

What Do Missouri's Youngest Children Need to Succeed?

2019 Missouri Preschool Development Grant Needs Assessment State Partner Guide

Missouri's early care and education (ECE) system includes many program options, such as home visits, licensed and license-exempt child care providers, and preschool programs. A needs assessment to determine the extent to which Missouri's system meets families' needs was conducted in 2019.

The full report provides county-level demographic data and describes factors impacting families' needs. This guide focuses on the need for public policy action to improve the outcomes of the system both for Missouri families and the workforce.

Policy and Systems-Level Recommendations

1. Financing the ECE System

- Challenges:** Complex System of Public Support
Eligibility Thresholds Negatively Impact Low-Income Families
- Opportunities:** Fiscal Map to Better Understand ECE Funding in Missouri
Review Eligibility and Reimbursement Rates for Public Support Programs

2. System Coordination

- Challenges:** Multiple State Departments Impact ECE
Insufficient Cross-Department Coordination and Support at the State-Level
- Opportunities:** Enhance the Coordinating Board for Early Childhood
Engage Families and ECE Professionals to Identify System Challenges
Examine the Costs and Benefits of Aligning ECE Programs

3. Accountability and Measurement

- Challenges:** Lack of a Statewide Quality System
Data Fragmentation
- Opportunities:** Implement a Statewide Quality System
Create an Early Childhood Integrated Data System
Identify Available ECE-Related Data

System-Level Challenges and Opportunities

A coordinated ECE system is a strategic priority for the State of Missouri, as it will greatly impact Missouri's workforce and economy. The needs assessment identified three areas of system-level challenges and opportunities for improvement.

1. Strategic Financing for ECE in Missouri

The funding structure for the ECE system in Missouri is complex and challenging for both families and ECE professionals to navigate.

Funding Structure Challenges

Complex System of Public Support

The current ECE system and related supports are composed of many different programs funded by multiple sources, such as:

- State departments
- Federal government
- Families
- Private philanthropic institutions
- Tax-supported county mental health or children's services

Many of these supports are overlapping, both for families and ECE professionals. A given ECE facility may provide multiple types of services, each with different funding sources. A given family may rely on several different services to meet their child care needs, each with different eligibility thresholds, requirements, administrative steps and costs.

Eligibility Thresholds Negatively Impact Low-Income Families

There are multiple income thresholds for government-funded support systems that can impact young children, when based on a percentage of the federal poverty level. These various eligibility thresholds can result in service ineligibility, if families earn more than the maximum percentage of the federal poverty level (133 percent to 185 percent, depending on the program).¹

In 2019, it is estimated that 36,500 Missouri children will utilize child care subsidies each month.² According to an Urban Institute report, an additional 44,600 children could receive assistance, on average per month, if the eligibility threshold was raised to 150 percent of the federal poverty level — still 30 percent lower than the national average for the subsidy eligibility threshold, which is 180 percent.³

Funding Structure Opportunities

Fiscal Map to Better Understand ECE Funding in Missouri

To date, no comprehensive fiscal map existed to illustrate how various public and private funding streams come together to impact the lives of families with young children, identifying where inefficiencies exist, and where resources may be going untapped. In order to build an effective ECE system for Missouri, its funding sources must be clearly understood by policymakers, professionals and families.

The Missouri Commissioner of Education’s Education Policy Committee seeks to address these inefficiencies. The committee notes a need to “explore options for creating a cohesive statewide early care and education system.” The committee’s recommendations call for collaboration and consolidation of the administration of funds as ways to create aligned governance structures between departments, and to streamline systems and funds.⁴

A proposed next step for improving the ECE system in Missouri is to develop a comprehensive fiscal map of how services are funded, including who is eligible for those services and who is not. A fiscal map that accomplishes these purposes would serve as a starting place to coordinate funding and the provision of services through streamlined eligibility, processes and communications with families utilizing multiple supports and programs.

Review Eligibility and Reimbursement Rates for Public Support Programs

States have the ability to tailor child care subsidy rates around different income levels. Governors have meaningful discretion on how states disperse funds dedicated to the ECE system.⁵

Policymakers may want to consider extending the length of time a family can receive support after surpassing an eligibility threshold as a way to increase stability and support the continuity of care for children. Additionally, Missouri policymakers may want to consider increasing the child care reimbursement rate for ECE facilities providing subsidized care.

Despite a recent reimbursement rate increase, qualitative data findings suggest that rates are still too low to cover program costs.⁶ Unless reimbursement rates are adjusted to be in closer alignment with the actual costs of providing care, ECE facilities will continue to be dis-incentivized to accept children and families who are eligible for and rely on child care subsidies.

2. System Coordination

The current infrastructure for the ECE system in Missouri is complex and challenging for both families and ECE professionals to navigate.

System Coordination Challenges

Multiple Departments Impact ECE

The child-serving state agencies in the ECE system include the Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS), the Department of Social Services (DSS), and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Of note, while the Department of Mental Health (DMH) is an integral department in supporting children and families, none of its federally-funded programs currently have specific, direct services or outcomes highlighting children ages birth through five.

In addition to the above state departments directly serving children birth through five, these statewide entities also play significant roles in supporting specific elements of the ECE system:

- Missouri Head Start State Collaboration Office
- Child Care Aware® of Missouri
- Children’s Trust Fund
- Department of Labor and Industrial Relations
- Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development

Insufficient Cross-Department Coordination and Support at the State-Level

As described earlier, Missouri’s multi-departmental approach to the current ECE system can present challenges for coordinating a large system. Lack of coordination at the state-level was a theme that emerged from qualitative research findings from this needs assessment.

For example, three different state departments (DHSS, DSS and DESE) and Children’s Trust Fund provide support for implementing home visiting programs. There is no single entity that coordinates all home visiting programs in Missouri. Each program operates independently and often in overlapping geographic areas. There is no requirement or support for coordination among programs in order to reduce duplication of services or to reduce resource inefficiencies. Similar examples exist throughout the landscape of services for young children and their families.

System Coordination Opportunities

Enhance the Coordinating Board for Early Childhood

A key action that has the potential to contribute positively to strategically reshaping the ECE system is to strengthen the Coordinating Board for Early Childhood (CBEC) by ensuring members understand the ECE funding and delivery systems, have expertise related to early childhood and early development, and have the authority to influence positive change. An enhanced CBEC would be well positioned to lead further system-wide improvements.

Engage Families and ECE Professionals to Identify System Challenges

As CBEC engages in critical discussions and deliberations to improve the ECE system, there is also potential to engage provider and family stakeholders in policymaking to ensure that any new policies translate well into practice. A number of families interviewed noted the challenges experienced by families navigating multiple support systems, both formal and informal. Only the families utilizing these multiple system components — and the professionals that provide the direct services — are fully aware of the extent to which service systems are or are not in coordination with one another. Continuing to engage directly with families and professionals will likely highlight opportunities for improvement in access and outcomes for young children across rural and urban areas of the state.

Examine the Costs and Benefits of Aligning ECE Programs

A significant action that could alleviate coordination and communication issues in Missouri’s ECE system would be to align and streamline the administration of state-run programs. In partnership with other stakeholders, CBEC should examine the effects of alignment and consider experiences of other states that have undertaken such efforts.

State-level efforts to coordinate across departments and systems have great potential to mitigate the system complexity experienced by families and professionals. Additionally, many regions across the state have undertaken their own local efforts to coordinate services, which can streamline services in ways that meet their communities’ specific needs, prevent duplication and support smooth transitions as families move among different service systems and facilities.

3. Accountability and Measurement

The current ECE system lacks data standardization and uniform outcome measures across the multiple departments serving young children and their families.

Accountability and Measurement Challenges

Lack of a Statewide Quality System

An analysis of the statewide capacity for licensed child care slots for children under age two revealed that all counties in Missouri are lacking child care availability, and 10 counties do not have any licensed child care slots for children under age two.

DHSS regulations for children under age two (0–24 months) require smaller group sizes and lower staff-child ratios than is required for serving children ages two and older. As a result, child care for this younger age group is generally more costly for facilities to provide and for families to afford. These more expensive child care slots generate less revenue for the facilities and, as a result, ECE facilities may choose to serve fewer or no children under the age of two, even if the facilities are licensed to do so, particularly if facilities struggle to generate sufficient revenue to cover their cost of operation. However, without actual enrollment data for licensed facilities broken out by age, it is not possible to confirm whether this is the case.

Missouri Accreditation of Programs for Children and Youth has been available since 1985, yet the state lacks a mechanism for defining and measuring the quality of programs across the ECE system. Without a statewide quality rating ability, families, policymakers and advocates are unable to identify, support, track the progress of and hold accountable the programs in place. The lack of a statewide system fails to underscore the critical role of quality, which leaves families and policymakers without the information necessary to make well-informed decisions on behalf of Missouri’s youngest citizens.

Data Fragmentation

The multiple state departments and other entities providing services in the ECE system do not share administrative data with each other, nor are they required to use a common identification system to track service provision at a child or family level. Most state departments lack a comprehensive ‘data dictionary’ to indicate what types of data are collected and analyzed by each department, which leads to a general lack of awareness regarding what data exist and should be used to inform decision making.

Accountability and Measurement Opportunities

Implement a Statewide Quality System

The three-year pilot of a Quality Assurance Report (QAR) that is currently underway in over 19 centers is a positive step towards ensuring quality in the ECE system. A statewide quality system is necessary for policymakers to assess the effectiveness and reach of the ECE system, for facilities to have a framework for improvement, and for families to have the information to find the best care and education of their children.

Create an Early Childhood Integrated Data System

An integrated data system utilizing a unique ID for each child would allow for countless internal state efficiencies and improvements.⁷ DESE currently uses a unique identifier system to track enrollment and program participation data at the individual student level. Other state agencies use separate data systems and alternative unique identifiers. An integrated data system that includes the use of unique identifiers would allow for policymakers and advocates to identify the true reach of the ECE system. This would create the ability to identify duplication of services, discover efficiencies and opportunities for collaboration, and focus on populations that are underserved.

Identify Available ECE-Related Data

The creation of an integrated data system is a significant undertaking that takes careful planning and time to implement. A short-term opportunity that can be implemented is a comprehensive listing of data elements utilized by programs in the ECE system (e.g., Head Start enrollment data, subsidy usage data, home visiting participation data, licensed child care center data). Such a centralized listing would significantly facilitate future efforts to study and improve the ECE system in Missouri.

Moving Forward

The executive and legislative branches of Missouri government, supporting entities, professionals and families all have a role to play in improving the availability, affordability and quality of the ECE system. As part of the early childhood strategic plan that has been developed, DESE will continue work on coordinating and aligning the system through the Preschool Development Grant. Next steps include aligning administrative activities, sharing best practices, maximizing funding and improving overall quality. The needs assessment summarized in this guide is a valuable resource to provide policymakers with information on the challenges and opportunities affecting early care and education programs in Missouri.

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