

## **Policy Brief:**

# **Increasing Early Childhood Programs Through Blended and Braided Funding**

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### Introduction

Early childhood programs have been found to benefit almost all children.<sup>1</sup> This is especially significant for children living in poverty and those who are racial or ethnic minorities because they tend to enter school behind their peers on measures of pre-academic skills, including early reading and math.<sup>2</sup> Children living in high-poverty neighborhoods who attend comprehensive early childhood education programs are *less* likely to experience abuse and neglect when compared to their peers who did not attend an early childhood program.<sup>3</sup> Students in the K-12 setting, who attended early education programs as young children, are *less* likely to drop out of school or to need remedial education services when compared to their peers.<sup>4</sup> These same students also have a higher graduation rate and are *less* likely to be arrested.<sup>5</sup> The economic impact of a comprehensive early childhood education program demonstrated a return of between \$2 to \$7 for every dollar invested in the program.<sup>5</sup>

### Blending and Braiding Funds to Improve and Increase Early Childhood Programs

#### **Funding to support early learning opportunities comes from several different sources.**

- Federal sources include Head Start, Child Care and Development Fund, Temporary Assistance, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and Preschool Grants.<sup>6</sup>
- Funding from state sources comes from states' matching funds from the Child Care and Development Fund.<sup>6</sup>
- States may choose to dedicate funds to pre-kindergarten programs.<sup>6</sup> Counties and cities may choose to allocate local funds to early childhood initiatives. Furthermore, schools may dedicate some of their facilities, transportation and administration in order to operate early childhood programs.

#### **Three strategies for increasing the flexibility of funding sources include coordinating, pooling and decategorizing the funds.<sup>6</sup>**

- *Coordinating*, or braiding, involves being flexible in the use of existing funding sources. Coordination of funds requires a good plan, a system to manage information and a method to track expenditures.
- *Pooling* funds of several programs allows local programs more discretion with using funds. Often, areas are asked to assess local needs and develop a plan to coordinate programs; the funds are then distributed in block grants. Another strategy to pool funds involves creating a master contract at the state level for several smaller contracts. While this strategy requires cooperation, it also reduces the administrative burden of managing several contracts.

- *Decategorization* involves removing many of the eligibility requirements that disconnect various funding streams. The eligibility requirements may be removed, reduced or realigned in order to support broad reform. However, decategorization requires approval from the state legislature or other agency. This strategy should only be used within the framework of an expansive vision regarding supporting children and families.

### Title I Early Childhood Programs

Title I is a supplemental program for children pre-kindergarten through grade 12 who are at risk for failing in school and living in poverty.<sup>7</sup> It provides annual funding to qualifying school systems across the country to ensure that all children have a fair, equal and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach (at a minimum) proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and assessments. Using Title I funds is the decision of the school and can be used to improve curriculum, instructional activities, counseling, parental involvement, as well as increase staff and program improvement. Districts also have the choice to blend and braid their Title I funds with other funds, which has been reported to serve a larger number of children and increase preventative efforts in early childhood.

### A Survey of Selected MO School Districts

In 2011, twenty-three districts in Missouri responded to a survey asking about their use of Title I funds for preschool. These districts were among 60 requested to complete the survey because they spent at least 50% of their Title I funds on preschool during at least one of the previous five years.

Survey questions were related to why, when and how districts decided to use the majority of their Title I funds on preschool programs. In addition, school districts were asked about other funding sources with which they combined their Title I funds.

#### Survey Results

The survey indicated that there were a variety of people working together during the decision-making process. Specific people mentioned were administrators (superintendents and principals), preschool and Title I teachers, school board members, federal program directors, parents, and community members.

The following two graphs illustrate the variety of funds used in their early childhood programs and how the Title I funds were used.

Figure 1: 71% of Districts Blended Funds with a Variety of Programs Listed Below

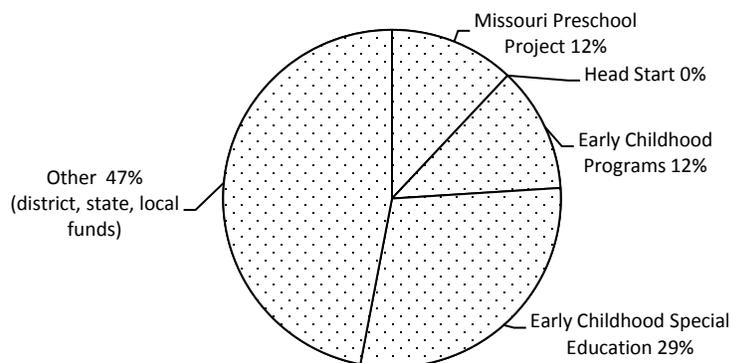
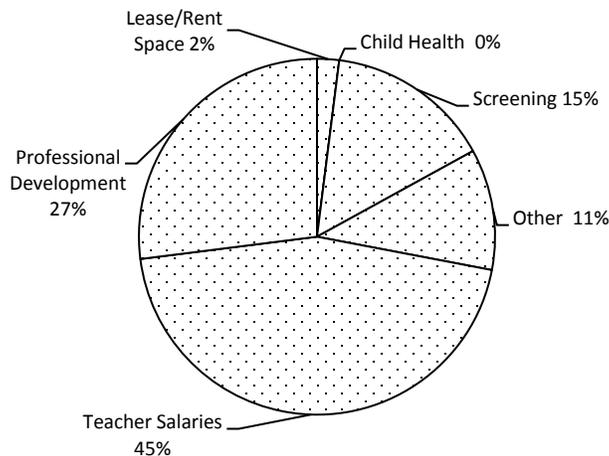


Figure 2: Uses of Title I Funds



### Why Do Missouri School Districts Use Title I Funds on Preschool?

Survey respondents stated reasons they use Title I funds for preschool education services:

- “We feel that early intervention is the key to student success and we want to give our community the option to receive these services.”
- “We feel that providing an early childhood instructional program allows our district to recognize students with learning difficulties at an early age, therefore correcting early, and/or minimizing learning problems at a later point in the child’s education. We feel early childhood is a priority.”
- “We believe that early learning and early intervention can prevent a wide range of learning difficulties later on.”
- “There was a need in the community for child care and the kindergarten and first grade teachers expressed that students were not school ready when entering kindergarten.”
- “Research suggests that a solid preschool foundation has significant impact on achievement throughout the following years. This allows us to provide service for students throughout the district.”

### Data on the Effects of Early Childhood Education

The Department has all 10 Fundamentals for a Coordinated State Early Care and Education Data System in place and will be able to track children and report on the effectiveness of early childhood programs statewide in the near future. The 10 fundamentals from the Data Quality Campaign are:

1. Unique statewide child identifier
2. Child-level demographic and program participation information
3. Child-level data on development
4. Ability to link child-level data
5. Unique program site identifier with the ability to link with children and the ECE workforce
6. Program site data on structure, quality and work environment
7. Unique ECE workforce identifier with ability to link with program sites and children
8. Individual ECE workforce demographics, including education and PD information
9. State governance body to manage data collection and use
10. Transparent privacy protection and security practices and policies

## Policy Implications

1. Child care and early childhood education should be considered part of the same system. Policymakers can support a system that provides not only high-quality child care but also high-quality early childhood education to all families.
2. Investment in high-quality early childhood education is a sound economic decision. The return on investment in high-quality early childhood education is significant.
3. Coordination of funds requires a good plan, a system to manage information, and a method to track expenditures. Policymakers at the state and federal levels can facilitate the process by providing support for systems that coordinate training and technical assistance, new funding streams, and aligning or adjusting funding requirements.
4. In order to successfully increase the flexibility of funding for early childhood programs, leaders and policymakers should:
  - Provide leadership and a clear vision,
  - Focus on results,
  - Establish collaborative planning processes and structures,
  - Understand resource options,
  - Allocate resources strategically; and
  - Develop needed infrastructure.

## References

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