including Head Start and Early Learning Scholarships. Early childhood program participation data is accessible by school district, county (by school location), race and ethnicity, and children who at some point prior to kindergarten entry accessed MFIP and/or Food Programs, which include SNAP and the School Meal Program. The data tool also is able to segregate data for early childhood participation by several child demographic characteristics including disability status, home language spoken, gender, pre-term birth, low-birth weight, child protection involvement, and deaf/hard of hearing. The system is also being built out to link data on children's long-term growth and achievement, including attendance and test scores, to help understand how early childhood program participation connects with outcomes later in a child's academic career. Additionally, the school district and county-level data offer opportunities for individual programs and communities to better identify strengths and challenges for early childhood program access. However, it is important to note, that a variety of factors, both positive and negative, influence children's outcomes and children often access multiple early childhood programs and interventions, including ones not included in the ECLDS, so it is imperative to be careful when attempting to use the tool to evaluate causal relationships between individual early childhood programs and indicators of children's long-term growth and achievement.

## Research Questions and Methodology

This analysis uses 2014-15 kindergarten cohort data (the most recent available at the time of release) from the ECLDS to analyze access to the early childhood programs included in the ECLDS prior to kindergarten entry for children of color and American Indian children and children accessing MFIP and Food Programs. The

data on children who accessed MFIP also includes children who accessed the Diversionary Work Program (DWP), a four-month cash assistance and employment program that most families access prior to transitioning to MFIP. For brevity, this report will just refer to MFIP. The kindergarten cohort is the total kindergartners enrolled in public schools during the 2014-15 school year, which is the year of the most recent data available. The integrated data allows for an aggregate count of the number of kindergartners in the cohort who were enrolled in each of the programs at some point prior to kindergarten entry. Due to the recent efforts to integrate data, participation data for the district programs (ECSE, ECFE and District Preschool) are only available for one year prior to kindergarten entry. Data for CCAP, MFIP and Food Programs participation are available for all years prior to kindergarten entry.

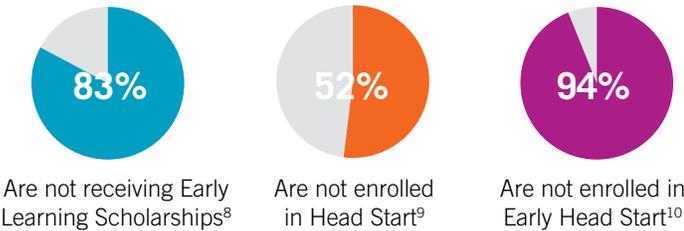
Focusing on children accessing MFIP and/or Food Programs, children of color, and American Indian children is critical because research shows that lower income children and children of color have less access to early childhood programs, increased risk for adverse experiences that can affect development, and conversely have been shown to have greater long-term positive gains and benefits as a result of participation in quality early childhood programs. To improve outcomes for these populations and reduce disparities, we must understand how they access early education and intervention programs and determine ways to improve their access to programs that support healthy development.

It's also important to understand the historical and structural barriers these families face to accessing early childhood programs and healthy child development. For low-income families who access MFIP and Food Programs, some early childhood programs are often less accessible because they're too expensive and programs to reduce the cost are underfunded, they're not compatible with hectic and non-standard work schedules, and there are too few targeted efforts to do early childhood program outreach where lower income families are already being served. In addition to being more likely to be lower income, children of color and American Indian families often face additional structural barriers to accessing early childhood programs. First, like many programs in Minnesota, which has long been a primarily White state, many early childhood programs were developed and modeled by and for White people and are often less culturally relevant to populations of color. Additionally, many families of color face barriers to access due to language, immigration, transportation or other barriers that could, and in some cases have, been addressed through targeted, culturally relevant outreach. Families of color and American Indian families are also often parts of highly interconnected cultural communities that rely on each other for support and help raising children. This, along with lack of child care affordability, is evidenced in families of color relying more than White families on Family, Friend and Neighbor (FFN) child care.<sup>6</sup> FFN care has many positive benefits. Children receiving FFN care should also have access to high-quality early childhood programs. Thus, there have been expanding efforts to target early childhood program and support outreach to children in FFN care.

## Participation in Early Care and Education for All 2015 Kindergartners

Early education, stable child care and early intervention services for children at risk for developmental delay have proven to be effective in not only making children more ready for school, but also with helping children develop executive functioning skills important for making healthy choices, maintaining social emotional control, and developing leadership skills.<sup>7</sup> Research shows these skills result in an increased likelihood for young children to grow into hard-working, contributing citizens, which reaps long-term cost savings to society. Despite the research that shows significant return on investment for high-quality early education and intervention, early education and intervention programs are not accessible to all young children primarily due to lack of funding, including for programs targeting access to lower income children and children of color who historically have been underserved. Increased investment in recent years by the state in CCAP, Early Learning Scholarships, Head Start and Voluntary Pre-K, have started to make a dent, but significant additional investment is necessary to reach these populations early.

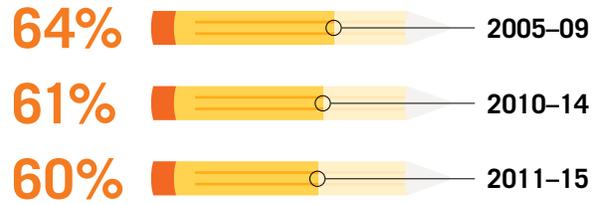
### PERCENT OF INCOME ELIGIBLE CHILDREN NOT SERVED BY SUBSIDIZED EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAMS



With the exception of ECSE, all the early childhood programs included in the ECLDS are underfunded and, therefore, unable to serve all eligible young children and their families. ECSE does currently serve all children and their families who are screened and meet the eligibility criteria including exhibiting a developmental delay or having a physical or mental condition that has a high likelihood of resulting in a delay. There are no income or other requirements for ECSE and eligibility determination and services are provided free of charge. However, not all those screened and determined eligible receive services because participation is voluntary and sometimes families face other issues like mobility and follow through. ECFE and District Preschool are offered based on children's age, but access and cost (both are typically sliding fee scale) vary by district. To be eligible for CCAP, families must earn less than 47 percent of the state median income and meet work and other income requirements. In part due to the lack of funding, all of these early childhood programs also face workforce issues such as recruiting, hiring and retaining adequately trained staff, paying adequate wages, and ensuring the diversity of the workforce reflects the diversity of the children and families served. Garnering the will and innovative ideas of the public and policymakers in

making significant investment in early childhood program access is necessary to put all children, especially children who face steeper ladders to success, on a path to success during one of the most significant periods in their development.

### LOW INCOME CHILDREN AGE 3 AND 4 NOT IN SCHOOL<sup>11</sup>

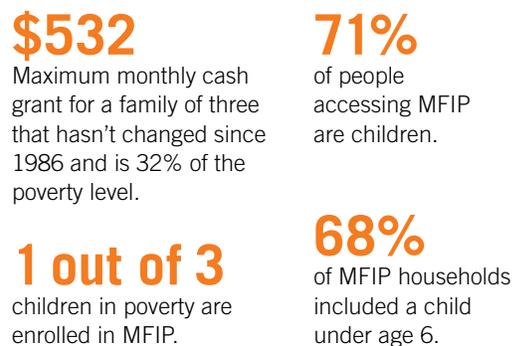


Aggregated data for the entire kindergarten cohort is an important measure of comparison for the more stratified integrated data included in the ECLDS. See Figure 1 on page six for total kindergartners accessing early childhood programs included in the ECLDS. This analysis will dive deeper into the ECLDS data to analyze access to early childhood programs for children accessing MFIP and Food Programs and for children of color and American Indian children.

### Early Childhood Program Access for Children Accessing the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) and Food Programs

The Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) is the state's Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), or welfare-to-work program. Children in families accessing MFIP are some of the state's most vulnerable to the effects of economic instability. For example, one-third (35%) of children in MFIP families are enrolled in Special Education—nearly three times the rate of all children.<sup>12</sup> Created with the intention of assisting families in meeting their children's basic needs, the program has few policies and minimal data collection to assess the well-being of children on the program.<sup>13</sup> The combination of the meager cash grant that hasn't been increased since 1986 and the food grant currently leaves families of three at 58 percent of the poverty level.

### THE MINNESOTA FAMILY INVESTMENT PROGRAM BY THE NUMBERS<sup>14</sup>

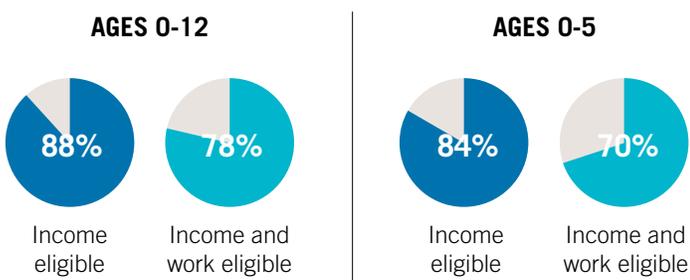


The Food Programs included in the ECLDS are the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the School Meal Program. To be income eligible for SNAP, a family's gross income must be below 165 percent of the federal poverty guidelines based on the family size (currently \$33,264 for family of three) and below 185 percent for the School Meal Program (currently \$37,296 for family of three). SNAP provides a benefit for families to purchase food items based on income, expenses and household composition. The School Meal Program provides free school meals (breakfast and lunch) for all enrolled children. In 2015, 167,470 children, or 13 percent of all children, were enrolled in SNAP<sup>15</sup> and 323,531, or 38 percent of all K-12 students, were enrolled in the School Meal Program.<sup>16</sup> Not all eligible families are enrolled in MFIP, School Meals, or SNAP.

### Trends in Early Childhood Program Access for Children Who Accessed MFIP or Food Programs Prior to Kindergarten Entry

**Children who accessed MFIP and/or Food Programs are more than twice as likely as those who did not access those programs to have also accessed one or more of the early childhood programs included in the ECLDS. CCAP participation drives the higher rates of early childhood program participation for children who have accessed MFIP or Food Programs.** See figures 3, 4 and 5 on page 6. Ninety percent of the 10,547 2015 kindergartners who accessed CCAP prior to kindergarten entry also accessed MFIP and/or Food Programs. However, only 31 percent of the 30,593 kindergartners who accessed MFIP and/or Food Programs accessed CCAP, though all were income eligible at some point. Children accessing MFIP are guaranteed access to MFIP CCAP if they meet work requirements. If accessing SNAP and parents meet work requirements, children under age 13 are almost always eligible for CCAP. However, lack of funding denies thousands of eligible children access to CCAP and currently leaves nearly 5,300 families on the waitlist.<sup>17</sup>

#### CHILDREN NOT ENROLLED IN CCAP DUE TO LACK OF FUNDING<sup>18</sup>



**ECFE served disproportionately fewer children who accessed MFIP and/or Food Programs than children who hadn't.** Only 31.6 percent of children who accessed ECFE one year prior to kindergarten also accessed MFIP or Food Programs, compared to 45 percent of all kindergartners accessing MFIP or Food Programs. Only 3.7 percent of all children who accessed MFIP and/or Food Programs also accessed ECFE one year prior to kindergarten. See figure 3 on page 6. Some barriers voiced by early childhood professionals and the Voices and Choices for Children Coalition<sup>19</sup> (see more about the Coalition in End Notes) include the times classes are held

often conflict with work schedules, lack of transportation, language barriers, and lack of cultural relevancy. Offered in short sessions typically during the day or early evening, the class times often conflict with lower income families' work schedules because they often work hourly jobs in sectors that have non-standards hours. Some school districts are taking innovative approaches to increase access to ECFE for lower income families by doing outreach and holding sessions in homeless shelters, apartment complexes, and neighborhood parks, as well as specific sessions for individual cultural communities.

**The rate of children who accessed MFIP and/or SNAP who also accessed ECSE was proportionate, or a bit above, the rate who accessed the programs in the entire kindergarten cohort.** Just more than half (53%) of ECSE participants in the kindergarten cohort also accessed MFIP or Food Programs at some point prior to kindergarten entry compared with 44 percent of the total kindergarten cohort accessing MFIP or Food Programs. This slightly elevated level of overlap between MFIP and Food Programs and ECSE participation is comparable to current K-12 Special Education participation for students on the School Meal Program. In the 2016-17 school year, 52 percent of Special Education students were enrolled in the School Meal Program compared to 38 percent of total students enrolled in the School Meal Program.<sup>20</sup> However, understanding that children accessing MFIP are enrolled in Special Education at nearly three times the rate of other children,<sup>21</sup> there seems to be a discrepancy in access to ECSE for this population with nearly the same percentage of all children accessing ECSE having accessed MFIP prior to kindergarten entry (9.5%) compared to the general kindergarten cohort accessing MFIP prior to kindergarten entry (9.0%).

**The rates of children accessing District Preschool by participation in MFIP or Food Programs prior to kindergarten entry is most proportionate with the rates in the general cohort population compared to any other program on the ECLDS.** The makeup of all children in the 2014-15 kindergarten cohort who accessed only MFIP is 9 percent, accessed only Food Programs is 35.5 percent and didn't access either is 55.5 percent. The makeup of those who accessed District Preschool and accessed only MFIP is 7.8 percent, only Food Programs is 38.8 percent, and neither program is 53.4 percent. Still, only 18 percent of all children in the kindergarten cohort who accessed MFIP or Food Programs also accessed District Preschool. A \$25 million investment in Voluntary Prekindergarten Programs provided to 74 school districts across the state is projected to serve 3,300 students in 2016.<sup>22</sup> This funding was not available to this cohort of children. The funding was targeted toward school districts with higher rates of lower income students, so this presumably will help increase the rate of students who accessed MFIP and Food Programs who also participated in District Preschool.

### Early Childhood Program Access for Children of Color and American Indian Children

One-third of the 2014-15 kindergarten cohort being examined in this report are children of color and American Indian. Refer

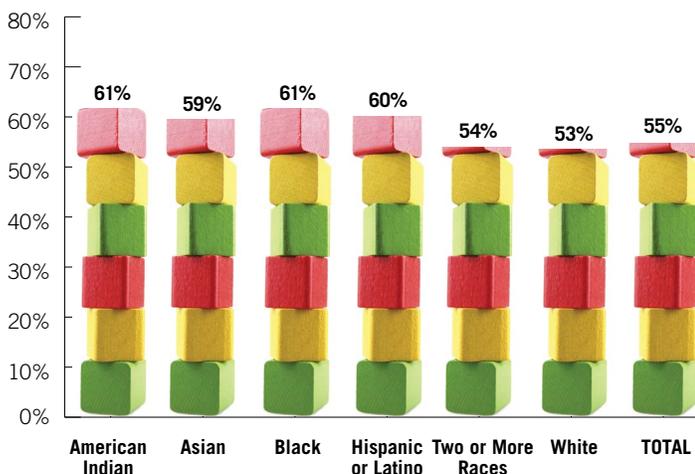
to figure 6 on page 7 for a complete breakdown of the cohort by race/ethnicity. The number of children of color in Minnesota has been on the rise over the past decade while the number of White children has decreased 9 percent. From 2005 to 2015 the Asian child population grew by 26 percent, the Black child population by 30 percent, the Hispanic/Latino child population by 38 percent, and children of Two or More Races by 43 percent.<sup>23</sup> The American Indian child population has remained relatively constant.<sup>24</sup>

### CHILD POPULATION GROWTH FROM 2005–2015<sup>25</sup>



This increase in children of color calls for significant attention from Minnesota policymakers and service providers to better understand the disparities in access to opportunities that support healthy development and, in turn, disparities in short and long-term outcomes for Minnesota children of color that are some of the worst in the country. The ever-changing face of Minnesota children means that the state's programs, policies and investments must adapt in order to address the needs of its evolving community through targeted outreach and investment, cultural adaptations to programs and curriculum, and an increase in program and policy leaders and educators from communities of color. This starts with early childhood programs, policies and investments. Currently, children of color and American Indian children face disparities in access to early education.

### YOUNG CHILDREN AGES 3 OR 4 NOT IN SCHOOL BY RACE AND ETHNICITY, 2010-14<sup>26</sup>



Recent investments in programs and policies targeted to increase early education program access for low-income children like CCAP, Head Start, Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten and Early Learning Scholarships, have simultaneously increased access for children of color. However, there needs to be more targeted investment in these communities to improve affordability and access while supporting programs that respect and incorporate cultural identity. A child's culture and race are highly influential to their learning preferences and should be taken into account in instructional and family engagement practices within early childhood programming.<sup>27</sup> By examining the ECLDS data it becomes apparent that some early childhood programs reach more children of color and are more successful in engaging diverse communities.

### Trends in Early Childhood Program Access for Children of Color and American Indian Children

**Black children proportionally are the most likely to have accessed one or more of the early childhood programs included in the ECLDS and this is driven by participation in CCAP.** Sixty percent of black children who entered kindergarten in 2014 participated in one or more of the early childhood programs included in the ECLDS, compared with 33 percent of Asian children, 36 percent of Hispanic/Latino children, 37 percent of White children, 40 percent of Asian Pacific Islander children, and 47 percent of American Indian children and children of Two or More races. Forty-four percent of all Black 2014-15 kindergartners accessed CCAP at some point prior to kindergarten entry and Black children comprise 33 percent of all CCAP participants in the cohort. High rates of Black children accessing CCAP is a result of most Black parents working but working for low wages where they cannot afford the full price of child care and are eligible for CCAP. The annual median household income for Black families with children (\$32,100) is nearly one-third of annual median household income for White families in Minnesota (\$90,500).<sup>28</sup> The other three early childhood programs included in the ECLDS (ECSE, ECFE, and District Preschool) show participation rates for Black children at or below the rate of Black children in the entire cohort.

**Hispanic/Latino children and Asian children have the lowest rates of participation in the early childhood programs included in the ECLDS.** It has been a documented trend in other states and nationally that Hispanic/Latino children participate in early care and education programs at lower rates than their peers<sup>29</sup> and nationally, three- and four-year-old Asian children are enrolled in school (see End Notes for definition) at the highest rate compared to any other race or ethnicity.<sup>30</sup> Of the 18 states with large enough numbers of three- and four-year old Asian children for data to be published, Minnesota has the lowest percentage of young Asian children enrolled in school.<sup>31</sup> Of the 38 states with large enough numbers of three- and four-year old Hispanic/Latino children for data to be published, Minnesota had the 10th highest percentage of young Hispanic/Latino children enrolled in school.<sup>32</sup> So compared to other states we are serving Hispanic/Latino children in early education programs

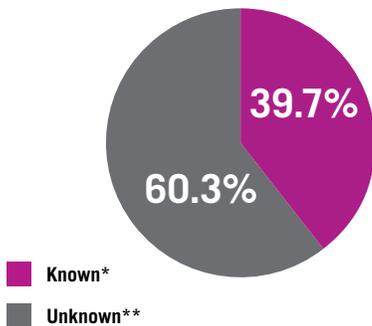
# How do children accessing MFIP and/or Food Programs, children of color, and American Indian children access early childhood programs included in the Early Childhood Data System?

Collection of integrated data from Minnesota's Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System (ECLDS). All data is for 2015 Kindergartners Prior to Kindergarten Entry.

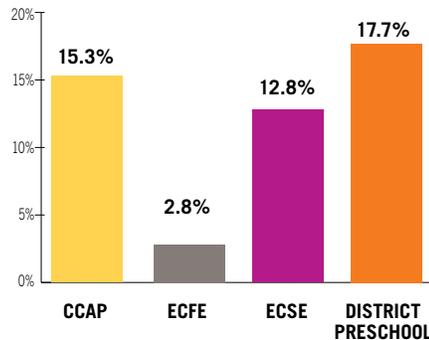
[www.ecls.mn.gov](http://www.ecls.mn.gov)

**FIGURE 1: TOTAL KINDERGARTNERS ACCESSING EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS INCLUDED IN THE ECLDS**

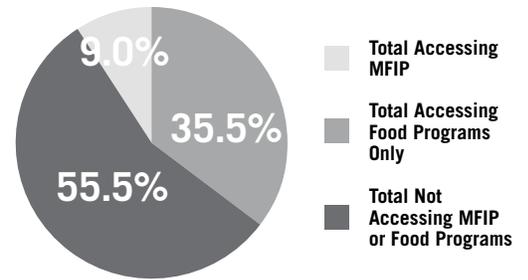
TOTAL KINDERGARTNERS: **68,797**



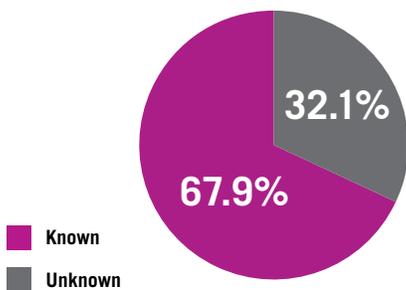
**PARTICIPATION BY PROGRAM AS A PERCENT OF ALL 2015 KINDERGARTNERS**



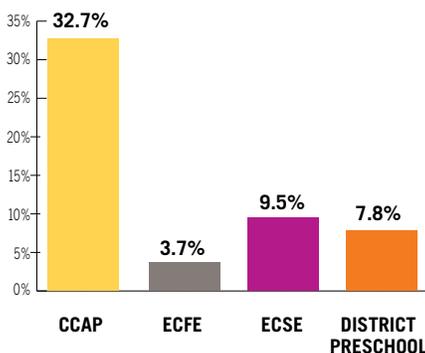
**FIGURE 2: TOTAL KINDERGARTNERS ACCESSING MFIP AND FOOD PROGRAMS AS A PERCENT OF ALL KINDERGARTNERS**



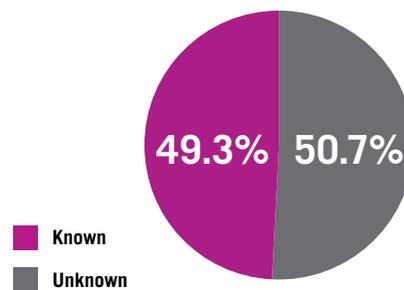
**FIGURE 3: EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM ACCESS FOR KINDERGARTNERS WHO ACCESSED MFIP AT SOME POINT PRIOR TO KINDERGARTEN ENTRY AS A PERCENT OF ALL KINDERGARTNERS WHO ACCESSED MFIP**



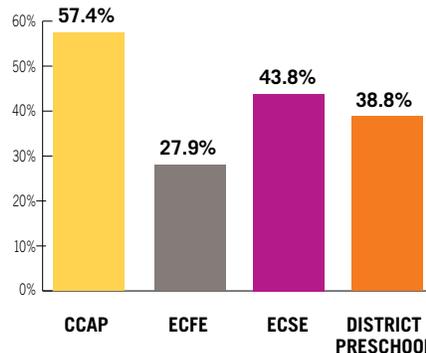
**PARTICIPATION BY PROGRAM**



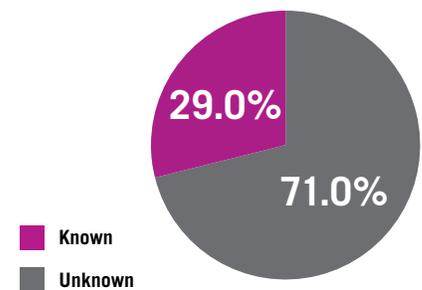
**FIGURE 4: EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM ACCESS FOR KINDERGARTNERS WHO ACCESSED FOOD PROGRAMS ONLY AT SOME POINT PRIOR TO KINDERGARTEN ENTRY AS A PERCENT OF ALL KINDERGARTNERS WHO ACCESSED FOOD PROGRAMS**



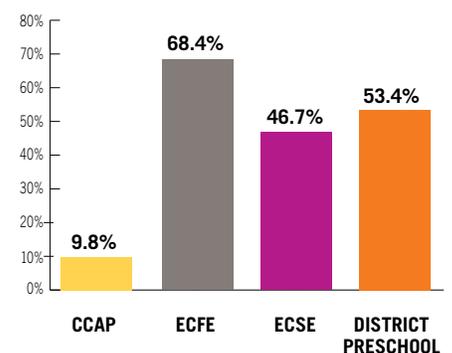
**PARTICIPATION BY PROGRAM**



**FIGURE 5: EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM ACCESS FOR KINDERGARTNERS WHO DID NOT ACCESS MFIP OR FOOD PROGRAMS AT ANY POINT PRIOR TO KINDERGARTEN ENTRY AS A PERCENT OF ALL KINDERGARTNERS WHO DID NOT ACCESS MFIP OR FOOD PROGRAMS**



**PARTICIPATION BY PROGRAM**

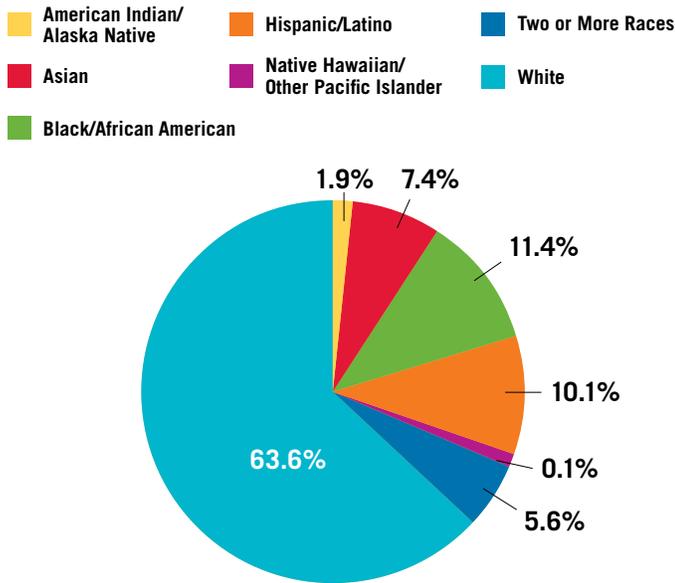


\***KNOWN PARTICIPATION** indicates participation in one of the four early childhood programs included in the ECLDS. If a child participated in one of the four programs included in the ECLDS during the time period that data was accessible then that is counted as known participation. Data for the district programs (ECFE, ECSE, and district preschool) are only available for one year prior to kindergarten entry for the 2015 kindergarten cohort and CCAP data is available for all years prior to kindergarten entry.

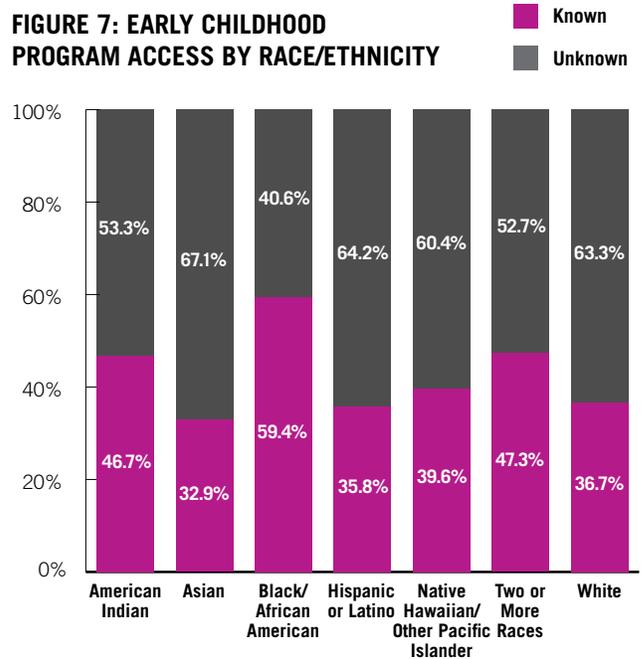
\*\***UNKNOWN PARTICIPATION** indicates no participation in early childhood programs included in the ECLDS prior to kindergarten entry. 2015 kindergartners in this category could have participated in other early childhood programs not included in the ECLDS or in the district programs included on the tool (ECFE, ECSE, and district preschool) more than one year prior to kindergarten entry.

# Data by Race/Ethnicity

**FIGURE 6: ALL 2015 KINDERGARTNERS BY RACE/ETHNICITY**

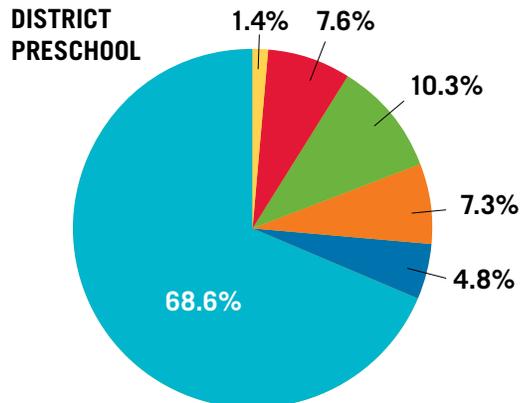
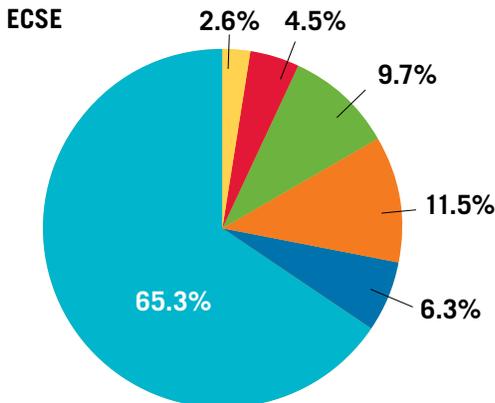
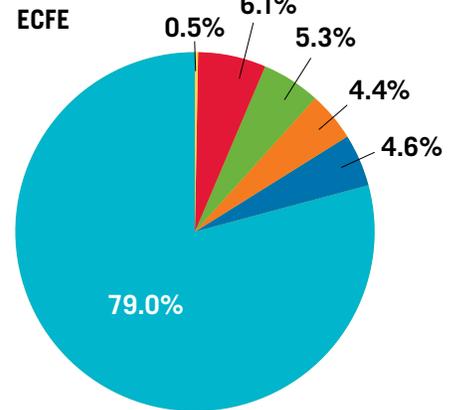
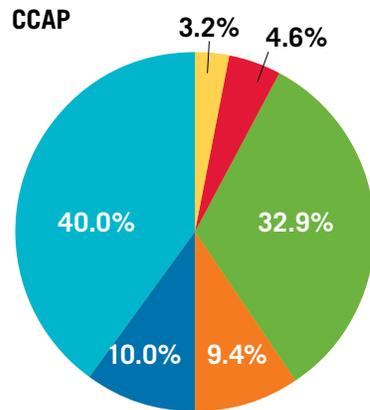


**FIGURE 7: EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM ACCESS BY RACE/ETHNICITY**



**FIGURE 8: PARTICIPATION BY RACE BY PROGRAM**

- American Indian/Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black/African American
- Hispanic/Latino
- Two or More Races
- White
- \*Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander total too small to count by program



better than Asian children, but there is still significant room for improvement among both populations.

Research also has shown that children of immigrants are less likely to participate in early childhood programs than children of non-immigrants.<sup>33</sup> Immigrants face steeper barriers to enrollment and awareness of programs due to issues around language, literacy, system navigation, immigration status requirements, and lack of outreach. With high rates of immigrants among Minnesota’s Asian and Hispanic/Latino populations, this is a factor for consideration when it comes to Asian and Hispanic/Latino children participating in early childhood programs. In particular, Minnesota’s Asian population is unique compared to most other states because it is comprised of many recent immigrants and refugees from underdeveloped countries that lack educational opportunities and often have to learn English upon arrival. Factors like immigrant and refugee status, ability to speak English and understanding of systems demand targeted outreach, enrollment support, and attention for increasing participation in early childhood programs for these children.

**The overwhelming majority (79%) of children participating in ECFE the year prior to kindergarten entry are White.** While there have been many efforts by various school districts to diversify the participation in ECFE to include more families of color and lower income families, the participating families statewide are majority White and majority middle to high income families. Similar to the barriers experienced by children accessing MFIP or Food Programs, families of color are more likely to work inconsistent and non-standard work schedules that conflict with the timing of the classes. Additionally, the lack of transportation and location may be a barrier for some families, as is for many early childhood programs. The efforts in some districts to provide increased cultural relevancy and bring ECFE to neighborhoods and homeless shelters have shown promise in increasing ECFE participation among families of color and American Indian families.

**The rate of children of color and American Indian children participating in ECSE is lower than the rates of children of color and American Indian children in K-12 Special Education.**

Race/Ethnicity	K-12 Special Education Participation, 2016 <sup>34</sup>	ECSE Participation for 2015 Kindergartners
American Indian	24.7%	17.6%
Asian/Pacific Islander	8.5%	7.9%
Black	16.1%	10.9%
Hispanic/Latino	16.3%	14.7%
Two or More Races	17.3%	14.3%
White	13.2%	13.2%

These differences in participation rates for young children and children already in school seemingly point to a need for additional screening and outreach to children of color and their parents to

ensure if they are experiencing or at high risk for experiencing a developmental delay they are able to access ECSE. Part C, which provides early intervention services for children age 0-3 who are experiencing or have a physical or mental condition that puts them at high risk for experiencing a developmental delay, has been proven to be very successful in improving outcomes for participating children. For instance, a Minnesota study found that one-third of Part C participants did not need Special Education by second or third grade.<sup>35</sup> While there are many factors that fuel high rates of children of color and American Indian children in the K-12 Special Education system, the lower participation rates for children of color in ECSE compared to K-12 Special Education, especially American Indian and Black children, point to a need to target outreach for the program to these communities to ensure eligible families are enrolled and to help decrease the need for Special Education services later on.

**The racial and ethnic makeup of children attending District Preschool is slightly less diverse than the broader cohort.** Sixty-nine percent of children who participated in District Preschool one year prior to kindergarten entry were White compared to White children making up 64 percent of the total cohort population. Hispanic/Latino and Black children were slightly underrepresented in the preschool attendees, 7.3 percent and 10.3 percent respectively, compared to their rate in the general cohort population, 10.1 percent and 11.4 percent.

## Recommendations Based on Data Analysis

**The data from the ECLDS included in this report offer a unique opportunity to better understand how children are accessing multiple programs across agencies and better understand opportunities to increase participation in programs.** Using the data analysis, national and local research, conversations with early childhood and other support program providers, and input from the Voices and Choices for Children Coalition (see End Note 19), CDF-MN compiled the following recommendations based on the findings in the report. These recommendations are based on the state-level data included in the ECLDS and outlined in this report. Local communities can use the ECLDS to determine the current participation status in their early childhood programs and determine recommendations for their own programming, outreach and family supports.

### Recommendations for Early Childhood Data Access

- 1. Increase access and use of integrated data through the ECLDS and other mechanisms.** Our state’s youngest citizens are being served by an array of resources and to fully understand how children access those resources, we must continue to improve the ECLDS data accessibility, availability and use. The ECLDS is continually adding data from additional programs with

Early Learning Scholarships and Head Start data just starting to be included. The support from the legislature and state administrative agencies will continue to be necessary to ensure the ECLDS can continue to expand and be used to understand how and by whom early childhood programs are being accessed, where outreach needs to be targeted, and how early childhood experiences are potentially shaping future child academic outcomes.

- 2. Increase and invest in data capacity of early childhood programs and staff across the state.** Many early childhood programs including public, private and nonprofit programs have limited or extremely outdated data collection mechanisms and very little resources, time or training to improve data capacity. However, it is imperative that programs are able to evaluate their immediate and long-term effectiveness and use data to drive improvements to programming, outreach and training.

**Best Practice Highlight | The Growing Evaluability Together, or GrEaT project,** is a project of the Minnesota Department of Education that provides technical assistance to district-based early childhood programs to build capacity for local data use. GrEaT is a pilot project intended to build a toolkit of resources for programs to be able to improve their collection and use of data for program improvement, communication, and planning. GrEaT supports programs in using their own local data and the ECLDS data more effectively.

### Recommendations for Increasing Access to Early Childhood Programs

- 3. Ensure a high percentage of young children are accessing early childhood programs prior to kindergarten entry.** Nearly 40 percent of all 2015 kindergartners had no known participation in the early childhood programs included in the ECLDS. According to Census Bureau data 55 percent of all three- and four-year-olds do not attend school, including district preschool, high-quality child care providers, and Head Start, and the numbers are higher for low-income children, children of color and American Indian children.<sup>36</sup> In order to improve school readiness and support healthy cognitive, social and emotional development, early childhood programs need to reach these children too. Many of these children are accessing child care of some sort, including care provided by Family, Friends and Neighbors (FFN). These environments can be stable and enriching, but extra support by early childhood programs can help ensure families are connected to resources, improve school readiness, and provide support to parents and caregivers. Targeted outreach to these families through mobile early childhood programs, home visiting programs, partnerships between FFN providers and centers, libraries, school districts, and specific community events can increase participation in early childhood programs and ensure families are connected to supportive programs.

- 4. Invest in the proposed Community Solutions Fund for Healthy Child Development Grant Program** that would provide grants to community organizations that serve specific populations of color to develop innovative solutions to improve outcomes, promote equity and reduce racial disparities in early childhood. The data in this analysis show that children of color and American Indian children access different early childhood programs at varying rates and the research shows that a child's culture and race are highly influential to their learning preferences and should be taken into account in instructional and family engagement practices within early childhood programming.<sup>37</sup> For decades, organizations that are from and serve communities of color and American Indian nations have been underfunded, restricting the ability of these communities to self-determine their needs. Providing a flexible funding stream that allows communities to redefine, recreate, or improve upon early childhood programs for their own benefits and address their specific needs is necessary to address gaps in access to programs and outcomes. The Voices and Choices for Children Coalition (see End Note 19) has introduced legislation to create the fund in the 2017 Minnesota Legislative Session.

**Best Practice Highlight | GrowMobile is a Willmar Public Schools** program funded by United Way of West Central Minnesota through Empower: Women United, a United Way Women's initiative, and an Otto Bremer Foundation grant. GrowMobile launched in 2007 to increase early childhood program outreach and participation in underserved communities, including the growing Hispanic/Latino population and emerging Somali population in the area. GrowMobile is a mobile preschool that goes to apartment complexes, parks and neighborhoods across the school district, with a focus on places where underserved families live. Through partnerships with Willmar Public Schools, Salvation Army, and the Willmar Area Food Shelf the program provides educational programming, lunch, books every Friday, and weekly backpacks full of food for kids to take home in the summer. During the school year, the GrowMobile visits a dozen child care providers and outreach sites in Kandiyohi County. Staffed by the United Way Success by 6 Coordinator and supported by cultural liaisons from the Somali and Hispanic/Latino communities in the area, the program has helped to increase participation among those growing populations and lower income children not only in GrowMobile programming, but also in other district early childhood programming including ECFE, family events and preschool.

- 5. Increase cultural diversity, relevancy and knowledge in early childhood curriculum and workforce.** In 2012, the most recent study found available, in center-based preschools more than 90 percent of staff were White, with the exception of 70 percent of Assistant Teachers were White.<sup>38</sup> Leadership was the least diverse with only 7 percent of the center directors being non-

White.<sup>39</sup> Recruiting more diverse staff and cultural liaisons on early childhood program staff will build trust in the community and research shows that teachers of color positively affect the outcomes of students of color.<sup>40</sup> Also, improvements outlined in Children’s Defense Fund–Minnesota’s summary from a public input process on cultural responsiveness of ParentAware could improve cultural relevancy among staff and in curriculum for many early childhood care and education providers. Recommendations from the summary include engaging in and incorporating more input and feedback from diverse communities regarding the ParentAware (see glossary for description) indicators and outreach, improve cultural responsiveness indicators, and increase outreach to child care providers from diverse communities. The report has been shared with the Department of Human Services and other entities engaged in ParentAware and actions toward implementing the recommendations have begun.

**6. Increase significantly the federal, state and local funding for the majority of early childhood programs that are currently woefully underfunded.** Many early childhood programs are not accessible to eligible children solely due to lack of funding, including CCAP and District Preschool programs that are included in the ECLDS. Additionally, other early childhood programs including Head Start, Early Head Start, Family Home Visiting, Early Learning Scholarships and Early Childhood Screening are just a few other programs that are also significantly underfunded. These are evidence-based programs that are proven to improve child outcomes. However, year after year young children are put on waitlists or denied access to programs when they don’t have the time to wait because their brains are developing so rapidly. Many of these underfunded programs serve the children who when able to access early childhood education, intervention and prevention programs see some of the most significant improvements in outcomes, particularly low-income children, children of color and American Indian children.

**7. Provide funding and continued support for the expansion of Minnesota’s Help Me Grow system.** Minnesota is in the process of expanding the system to increase the reach to children up to age 8 and offer referral and navigation assistance for more services and programs. The existing *Help Me Grow* system is dedicated to referring young children with developmental and emotional concerns to early childhood special education services. The expanded system would go beyond that and help families to navigate the broader early childhood system to prevent inefficiencies and services gaps. The expanded system will establish a comprehensive statewide system of early identification, referral, and follow-up for children with developmental, behavioral, and or other related concerns including lack of resources or economic stability. It will have a “no wrong door” approach with a centralized access point for families to access resources, training for child health and education providers, community outreach to increase its use, and a data system to drive evaluation and improvements of the early childhood system in the state. Approximately 630,000 children 8 years old and younger

and 68,000 to pregnant women could benefit from this expansion.<sup>41</sup>

## Program-Specific Recommendations

**8. Improve program outreach, guidelines and implementation to target participation to children accessing MFIP and Food Programs and children of color and American Indian children.** Below are specific recommendations and examples for each of the programs included in the ECLDS based on the participation data:

### Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)

The 2015 kindergartners who accessed MFIP and Food Programs prior to kindergarten entry as well as children of color and American Indian children were the most likely to participate in CCAP. The program is successfully reaching the target populations that benefit most from access to stable, high-quality child care while parents work to improve family economic stability. This evidence demonstrates that CCAP may be key to success for many young, lower income children and children of color. The impact of improved outcomes for children could be expanded and amplified to reach more families in three ways: 1) if the program were fully funded; 2) if proposed program changes included in the updated federal program regulations were implemented; and 3) families enrolled were targeted in outreach efforts to increase access to early childhood screening and other programs that support parents and healthy child development.

**Implement the family friendly provisions of the reauthorized Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG).** Nearly half of CCAP funding comes from the Federal Child Care and Development Block Grant, which was reauthorized in September 2016.<sup>42</sup> The reauthorization came with new rules and regulations that include many family-friendly program improvements regarding how families are eligible, application and recertification paperwork, and treatment of special populations. Adopting many of these changes is required to receive the federal funding, but the Minnesota Legislature must approve the changes before they’re implemented. Additionally, the changes must be funded so that their implementation doesn’t decrease the number of families served by the program or increase its waitlist. These federally required changes and others that would align CCAP with national best practices include:<sup>43</sup>

- Authorize 12-month continuous eligibility for families. Currently, enrolled families have to fill out recertification paperwork every six months.
- Continue assistance for three months when work or education activity ends permanently.
- Allow assistance to continue during the redetermination period when income exceeds current state exit level (67% State Median Income) but is below federal exit level (85% State Median Income).
- Process applications from homeless families within 5 days and prior to receiving verifications and waive education and work

activity requirements for 3 months.

- Eliminate copayment increases during 12-month redetermination period.
- Eliminate employment and education schedule verification requirements for most families and allow families to choose a child care schedule that works best for them.

**Promote Early Childhood Screening and other early childhood program referrals to families enrolled in CCAP.** Because all CCAP families are lower income and the majority of CCAP children are children of color or American Indian, it is imperative to layer on additional early childhood resources to increase intervention and prevention and promote healthy child development and school readiness. This idea isn't new, and many counties are already embarking on innovative ways to target CCAP and other work support program participants to increase access to other early childhood programs. Targeting families with information about early childhood screenings and other programs at the time of application and at recertification periods could increase parents' knowledge and participation in other programs that support their child's development.

**Best Practice Highlight | The Hennepin County South-Suburban Regional Human Service Center** partners with Bloomington Richfield Early Learning Services to offer early childhood screening and program referrals onsite to families who come in to apply or recertify for CCAP, MFIP and other work support programs. Families with young children ages 3 to 5 years old who are eligible for an early childhood screening are identified in the intake process at the Human Service Center and VEAP, a basic needs and social services organization in the same building as the Regional Human Service Center. Identified families are then offered an immediate, onsite screening or to schedule an appointment for a later date. This one-stop approach makes it easy for families to get connected to services and ensures children are screened and identified for and referred to appropriate services.

### Early Childhood Family Education

ECFE has the lowest overall participation rates compared to the other early childhood programs in the ECLDS for children accessing MFIP and Food Programs, children of color and American Indian children, so it is imperative that ECFE programs continue broadening their approach to services to reach these populations, particularly the growing populations of children of color. The numbers in this report are statewide, and there are many school districts across the state that are adapting their ECFE models to better fit the cultural needs of diverse communities. Some recommendations are to offer culturally specific ECFE classes, offer more classes in the evenings or on the weekends, and provide transportation and child care. Finally, districts need to offer classes where the families are living and working like at apartment buildings and homeless shelters.

**Best Practice Highlight | The Village of Hope Homeless Shelter in Bemidji** has helped increase access to Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) by incorporating the classes into their regular shelter programming with the goal of helping to break the cycle of homelessness by giving children the tools they need to be successful and parents the tools to help foster that success. The curriculum focuses on early childhood development and is designed to be culturally relevant for American Indian families which the shelter primarily serves. All parents and children ages 3-12 years old living in the shelter are invited to attend the classes and older children often attend as "assistants." When families transition out of shelter living they are still invited to attend the ECFE classes. By bringing the program into shelter, Village of Hope has eliminated the barrier of finding transportation and made it easier for shelter residents to access the program.

### Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)

ECSE only serves children who are experiencing a developmental delay or have a condition, including physical or mental, that puts them at high risk for a delay, so outreach and enrollment for ECSE looks different than for other programs. However, because participation rates for many populations of color and lower income children are lower than the rates of these populations participation in K-12 Special Education, there seems to be an outreach need to determine children who are ECSE eligible in these communities and provide intervention services earlier to decrease the likelihood of needing those services later on—a benefit to the family and child as well as cost savings to the state. One-third of children who accessed Part C (ECSE for children age 0-3) did not need Special Education by second or third grade.<sup>44</sup> Based on early brain development research, children who experience adverse childhood experiences such as poverty, homelessness, abuse or neglect, or a caregiver with mental health or substance abuse issues, could benefit significantly from Part C services. Minnesota does not take advantage of part of the law that governs ECSE, which is part of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), that allows states the choice to include these environmental risk factors as qualifying factors for children to be at risk for a developmental delay and therefore eligible for ECSE. Several other states have chosen to adopt provisions that make children with one or more environmental risk factors eligible to receive services, and Minnesota could also to improve child outcomes and reap long-term cost savings.

### District Preschool

The breakdown of 2015 kindergartners who accessed District Preschool is only a little under representative of the racial composition for the general cohort and MFIP and Food Program participation composition. Specifically, District Preschool serves higher rates of Asian and Hispanic/Latino children, who as

previously noted have some of the lowest early childhood program participation compared to any other program in the ECLDS. However, children accessing MFIP and Food Programs, children of color and American Indian children are less likely to be ready for kindergarten, so it would be in the best interest of school districts to target these populations to ensure they're ready to learn when they enter their schools as kindergartners. The state and districts are already working to target these populations through the recent \$25 million investment in School Readiness Programs that targeted school districts with higher rates of lower income children and, in turn, reached many districts with high rates of children of color and American Indian children. Additionally, Early Learning Scholarships support participation in District Preschool as well as other high-quality rated early childhood programs. However, enrollment data with the new School Readiness funding or scholarship participation is not included in this report's analysis. To increase participation of these populations school districts can engage in targeted, culturally relevant outreach, partner with child care providers who serve high rates of children accessing CCAP, hire diverse staff who are representative of the community, provide transportation, and incorporate culturally relevant programming into their curriculum.

**Best Practice Highlight | Dakota County Birth to Eight Initiative's** goal is to make every child in the county school ready and reading by third grade. One part of the initiative is to increase early childhood program access to lower income children by a collaboration between the Dakota County Public Health Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program and the area school districts. When WIC staff meet with families, they are given the opportunity to sign a release form so the families contact information can be shared with the school district. Once signed, the family's contact information is given to the school district who then contacts the family about early childhood programs available to them and assists in enrolling them. In the first pilot of the partnership, 80 percent of WIC families who signed the release form weren't known to the school district and 89 percent of those families ended up participating in one or more of the district early childhood programs.

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### **Members of the Voices and Choices for Children Coalition**

Voices and Choices for Children Coalition focuses on developing strongly engaged cultural communities of learning as well as an organizing and advocacy pipeline for their access, input, and impact around shaping early childhood policies for children of color and American Indian children 0-8 years old throughout the state. Voices and Choices is staffed by CDF-MN and includes organizations, professionals and parents of color and American Indians engaged and working across early childhood sectors including government, philanthropy and non-profits. As part of the process for generating recommendations and understanding of the data for this report, Voices and Choices members were engaged in a feedback session that informed this report and the recommendations included.

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## Glossary of Early Childhood Programs Mentioned in this Report

### **PROGRAMS INCLUDED IN THE ECLDS:**

**Minnesota's Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)** helps parents with lower incomes pay for child care for children under age 13 or for children with disabilities under age 15. To be eligible, families must apply and meet specific income, work and citizenship rules. Once enrolled in the program, families can choose to enroll their children in a child care center, a family child care home or use Family, Friend and Neighbor (FFN) care that accept CCAP and meet certain requirements. Families pay a biweekly copayment based on their income and the state reimburses the

remaining balance up to the total amount of the provider's rate or the state's maximum reimbursement rate. CCAP has three subprograms that families can access:

- 1. Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) Child Care** is for families accessing MFIP. MFIP is the state's Federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Program, or welfare-to-work program. All MFIP families that meet work requirements can access MFIP Child Care. Most families on MFIP Child Care have a \$0 copayment.

- 2. Transition Year Child Care** is for parents in the first year after leaving MFIP. Parents must have been on MFIP or the Diversionary Work Program in the past year and working or looking for work for an average of 20 hours per week. Families accessing Transition Year Child Care may be able to get an extension if there is a waitlist for BSF in their county when their transition year ends.
- 3. Basic Sliding Fee (BSF) Child Care** is for parents who are working, looking for work or going to school. These families must not be enrolled in MFIP and have all parents in the household working on average 20 hours per week. Biweekly copayments currently range from \$0-\$286 for a family of 3. Due to limited funding, not all eligible families are able to access BSF. Funding for the program is allotted to each county; therefore, some counties have waitlists while others are trying to find families to enroll. As of February 2017 there are a total of 5,267 families on the waitlist.<sup>1</sup> About half of the BSF program funding in 2016 came from the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) and the other half from the state.<sup>2</sup>

**Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE)** is a program offered through public school districts that provides supports for Minnesota families with children between the ages of birth to kindergarten entrance based on the idea that parents are a child's first and most important teachers. ECFE is funded through state aid and local levies.

**Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)** provides a personalized array of services to infants, toddlers and preschoolers who meet eligibility requirements including exhibiting a developmental delay or having a physical or mental condition that has a high likelihood of resulting in a delay. There are no income or other requirements for ECSE and eligibility determination and services are provided free of charge and in child's environment (i.e. home, child care center, or preschool). Funding is provided as part of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and programming and services are implemented at the district level.

**MN District Preschool** is a school-based program for children age three to kindergarten entrance with the purpose of preparing children to enter kindergarten. District preschool is funded through a combination of federal, state and local funds, including Voluntary Pre-K,

Early Learning Scholarship and School Readiness funds. Voluntary Pre-K funding was implemented in the fall of 2016, so the data analyzed in this report does not include access to the program.

#### **OTHER EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS MENTIONED:**

**Head Start and Early Head Start** programs provide early education, health, nutrition and social services for families with children under age 6 living in poverty across the state. Studies show Head Start's success in making children ready for kindergarten. Most of Head Start funding comes from a federal grant (83 percent) and the rest is state dollars.<sup>3</sup>

**Minnesota Early Learning Scholarships** provide 3-and 4-year olds and their siblings living in households below 185 percent of the Federal Poverty Guidelines with scholarships to attend high-quality early childhood education programs. Scholarship funding is entirely through state dollars and is provided in two ways. Pathway I scholarships are given directly to families to use at an early childhood program of their choice that has a three-or four-star rating by the Parent Aware Quality Rating and Improvement System and may include Head Start, school district preschool programs, or child care programs. Pathway II scholarships are awarded to a Parent Aware four-star rated program including Head Start, school district preschool programs, and child care programs within geographic regions identified by the Minnesota Department of Education.

**Parent Aware** is Minnesota's early education Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). Parent Aware rates the quality of early education and child care programs to help families make informed choices and provide a benchmark for certain programs serving lower income families. Providers that have a three- or four-star Parent Aware rating can receive higher CCAP reimbursement rates and can accept families with Early Learning Scholarships.

**Woman, Infants and Children (WIC) Program** provides food vouchers for pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers and children under age 5. The vouchers pay for nutritious foods such as infant formula, beans, fruits, vegetables and milk. In 2015, nearly 40 percent of Minnesota children under age 5 were enrolled in WIC.

1 Minnesota Department of Human Services. Note: The February 2017 waiting list was the most recent available at the time of publication.

2 Minnesota Department of Human Services, February 2017 Forecast.

3 Personal contact with Gayle Kelly, Minnesota Head Start Association.