

# Early Childhood Systems Reform

YEAR ONE FINAL REPORT

## **Early Childhood Systems Reform**

Report prepared by the Early Childhood Systems Reform Project Team

For more information on this report, contact the [Minnesota Children's Cabinet](#)

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# Introduction

Early childhood is the optimal opportunity to support lifelong health and well-being, and development during this time is interdependent with family and community prosperity. Significant findings in recent years inform us that what occurs in early childhood – in particular before birth until age three – has great impact on future success. As such, for over a decade, Minnesota state leaders and early childhood advocates and stakeholders have been engaged in efforts to increase the quality, coordination, and efficiency of state services supporting young children and their families. However, despite many advances that have been made, there continue to be persistent racial disparities in access to high quality early childhood programming and developmental outcomes. As such, the Early Childhood Systems Reform project was launched in early 2017 to create an effective state system of early childhood programs and services that ensures pregnant and parenting families of prenatal to three-year-olds are receiving the supports they need in a manner that encourages their optimal growth and development, and eliminates racial disparities in program access and outcomes.

## Developmental Science<sup>1</sup> (aka “Brain Science”)

Neuroscience and behavioral research confirm that the foundation for future relationships, health, and the capacity to learn and thrive throughout life begins before birth and is influenced strongly prenatally and during the first three years of life. There is mounting evidence linking the importance of a healthy birth; safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments early in life; and social and economic security to a thriving childhood and a healthy future.

During pregnancy and the first 1100 days of life, the brain is developing and forming neural pathways at its most rapid rate of the entire life course.<sup>2</sup> While neural connections can be made throughout life, early childhood, particularly the period from prenatal development to three years of age, is the most important for establishing neural connections. Genetics and experiences interplay to create and reinforce brain circuits. Experiences, including serve and return interactions, are crucial for brain circuit formation. In serve and return exchanges, caring adults respond to children with eye contact, words, hugs or other communicative interactions. Without these stimuli and interactions, the brain’s pathways and interactions cannot form as expected.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from materials from the Harvard Center on the Developing Child [Key Concepts](#)

<sup>2</sup> Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2010). [\*The Foundations of Lifelong Health Are Built in Early Childhood\*](#).

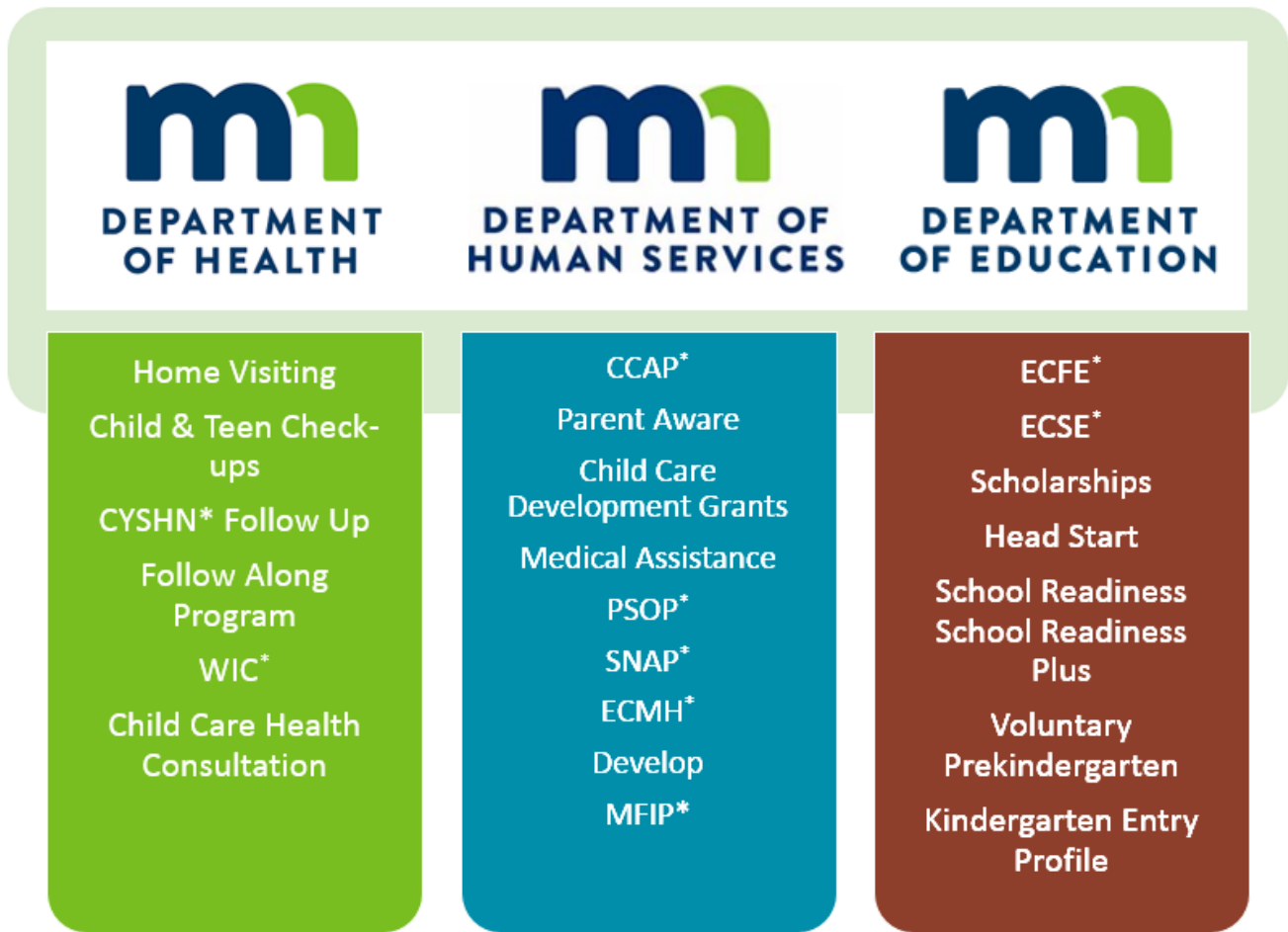
Furthermore, we know that stress is crucial to the formation of a healthy brain. Brains and children need to learn how to adapt to stressful and adverse situations. However children who experience prolonged activation of stress response systems (such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence and/or the burdens of family economic hardship) without adequate support are experiencing toxic stress. Toxic stress can interfere with healthy brain development. One of the key remedies to toxic stress is building resilience through early and frequent positive relationships with caring adults. It is critical that parents and caregivers are supported in cultivating those relationships so that they are safe, stable, and nurturing in order to provide positive experiences and environments for very young children.<sup>3</sup> It is also important to acknowledge that families' ability to provide for and relate to their children is impacted by social, economic and environmental factors.

## Early Childhood System Building

Intentional investment in pregnant and parenting families with young children and the communities in which they live creates a vibrant future for the state of Minnesota. Minnesota state agencies are dedicated to ongoing examination and continuous improvement of the programs and services they provide to pregnant and parenting families. However, many policy makers and early childhood stakeholders have noted challenges and barriers to the realization of an effective and efficient early childhood system. State programs and services for families of young children are spread across three primary state agencies, the Minnesota Department of Education, the Minnesota Department of Health, and the Minnesota Department of Human Services. Even within those agencies, there are programmatic siloes that can create frustration for families as well as lead to inefficient use of resources. The graphic below highlights some of these programs. For a more extensive review of the more than 40 state programs that serve families of young children, please see the 2018 report, Minnesota Supports and Services for Families with Young Children, which can be found on the [Children's Cabinet webpage](#).

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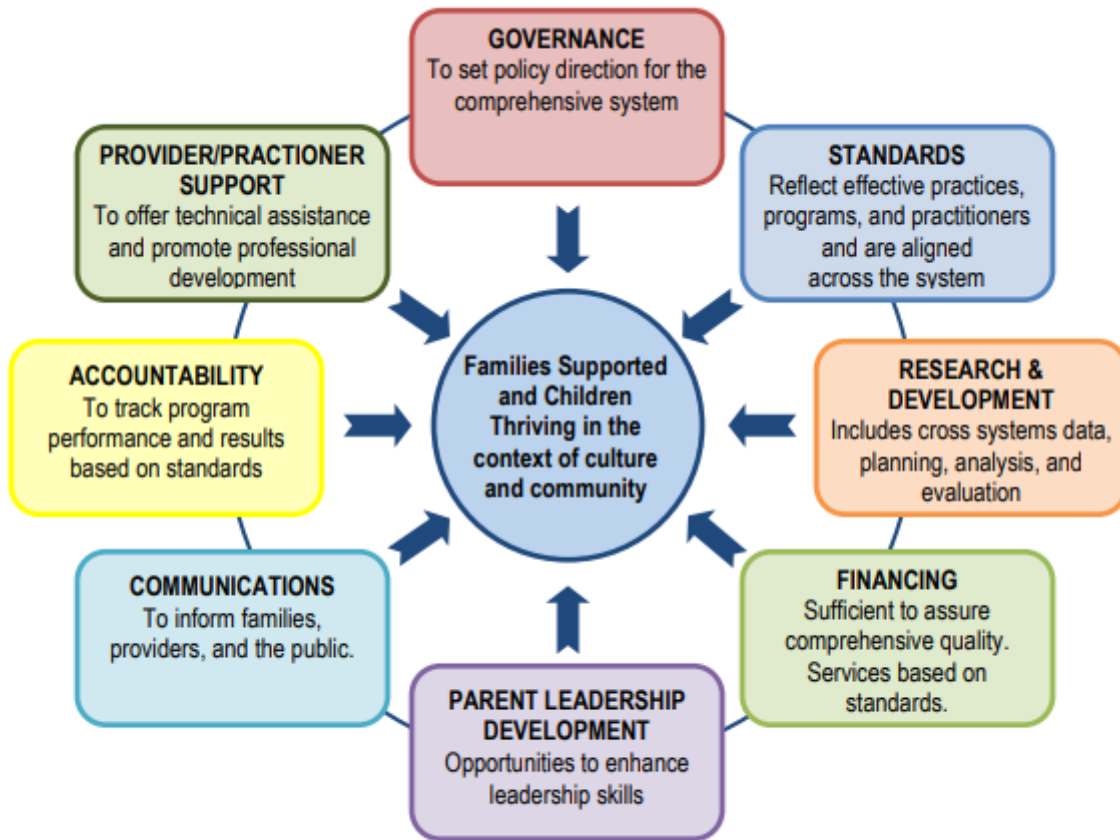
<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*



*\* CYSHN: Children and Youth with Special Health Needs Follow-Along Program; WIC: Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; CCAP: Child Care Assistance Program; PSOP: Parent Support Outreach Program; SNAP: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; ECMH: Early Childhood Mental Health; MFIP: Minnesota Family Investment Program; ECFE: Early Childhood Family Education; ECSE: Early Childhood Special Education*

Recognizing the challenges to efficiency and effectiveness resulting from the disparate administrative structure of its programs and services, Minnesota has a long history of dedicated effort to examining how to build a more comprehensive early childhood system. Since 2008, Minnesota has been a strong partner in national early childhood systems building conversations, and as members of a national Early Childhood Systems Workgroup, key Minnesota early childhood stakeholders identified the essential core components of an effective early childhood system, which include: governance, standards, research & development, financing, parent leadership development, communications, accountability, and provider support. These are depicted in the graphic below.

## Components of an Effective Early Childhood System



Adapted from Early Childhood Systems Working Group, 5/13/08

Source: *Early Childhood Minnesota: Indicators and strategies for Minnesota's early childhood system, a joint report of Minnesota Build and Minnesota Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (Wilder, 2008).*

Since outlined in 2008, the state of Minnesota has made advances in all of these areas, including the creation of the Governor's Children's Cabinet and Early Learning Council, statewide roll out of the Parent Aware Quality Rating and Improvement System, development of an Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System, increased interest and investment from both the public and private sector, family-focused communication resources like ParentAware.org, and a results-based accountability structure, called Results for Children, which is managed by the Minnesota Management and Budget Department.

# Early Childhood Racial Disparities in Minnesota

Despite the successful steps forward that have been made in developing the essential components of an effective early childhood system discussed above, the state is not making progress equitably. Minnesota is commonly at the top of state rankings of overall health, education, and economic outcomes. Minnesota has some of the country's top-ranked public schools, highest average ACT scores, lowest infant mortality rates, and boasts one of the strongest workforces. But underneath the surface and averages lie deep disparities in wellbeing that fall primarily along racial lines, with African American and American Indian communities experiencing the brunt of these inequities. One recent study<sup>4</sup> ranked Minnesota as having the second worst racial inequities in the nation, in terms of employment and economic outcomes, and those inequities can be seen just as starkly in metrics of early childhood health and wellbeing. There are long-standing and enduring gaps in infant mortality, poverty rates, reading proficiency levels in third grade, and a host of other indicators between white children and children of color<sup>5</sup>.

These numbers are not just abstract statistics; they represent real children who are growing up without the same access to opportunity and prosperity as their white counterparts. Moreover, the racial composition of the state is shifting quickly, with populations of color and American Indians forecasted to compose a full 25 percent of the state population by 2035<sup>6</sup>. Today's children are tomorrow's leaders in the economy and the workforce, and a large share of today's children are facing deep inequities that have lifelong consequences. The success of all Minnesotans moving forward depends on our ability to equip all children, regardless of race, ethnicity, or income, with the resources they need to thrive and prosper now and in the future. See the attached appendix for a review of indicators highlighting these disparities.

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<sup>4</sup> [Study ranking Minnesota](#)

<sup>5</sup> See appendix for racial disparities data for the following metrics: third grade reading proficiency, children under age five in poverty, infant mortality rates, children in households with a high housing cost burden, and children living in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty

<sup>6</sup> Projections by the Minnesota State Demographic Center [Population Projections](#)



# Structural Racism

From the outset, the Early Childhood Systems Reform project acknowledged that historic structural racism is a root cause of many of the disparities in health, developmental and community outcomes discussed above. As such, it is important that those reading this report have a shared understanding of the definition of structural racism to fully understand why the project was conducted in the way that it was and how the path forward from problem identification to solution development requires examining core assumptions and how assumptions flawed by implicit bias affect the development and enactment of state policies, programs and practices.

In a 2014 report to the legislature titled, “Advancing Health Equity in Minnesota”, the Minnesota Department of Health boldly took a lead among state agencies, defining structural racism and the way in which it negatively impacts outcomes for people of color and American Indians in Minnesota. Early Childhood Systems Reform state agency project staff identified that the discussion of structural racism within the Advancing Health Equity report continues to be the state’s best framing of this issue, and therefore is included here.

## **Minnesota Department of Health’s Definition of Structural Racism**

Structural racism is the normalization of an array of dynamics — historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal — that routinely advantage white people while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color and American Indians. Structural racism is deeply embedded in American society and is a potent factor leading to inequities in all major indicators of success and wellness.

Structural racism often operates without explicit intent, being built into processes and systems and emerges when decisions are made without considering that they might benefit one racial and ethnic population more than another. Structural racism can also take the form of seemingly colorblind policies, or decision-making criteria that do not take into account disparate racial impacts, as well as policies or decision-making criteria that exclude cultural knowledge and locally-generated approaches.

## Adversity, Stress and Trauma's Impact on Early Childhood Development

Experiencing discrimination due to racism (structural, institutional, and individual) increases stress levels. Racism is not a one-time event. Rather, racism and discrimination are actual living conditions experienced by black, brown, and Tribal communities, which leads to both chronic and toxic stress within the body. The chronic elevation of stress hormones in the body at any stage in life (including prenatally to age three), lead to a lifelong increased risk of certain diseases in people of all ages, including diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, stroke, and immune system dysfunction.

Sometimes referred to as “multi-generational trauma,” historical trauma is the collective emotional and psychological injury both over the life span and across generations, resulting from a cataclysmic history that occurs as a result of racism, displacement, forced assimilation, language and culture suppression and other significant abuses. This type of trauma has been experienced by several cultural and ethnic communities in Minnesota.<sup>7</sup>

The compounding effects of structural racism and multi-generational trauma commonly impact family economic security and optimal child development. Limited parent-child interaction time due to overtime work, multiple jobs, or shift work; a lack of child care choices to meet the needs of the family; growing up in a neighborhood that's more dangerous, having less food security, and lacking the kind of community resources to which more affluent families have are all outcomes of economic insecurity. As well, the addition of a new baby into a family is often a precipitating event - causing people to enter or fall deeper into poverty. Both parents living at or below poverty and those who are low income are very often one event or one sick child away from losing a job. These conditions can lead to high levels of ongoing stress in families' everyday environments, and in turn, can affect children's development.<sup>8</sup> Data continues to show our black, brown, and Tribal communities disproportionately experience these conditions. Scientists agree that racial and other social inequities, historical trauma, and income and wealth all play a role in future health<sup>9</sup>. The negative effects of these factors can be countered through safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments coupled with family and community social and economic security.

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<sup>7</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. *Definitions of Trauma and Resilience*. <http://www.samhsa.gov>

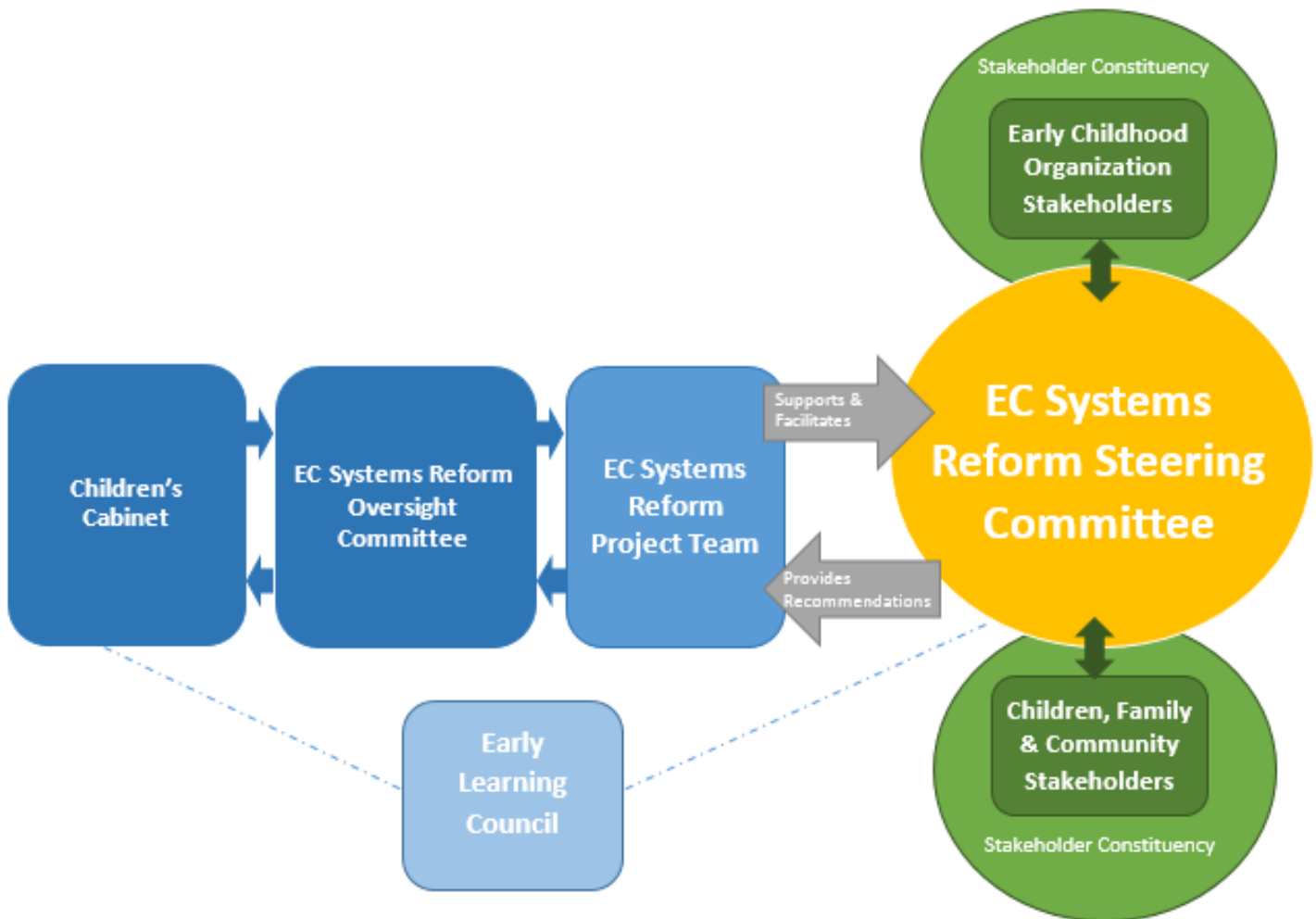
<sup>8</sup> Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. [\*The Long Reach of Early Childhood Poverty: Pathways and Impacts\*](#).

<sup>9</sup> Middlebrooks JS, Audage NC. (2008). *The Effects of Childhood Stress on Health Across the Lifespan*. Atlanta (GA): Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.

# Early Childhood Systems Reform Project Structure & Process

Acknowledging that prior attempts to create an effective early childhood system in Minnesota had a limited impact on long observed disparities in program access and developmental outcomes, it was determined that a different approach to early childhood system reform was needed. A deeper examination of the root causes of the disparities and inequities was required, informed by the impacted children, families and communities. To that end, the Early Childhood Systems Reform project was designed with families and communities at the center of the process, through the creation of a Steering Committee. See the graphic below for a full mapping of the project's various stakeholder groups, followed by a deeper description of the Early Childhood Systems Reform Steering Committee and the project process.

## Project Structure



In forming the Early Childhood Systems Reform Steering Committee, individuals were identified who represent the racial, cultural, and geographic diversity of Minnesota (see appendix for a list of Steering Committee members). Members were chosen who could speak to the lived reality of children and families in their community while also simultaneously working to name problems and develop solutions for all, not just their specific community. Committee members played a dynamic role serving as a bi-directional communication channel to bring the real life experiences of children, families and communities to the center of the process, and create ongoing feedback loops within their communities.

And, because a state government system is the focus of the reform effort, to be effective, solutions need to be anchored in and informed by the lived reality of state government. To this end, this project was strategically anchored as an interagency effort with top level guidance and oversight from the Governor's Children's Cabinet. Direction for the work was given by the project Oversight Committee which was comprised of Assistant Commissioners and Division Directors from the Departments of Human Services, Health and Education, as well as the director and project manager of the Governor's Children's Cabinet. Each of these state leaders also attended Steering Committee meetings to listen deeply to input from the community. An interagency project team comprised of staff from the three departments managed the day to day work.

The project was also designed to intentionally align with ongoing early childhood projects overseen by the Governor's Children's Cabinet, specifically the Early Learning Council. The Early Learning Council serves as the state advisory council on early childhood education and care under [Public Law 110-134](#) and [Minnesota Statutes, section 124 D .141](#). The Council focuses on children prenatal to age eight and their families, and provides recommendations to the Governor's Office and legislators to inform current legislative actions. The two efforts are aligned but different in scope and scale, given the long term systems change lens taken by the Early Childhood Systems Reform effort.

Structural alignment of the Early Childhood Systems Reform project with the work of the Early Learning Council was ensured in that the Chair and Co-Chair of the Early Learning Council were members of the Early Childhood Systems Reform Steering Committee. The director and project manager of the Governor's Children's Cabinet oversaw internal strategy alignment between the two groups.

**A committee member describes the reason they chose to serve on the committee:**

I chose to be a part of the committee because I do believe change needs to start early and I believe in prevention vs. fixing it afterwards. Catching it early on really helps families and children be successful in life. So when they get to kindergarten, they know and have all the tools that they need for them to be on point for their education with their peers in the mainstream American school.

I want to make a change. I want to take charge, walk the walk instead of talk the talk. I want to make the change myself so I devote my time, energy and ideas into this because I want Minnesota to get better - we are very behind and I think children of color are the most underserved.

# Project Process

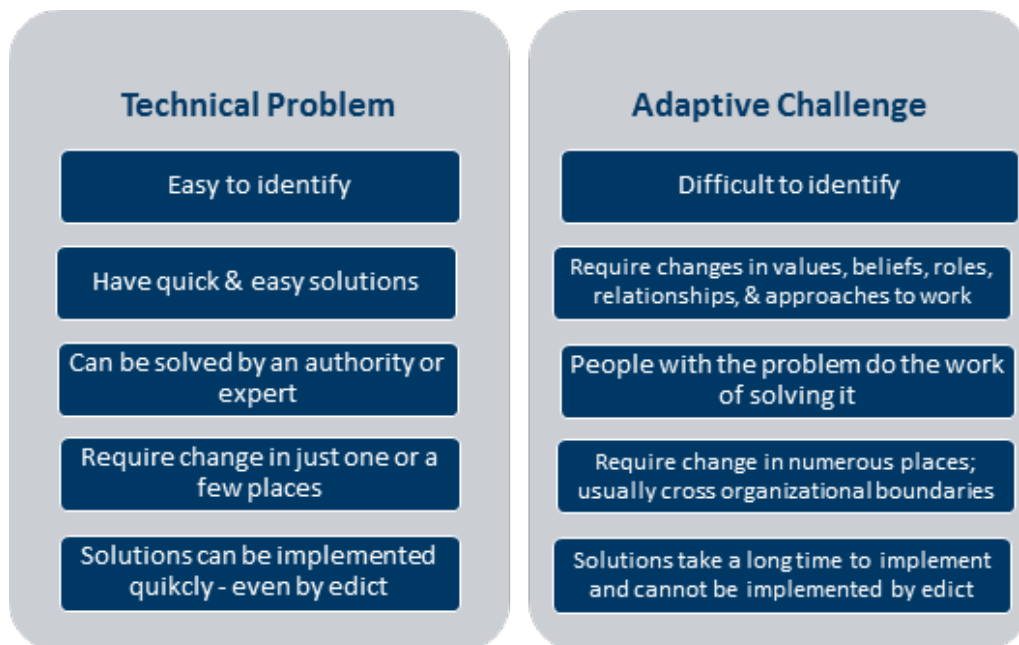
## Early Childhood Systems Reform Year One Timeline



The Early Childhood Systems Reform Steering Committee met one time per month for 3 hours each meeting. Meeting facilitation support was provided by Wilder’s Center for Communities, Community initiatives program. The project process structure was influenced by a hybrid of Human Centered Design and Systems Thinking frameworks such that the project and facilitation team guided the Steering Committee through a series of strategic conversations starting with lifting up culturally influenced values; bridging worldviews; and identifying, owning and sharing power to defining a shared vision which is a statement about the future reality a reformed early childhood system will create. Working with the Steering Committee to co-creatively define the scope of focus for the early childhood systems reform project, the project team utilized emergent and iterative facilitation processes to translate the vision into focused recommendations.

## Early Childhood Systems Reform Theory of Change & Recommendations

The Early Childhood Systems Reform Steering Committee was brought together to chart a course for reform of the state’s early childhood system, guided by a deep commitment to creating a more racially equitable system that recognizes the necessity of whole family, multi-generational approaches. To counteract implicit bias, it was determined that a community-collaborative approach was needed to define what is meant by “early childhood” when using an intentional multi-generational whole-family lens, what is meant by “system(s),” and what is meant by “reform.”<sup>10</sup>



<sup>10</sup> See Appendix D for the operational definition of these terms adopted by the Steering Committee.

It was also determined that an adaptive, rather than a technical approach<sup>11</sup> was needed, because of the complexity of addressing multi-faceted and complex systems change issues. To this end, the Steering Committee did not start with a technical approach, defining how a well-functioning early childhood system should work and operate (i.e. communication, coordination and alignment). Instead, its first task was to collaboratively co-create a vision for the future reality to be created through the reform efforts. The process of developing a vision started with members sharing their personal hopes and values (see below). Over several subsequent meetings, the committee continued to focus on these hopes and values, while simultaneously holding a light on barriers and challenges, and working together to define the key terms listed above before arriving at a vision and mission statement that group could unanimously support.

### Early Childhood Systems Reform Steering Committee Values

**VALUES**

- Children and families thrive
- All kids are valued
- Justice
- Strength-based
- Equity
- Children arrive ready
- Cultural identity
- Places and spaces reflect family values
- Community and families
- Same opportunities for all children
- Prevention of need for services
- Parents and children “keep the light”
- Playing and living well
- Hope
- Healthy start
  - Mental
  - Physical
  - emotional
- Access to high quality services
- Love
- No worries about basic needs
- Racial equity
- Collaboration across programs
- Justice
- Easy access
- Time
- Multicultural integration
- Opportunity for all children
- Curiosity
- Standard of care
- Opportunity to explore
- Services in settings
- Truth

<sup>11</sup> The comparison of technical problems versus adaptive challenges presented here was adapted from Ronald A. Heifetz & Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, Harvard Business School Press, 2002.



A vision, by its very nature, is unattainable. And so, once adopted, the work of the Steering Committee focused on translating the vision into tangible, achievable outcomes, which in the Early Childhood Systems Reform Theory of Change (see below) are referred to as Goal Areas. To identify Goal Areas, the Early Childhood Systems Reform project team examined the national landscape and identified an early childhood system building framework<sup>12</sup> that was introduced to the Steering Committee as a potential starting point for defining Goal Areas. The primary components of that early childhood system approach were family support, health, and early learning. With these three primary areas as a starting point, coupled with an intentional grounding in the parameters of whole-systems thinking combined with a narrow focus on prenatal to three year olds and their families, committee members identified strengths and opportunities specific to their cultural and/or geographic communities. From these, broad themes were lifted out that allowed the group to define Goal Areas unique to the Minnesota context which are: Early Learning, Health & Wellbeing, Economic Security, and Safe, Stable Nurturing Relationships.

These Goal Areas were still broad enough to encompass many possible pathways for action, and so working with the themes lifted up from examining culturally specific strengths and opportunities, the Steering Committee defined Focus Areas, which as the name implies, provide targeted focus for the recommendations to drive change within and across Goal Areas. Focus Areas include: Early Care & Education, Healthy Birth & Development, Housing & Community Design, Government Partnership with Community, and Family and Community Supports. Additionally, a handful of the themes identified functioned more as principles to adhere to when doing the work, rather than areas to focus recommendations, and as such, were incorporated into the theory of change as guiding principles. These include: Cultural Relevance, Equity, Leveraging Family & Community Assets, Support Long-Term, Whole Family Stability, Brain Science, Integration of Strategies to Breakdown Silos, and Acute & Historical Trauma. See the full Early Childhood Systems Reform Theory of Change on the following page. Once adopted, additional work was done with the Steering Committee to define what was meant by each of the Goal and Focus Areas. These definitions are found immediately following the theory of change.

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<sup>12</sup> For a full description of the framework developed by the national Early Childhood Systems Work Group, please see [Updating the “Ovals”](#)



## MN Early Childhood Systems Reform Theory of Change

### Guiding Lenses

1. Cultural Relevance
2. Equity
3. Leveraging Family & Community Assets
4. Support Long-Term, Whole Family Stability
5. Brain Science
6. Integration of Strategies to Break Down Silos
7. Acute & Historical Trauma

<b>Vision</b>	By focusing on children facing racial, geographic, and economic inequities, all children in Minnesota will be born healthy and able to thrive within their families and communities.				
<b>Mission</b>	Create an equitable system that supports pregnant and parenting families with young children. To do this families, communities, and government agencies will partner to eliminate structural racism and inequities that exist in access, policies, programs and practices.				
<b>Goal Areas</b>	Early Learning	Health & Wellbeing	Economic Security	Safe Stable Nurturing Relationships	
<b>Focus Areas</b>	Early Care & Education	Healthy Birth & Development	Housing & Community Design	Government Partnership with Community	Family & Community Supports
<b>Recommendations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritize policies that support family economic stability.</li> <li>• Ensure policies and programs incorporate an inclusive and flexible definition of family.</li> <li>• Expose and eradicate explicit and implicit racial &amp; geographic bias.</li> <li>• Incentivize authentic partnerships between government and communities.</li> <li>• Increase access to and knowledge of services in a community driven and culturally responsive way.</li> <li>• Increase access to safe and affordable housing for families with low incomes.</li> <li>• Build trust of government within communities.</li> <li>• Transform government culture and operations to meet the needs of families and communities.</li> </ul>				

# Goal and Focus Area Definitions



# Problem Identification & Recommendation Generation

## Story Shared by Committee Member Highlighting Opportunities for Systems Change

Mary first entered the system as the child of a woman who had some chemical dependency and mental health struggles. After 2 years of programming, the biological mother's parental rights were terminated by the Juvenile Court. Mary was placed into long term foster care because she was almost 16 and there wasn't any family who could take her permanently. When Mary aged out of foster care at age 18, she was pregnant and upon the birth of her child, her son was removed based on allegations of her behavior while in foster care and her lack of stable housing.

Mary's attorney made a motion to place the infant with Mary's maternal grandmother so that he could be cared for by family and also to allow Mary frequent contact with her son to support breastfeeding. However, because of state child protection laws, the infant could not be placed with the maternal grandmother because she was the legal custodian of Mary's brother who was a known gang-member, even though the brother had not physically lived there in quite some time. The infant was placed in non-relative foster care and Mary was only allowed to visit him every other week.

For almost 9 months Mary's attorney legally requested reunification or at least placement with the maternal grandmother. Then, Mary's brother was the victim of a drive-by shooting and was killed. The infant was transferred to grandmother the very next day. Ultimately the case was closed with the successful reunification of the baby with the mother, all together living at the maternal grandmother's house. Mary's mother, who had her parental rights terminated, appeared at every court date - was with Mary every step of the way - and ultimately lived with Mary, the baby, and grandmother. Three generations of women are now taking care of that baby.

Once Focus Areas were solidified, the Committee began to unpack the problems serving as barriers to reaching identified goals and the root causes of those problems, through the sharing of personal stories<sup>13</sup>. One of these stories is highlighted here. A Steering Committee member shared this story to illuminate how she feels the state child-protection system fails children by failing families. She felt that state child protection laws do not prioritize mother/infant unification. She also felt that state child protection laws and decision making should more strongly consider family members as sources of support, finding ways to mitigate potential harm, rather than leading with separation which is costly both financially and developmentally for the baby.

Through the sharing of this and other personal stories, the Steering Committee listened to and grappled with system barriers and challenges. This resulted in the identification of cross-cutting problem themes which served as the basis for the committee's recommendation framework, shown in the chart on the next page. Following the recommendation framework, direct excerpts from steering committee discussions that drove formation of the recommendations is provided as additional context. This context is necessary for policy makers and other stakeholders to understand when attempting to implement the recommendations.

<sup>13</sup> Working in small groups, committee members shared stories that illustrated real life examples of how early childhood system problems affected their life or the lives of a family they served. A more robust description of the methodology used can be found in Appendix C.

## Early Childhood Systems Reform Recommendation Framework

<p><b>PRIORITIZE POLICIES THAT SUPPORT FAMILY ECONOMIC STABILITY</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Direct financial resources to policies and practices that prioritize whole family approaches.</li> <li>2. Increase financial investment in early childhood ecosystem to provide quality care, including non-traditional, non-center-based options that meet the needs of all families.</li> <li>3. Change the government narrative and behavior to promote family economic stability specifically for those experiencing inequities from institutional racism.</li> <li>4. Continue services and resources when there is a significant change and throughout a transitional period until the family stabilizes.</li> </ol>	<p><b>ENSURE POLICIES AND PROGRAMS INCORPORATE AN INCLUSIVE AND FLEXIBLE DEFINITION OF FAMILY</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ensure laws and policies are built around definitions of family created by the family.</li> <li>2. Use language, engage families and implement programs using the definition of family created by family.</li> <li>3. Resource fully and support family engagement in decision making, policy making, and program implementation.</li> </ol>
<p><b>EXPOSE AND ERADICATE EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT RACIAL &amp; GEOGRAPHIC BIAS</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Direct funding to those delivering core services in a culturally-specific way.</li> <li>2. Assess and create plans to expand current level of training on historic and acute institutional racism and trauma.</li> <li>3. Make decisions based on community-involved and data-informed processes.</li> </ol>	<p><b>INCENTIVIZE AUTHENTIC PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Establish task force around building authentic partnerships in order to solve specific problems.</li> <li>2. Establish feedback loops between government staff and communities that support reciprocal relationships.</li> </ol>
<p><b>INCREASE ACCESS TO AND KNOWLEDGE OF SERVICES IN A COMMUNITY DRIVEN AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE WAY</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Direct funding to support communities to define their own problems and community-specific solutions. Culturally-specific community-based hubs should be strongly considered as a model for accomplishing this.</li> <li>2. Provide the necessary infrastructure, support, and technical assistance to allow for intake and navigation across a multiplicity of whole family issues within community-based locations.</li> <li>3. Ensure that culturally-specific whole family programs and services are provided within communities.</li> </ol>	<p><b>INCREASE ACCESS TO SAFE AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING FOR FAMILIES WITH LOW INCOMES</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Institute education and training about the history of racist housing policy and its effect on the current housing situation.</li> <li>2. Support organizations that are holistically addressing housing instability across multiple sectors.</li> <li>3. Make housing a priority for interagency efforts working on early childhood.</li> <li>4. Invest across the continuum of housing stability support and services.</li> <li>5. Work with city and county governments to address key barriers to housing stability.</li> </ol>
<p><b>BUILD TRUST OF GOVERNMENT WITHIN COMMUNITIES</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Hire and retain a diverse, culturally-informed workforce and develop an infrastructure that allows diverse communities to apply their cultural values to the development of state and local practice, programs, and policy.</li> <li>2. Establish accessibility to services through navigators or community locations.</li> <li>3. Share power between communities and government to co-create programs and policies.</li> <li>4. Collaborate to allow for ease of data sharing and other county/state administrative needs.</li> <li>5. Co-create a narrative that prioritizes racial equity in practice, programs, and policies.</li> </ol>	<p><b>TRANSFORM GOVERNMENT CULTURE AND OPERATIONS TO MEET THE NEEDS OF FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prioritize collaborative cross-agency government efforts that place families at the center of the efforts.</li> <li>2. Increase investment in early childhood education by fully funding evidence- and practice-informed strategies and services that meet the needs of all families to eliminate the cliff effect.</li> <li>3. Partner with families and communities as experts to identify and solve problems and create culturally-driven programs that support child health and development that can be accessed by all communities that need them.</li> </ol>

# Critical Considerations for Recommendation Implementation

It is quite challenging to capture the depth and complexity of a year's worth of interweaving conversations in one comprehensive framework. Given that, it is necessary to provide additional context about the issues, viewpoints, and guidance that was involved in developing the recommendations so that when they are interpreted and implemented by state agency staff, early childhood stakeholders and policy makers, they are done so correctly. See the graphic below for additional context to anchor each of the top-level recommendations.

Prioritize policies that support family economic stability	Children can't thrive if their family is not economically stable. Current programs, practices and policies either incorrectly assume economic stability in the way they are delivered or are designed in such a way that they are keeping people in poverty through overly stringent eligibility requirements and cut-off criteria.
Ensure policies and programs incorporate an inclusive and flexible definition of family	The definition of "family" that government systems use to inform programs and eligibility standards do not align with what different communities consider to be family. This creates a mismatch between the communities that programs are intended to reach and who is able to access them. One solution that was developed was for families to define for themselves who their family consists of. This would allow diverse communities with different conceptions of what a family is to be able to access the resources they need.
Expose and eradicate explicit and implicit racial & geographic bias	Government must acknowledge past and current racial inequities and structural racism present in its programs, practices and services, and take significant action to eradicate it. One strategy to accomplish this is for the state government to require in-depth training on historic structural racism and multi-generational trauma.
Incentivize authentic partnerships between government and communities	In many cases, government programs and services do not match the needs of those that they're intended for. And, families and communities know best what is needed for their children to thrive. Given this, government systems need to engage communities when they are designing programs, practices, and policies. Part of establishing authentic partnerships is creating channels for real communication, enabling communities to more readily express things they feel are going well and are not, and government staff to follow up appropriately.
Increase access to and knowledge of services in a community driven and culturally responsive way	Communities that traditionally experience barriers to services and programs would benefit from being able to access a location in their community, staffed by people that look like them, in order to hear about and sign up for a range of targeted resources and services. Community hubs are one strategy that would allow services and programs to be tailored to the unique issues facing their community and alleviates distrust of government systems.
Increase access to safe and affordable housing for families with low incomes	Unstable and unaffordable housing is at the center of a host of related problems in early childhood, both the effect of a web of complex government policy and systems, and the cause of numerous negative outcomes for kids and families. Efforts have to address affordable and stable housing as the center of child and family wellbeing, and those efforts need to be coordinated across multiple agencies and sectors.
Build trust of government within communities	Government needs to figure out how to incentivize relationships, love and support rather than its current focus on accountability and checkboxes which has resulted from its grounding in scarcity mentality and fear of litigation. It is also important to acknowledge the implicit bias in government practice, programs and policies that has been source of distrust in communities.
Transform government culture and operations to meet the needs of families and communities	Government culture that incentivizes siloing of services, lack of coordination, and incremental change, coupled with historic and ongoing structural racism that perpetuates mindsets about who is deserving of support lead to inequities in service provision and outcomes. To make progress, these cultural norms need to be disrupted.

# Unique Aspects of the Early Childhood Systems Reform Process

Advisory bodies and steering committees are common vehicles for collaborative guidance of state efforts. However, there were many ways in which the Early Childhood Systems Reform (ECSR) Steering Committee was convened and structured that were different from previous efforts. To document these, members of the steering committee, both community-based members as well as state staff, were asked to name what was unique to them about the process. Aspects such as financial support to allow community members to attend, an explicit focus on racial equity, a focus on government systems versus family deficits, and intentional collaboration across state agencies were identified. The following themes also emerged:

- **Unique group of stakeholders.** Involving stakeholders in a steering committee is not a unique practice. However, the ECSR committee makeup was different for several reasons:
  - Committee members represented a deeper degree of community involvement, advocacy, and cultural knowledge. Members noted that this committee felt unique because many of the people involved represented cultural communities rather than being early childhood experts or other professionals working for providers or government agencies. This diversity in experience and worldview also meant that few members shared the same approach to early childhood issues, which gave the whole group a broader perspective.
  - Committee members made a strong commitment to the group early on and participated fully in meetings and at between-meeting check ins. Members were highly engaged and also felt that checking in with state agency staff between meetings helped them stay focused on the work of the committee.

## Committee Member - Parent Voice:

“I’ve had these conversations before I had kids. Now I have kids and it’s important to me because I want to see that their children will have the opportunities that we’re discussing. I am very discouraged. I don’t have hope. After this, I will go home and take care of my family. If the state is serious and they want to reform, then I am here. I have a job, need to take care of my kids, and I have challenges. I speak for families and friends and they all go through these experiences and it’s hard for me to go back to them and say there’s hope when I feel like I can’t even have hope for me. These conversations are so important today and will be for my kids. I may not say much because I am very discouraged, but want to bring onto this table that I am listening actively- I want to participate. I represent those who come to me and knowing what we’re all trying to do. I’m willing to sacrifice my time. I just really want that to be heard.”

- There were also unique characteristics of the state agency employees who participated in the committee. This was not an effort mandated by the legislature and was an interagency effort. State Assistant Commissioners and Division Directors participated directly in this committee and listened to community members. The Department of Human Services also hired a full time staff to oversee the work of the project, as well as a full time analyst to support the work, which is a highly unique step.
- **Blank slate to identify problems and co-create solutions.** This process was unique in comparison to other initiatives because the committee was not given a pre-determined agenda and goal. Because of the project’s focus on racial equity and acknowledgment of the implicit bias and structural racism that exist in typical government decision making, the committee was intentionally given the freedom to co-creatively define the scope of the project, and determine the problems and solutions as a group. Given its uniqueness, many committee members needed time to build trust with the state agency staff involved to determine if there were any ulterior motives or a desire to see specific outputs or results of the committee. Some committee members were concerned that, despite appearances, there was not actually a “blank slate.” Others felt that not having a preplanned set of goals and objectives allowed the group to generate better and more authentic conversation. One member noted that this approach allowed the group to identify the problems as well as the solutions, whereas a typical committee would be convened and the group members would be “given” a specific problem to solve. However committee members also noted that the blank slate approach was very time consuming and created confusion. One member described the process as both, “exhilarating and incredibly frustrating.”
- **Communication feedback loops with stakeholders.** The intensity and frequency of contact between committee members and state agency staff was a unique aspect to the ECSR initiative. State agency project staff conducted one-on-one check-ins with community-based committee members in between the majority of meetings which helped to establish trust and led to a greater buy-in on the part of committee members. Members appreciated the level of communication and felt it was a unique aspect to the work.
- **Sharing power among stakeholders.** Committee members felt that the ECSR initiative was unique in how power was shared among all participants when, in a typical steering committee scenario, government agencies or other “professionals” would hold the decision-making power. This process necessitated three state agencies working together and building trust. Committee members felt that state staff were authentically trying to share power by being responsive to the group in large and small ways. They also noted most of the committee members did not know the roles of everyone else which helped level the playing field and allowed everyone in the group an equal opportunity to participate.



- **Using personal stories to examine policy.** It may not be unique for steering committee members to share personal stories about the challenges they have experienced within a system, but using them to examine policy and make decisions was unique to the ECSR initiative. Group members noted that their intention from the beginning of the initiative was to incorporate the values and lived experiences of members into the work. This allowed the group to keep families at the center of their work. Another committee member also felt that the focus on personal stories helped to facilitate trust-building between the members of the group. It led to more openness and teamwork.

#### **A Committee Member Describes Her Experience:**

“There are a lot of truths that were being said there. A lot of feelings were hurt, a lot of tears. They said this is a safe room and there’s no coded language, so don’t be shy in speaking the truth. That’s what empowers a lot of us. I felt like I was important. I felt like my thoughts matter. I felt like they wanted us to get our real truth answered. They were genuine, caring people and they show us they need our help in changing because what they are doing is not working. That spoke louder than words. That was a bold statement to me in the way they (State Assistant Commissioners and Division Directors) dedicated their time - they didn’t send their assistants. They physically sat down in a room with us, debating about different areas. Even when we were screaming at them saying you are just liars, you’re wasting our time. They said well give us a chance. That’s why they were there. That was a beautiful thing. That was a humane thing to do.”



# Alignment with Previous Efforts

To ensure the work of the Early Childhood Systems Reform project was based on a strong foundation of ongoing efforts, a review was conducted to identify reports that both inform full understanding of Minnesota's current early childhood systems, and provide an overview of identified strengths, opportunities, barriers, gaps and recommendations for short- and long-term action. The reports included in the analysis were primarily from 2011 to 2017. Key stakeholders were interviewed to provide information to identify relevant reports and other sources of information. Key stakeholders included state agency division directors, managers and other staff from the three agencies involved, as well as directors and managers of key community-based and early childhood advocacy organizations. All reports were coded according to key topics or themes identified in reports. Themes are broad and include identified needs, goals for improvement, and when warranted, recommended actions. Most reports included multiple themes, with more than 40 unique themes identified. The full review of reports is located on the Children's Cabinet [web page](#).

Through this review, it was identified that prior state-led early childhood policy efforts focused mainly on funding early learning programs and strategies and improving child care quality and options. There has been little emphasis on efforts specifically targeting the systems affecting children from prenatal to three years old. However, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) developed a comprehensive, cross-agency Prenatal to Three,<sup>14</sup> planning process which resulted in statewide community conversations and draft program and policy recommendations between 2013 and 2015. While these recommendations were not adopted by the Children's Cabinet, they focused on improving outcomes for children in many areas including health, education, and social and economic security. The Early Childhood Systems Reform (ECSR) initiative builds on the MDH collaborative effort, explicitly focusing on system level issues that impact families, and specifically naming structural racism as a core problem to be addressed. As such, the ECSR recommendations are less focused on expanding services for children and families, instead addressing how implicit bias and structural racism have deliberately contributed to disparities in early childhood outcomes.

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<sup>14</sup> Please see the [Publications page](#) for more information.

# Internal State Strategic Efforts

## Children's Cabinet Infrastructure

In 2011, Governor Dayton re-established the Minnesota Governor's Children's Cabinet consisting of commissioners of the Minnesota Departments of Education, Health and Human Services. The purpose of the Cabinet is to better coordinate policies, programs, and resources across agencies and communities to support improved outcomes for Minnesota children. The Children's Cabinet is focused on ensuring all Minnesota children are healthy, safe, supported, and prepared to achieve their full potential.

Since 2011, the Children's Cabinet has led efforts to reform Minnesota's early childhood system and expand Minnesota's Help Me Grow system. It also has advanced policies around voluntary pre-kindergarten, home visiting, health and well-being, and ensuring all Minnesota children have access to foundational education opportunities. In addition, the Children's Cabinet has worked to improve interagency communication and the coordination of services across state government.

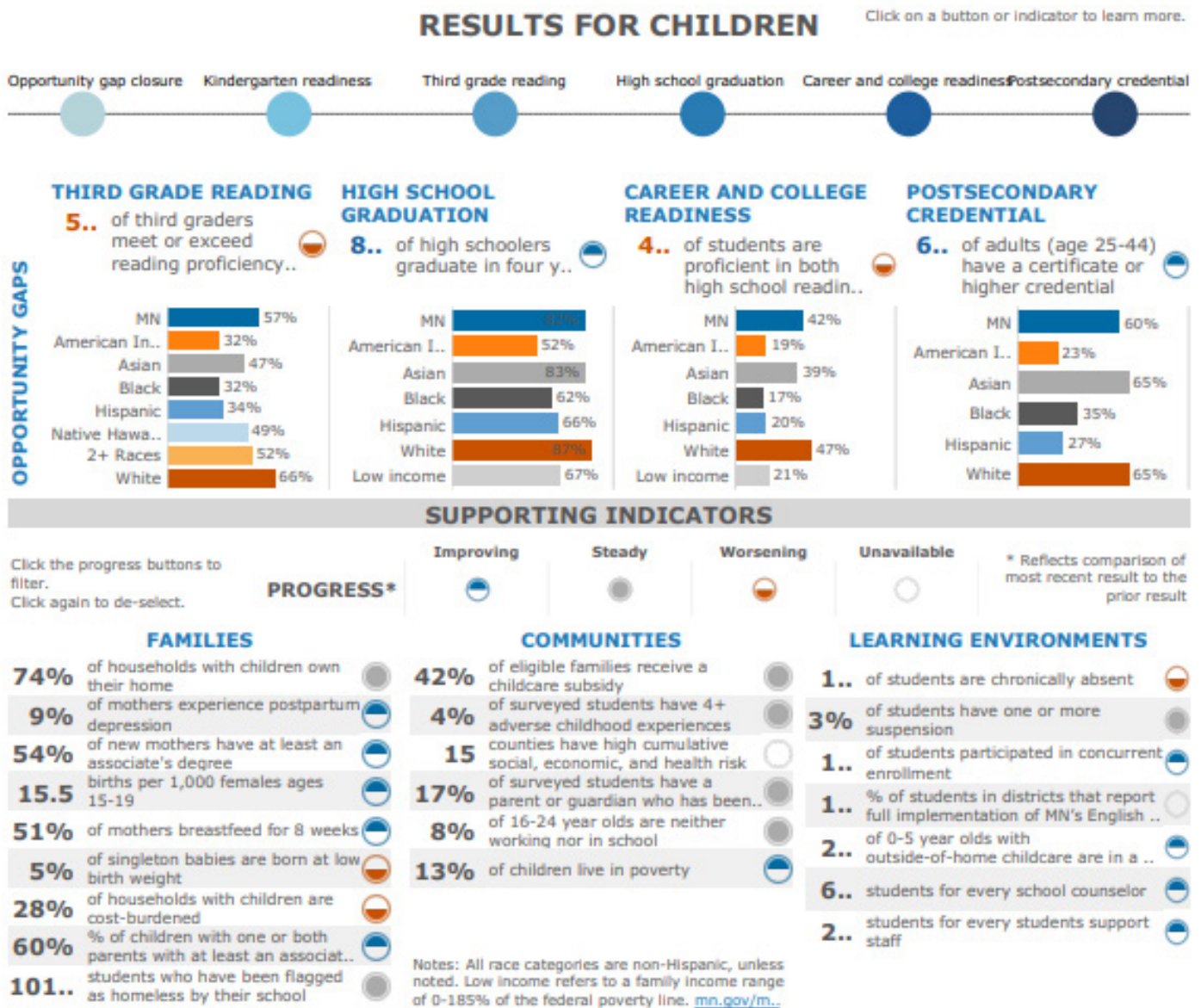
In January 2018, the Children's Cabinet was expanded to include commissioners of the Minnesota Department of Transportation (DOT), Minnesota Housing Finance Agency (MHFA), Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), and the Metropolitan Council. The expansion reflects the consensus that families with young children must have a broad spectrum of needs met to ensure healthy development and future life success. Inclusion of the additional agency commissioners in the Children's Cabinet ensures that Minnesota is taking a whole-family approach to serving children and families, and will improve coordination and streamline services.

Since its inception in early 2017, the Early Childhood Systems Reform project has strengthened and greatly expanded the Children's Cabinet's focus on early childhood systems reform, creating a venue for community-centered decision making and a process for translating community-driven ideas into action. The Children's Cabinet meets quarterly to provide high-level governance, vision stewardship, accountability, and to ensure needed capacity and resources are available to act on recommendations from the Early Childhood Systems Reform project. In addition, the Children's Cabinet sub-cabinet, comprised of assistant commissioners from participating state agencies, meets monthly to provide real-time stewardship of Children's Cabinet projects, ensure timely communication across state agencies, and approve final recommendations to the Children's Cabinet. This infrastructure ensures a strong avenue for systems reform recommendations, producing the intended impacts.

One early example of this strategic infrastructure support for systems reform efforts is that the vision and mission articulated by the Early Childhood Systems Reform Steering Committee has been adopted by the Children's Cabinet to ensure all early childhood efforts in Minnesota have a unified direction and common purpose.

## Results for Children

Every other month, commissioners and staff from the seven agencies that comprise the Children's Cabinet meet to explore opportunities to support the holistic well-being of children and their families. Wherever possible, the discussion during these "Results for Children" meetings is informed by data and research on child and family outcomes and publically-funded services intended to support them. Specifically, these agency leaders assess progress on five key goals: kindergarten readiness, third-grade reading proficiency, high school graduation, career and college readiness, and earning a postsecondary credential. Progress on these goals and supporting indicators is tracked via a dashboard, an image of which is presented below.



The Early Childhood Systems Reform recommendations will be presented to the Governor’s Children’s Cabinet via the Results for Children infrastructure, and the Children’s Cabinet will collectively monitor ongoing advancement and uptake of the recommendations, as specific strategies and actions are identified and implemented. This presents a tremendous opportunity - a pathway of accountability - supported by tracking of metrics that indicate how investments made early in a child’s life pay dividends in terms of long term success.

## State Agency Division Directors Driving Action

As discussed previously, state Division Directors from MDH, MDE and DHS were integrally involved in oversight of the Early Childhood Systems Reform project and regularly participated in Steering Committee meetings. Through this participation Division Directors came to better understand the system challenges and their root causes, and have been able to identify opportunities to embed these learnings in the programs, practices and services they oversee, as well as create new opportunities to conduct the work of their division through an equity lens.

## Alignment with Office of the Legislative Auditor (OLA) Evaluation of Early Childhood Programs

It is important to note here that while the Early Childhood Systems Reform project was underway, another effort to examine the state of Minnesota’s early childhood programs was also being conducted by the Office of the Legislative Auditor, in response to a request put forth in the 2017 legislative session. While both focused on the state’s early childhood system, the efforts were quite different in scope and methodology, and as such, resulted in unique sets of recommendations. Below is a comparison of the scope and methodology of the two projects followed by a crosswalk that indicates where there is alignment in the recommendations put forth by each project. The OLA’s [Early Childhood Programs](#) full report.

	Early Childhood Systems Reform	OLA Evaluation of Early Childhood Programs
Scope	Collaboratively defined whole-family scope that includes 40+ state operated programs serving children, prenatal to age three, and their families.	In depth review of 9 state operated programs that support young children’s learning and development, focused on children birth to age five.
Why	Project initiated to ensure that children and families are receiving supports they need in a manner that encourages their optimal growth and development, and eliminates racial disparities in program access and outcomes.	Evaluation conducted due to legislators’ concerns about overlapping services or duplicative funding.
How	Community-centered process that highlighted the impact of historic structural and institutional racism in state practice, program and policies on outcomes for children and families.	Methodology included reviews of legal and other program requirements, review of academic research, interviews, data analysis and site visits.

## Crosswalk of Project Recommendations

ECSR TOP-LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS
Transform Government Culture and Operations to Meet the Needs of Families and Communities - Prioritize collaborative cross-agency government efforts that place families at the center of these efforts.
Build Trust of Government within Communities- Collaborate to allow for ease of data sharing and other county/state administrative needs.
OLA RECOMMENDATIONS
The Legislature should consider aligning funding and eligibility requirements of certain early childhood programs to make them more understandable and efficient.
MDE, MDH, and DHS should jointly identify what is needed to use a universal identification number for children participating in early childhood programs.
The Legislature should consider broadening authority for MDE, MDH, and DHS to share individual-level data from early childhood programs to improve program coordination.
MDE should collect (1) attendance rates and dates of participation for children in early childhood programs and (2) data on the number of children who are not screened.

## American Indian Supplemental Study

American Indian tribes have a unique sovereign political and legal status, recognized through Supreme Court cases. As sovereign nations, Minnesota’s American Indian Tribes’ participation in Minnesota State Government work groups should be treated as inter-governmental relations. [Executive Order 13-10](#) affirms these government to government relations, recognizing the state government’s unique relationship with the tribes, and calls for consultation and collaboration on matters of mutual interest.

*“We have done this (know needs of our community) over and over. We are not broken; so, we don’t need fixing. Let communities define what will work in our communities; rather than systems telling us what will work for us. All these disparities, yet we have systems that do not know how to work with us and disparities continue. We need to work together. Others need to care with us.”*

*Mother of young child*

Additionally, because of historical and ongoing traumatic interactions between the government and the Minnesota American Indian community, trust is earned over time through deep relationship and committed action. As such, a project consultant was hired to conduct community-based research to ensure that the authentic viewpoint of American Indian families, service providers and community-based organizations is informing development of the Early Childhood Systems Reform recommendations. In order to authentically represent the views and opinions of the American Indian individuals who contributed to this report, it was important that the work be done by a respected elder from the community who understands cultural customs and communication styles.

The full American Indian Supplemental Study can be found at the Children’s Cabinet [web page](#). Included here are several quotes captured from individual interviews and talking circles that highlight viewpoints that align with and support the recommendations put forth in the American Indian report specifically as well as the recommendations developed collaboratively by the Steering Committee. See below for a cross walk of the collaboratively developed Early Childhood Systems Reform recommendations with the recommendations put forward in the American Indian Supplemental Study. The American Indian report was presented to the Early Childhood Systems Reform Steering Committee during the May meeting, and had an impact on how recommendation language was framed. Specifically, after hearing about the American Indian report, committee members discussed that it isn’t sufficient for the state to hire a culturally diverse workforce. The state must go further, and when hiring individuals who come from diverse cultural communities, those individuals need to be allowed to bring their culture and worldviews with them to influence practice, program and policy decisions.

*“It is hard to figure what comes first and to see where they are connected.” A woman was asked, “What are the issues?” She responded, “health, housing, chemical dependency, and domestic violence; hard to tell.” Another person spoke up, “Usually the way some of these folks look at things is a sequence, what comes first. What we are looking at here is the chicken and the egg. It is hard to settle on one when resolving this issue, because it all happening at once.”*

*Metropolitan Area Talking Circle Participants*

# Next Steps:

## Crosswalk of Top Level Early Childhood Systems Reform and American Indian Recommendations

### ECSR Recommendations

- Incentivize Authentic Partnerships Between Government And Communities
- Expose And Eradicate Explicit And Implicit Racial & Geographic Bias
- Build Trust Of Government Within Communities
- Increase Access To And Knowledge Of Services In A Community Driven And Culturally Responsive Way

### American Indian Supplemental Study Recommendations

- A special navigator should be employed by the state of Minnesota who possesses historical knowledge about American Indian communities, tribal governments, Indian oral history, culture and other pertinent information about Indian traditions. This is a reverse of actions taken over recent times where navigators were employed by local governments to coach American Indians to navigate the system.
- Research should be conducted by state and local governments to secure meaningful information about the divide between the culture of American Indians and mainstream social service practices. Purpose to be served is to develop more effective policy and programming.
- To reduce American Indian racial disparities the Minnesota Legislature, researchers, and officials in state and local governments should begin to authentically involve qualified American Indians in the policy-making process. These actions must focus exclusively on the unique historical, legal, political and cultural situation of American Indians.
- Serious, active consideration must be given to current American Indian early childhood learning models in the American Indian community and replicate their success within similar communities elsewhere.
- Culturally specific American Indian early childhood funding should be given higher priority than previous by the state Legislature.
- Secure and sustain long-term funding to support American Indian parents desiring a quality preschool for their child in an effective and equitable manner.
- Education sessions should be offered about the unique cultural world of the American Indians who are “on-the-ground” in poor and distressed American Indian communities. This module of training should be a “reverse training” of what is now in place where trainers from government come into the community and provide training about government rules and regulations. Instead of outsiders coming to the American Indian community, members of the Indian community might offer this training.



# Pathways from Recommendations to Action

## State Agency Actions

As discussed above, the Minnesota Governor's Children's Cabinet has adopted the Vision and Mission developed by the Early Childhood Systems Reform Steering Committee. The Children's Cabinet staff are now poised to be the owners of the Early Childhood Systems Reform Recommendation Framework and will act as conveners to facilitate state division directors to collaboratively use the ECSR Recommendation Framework to develop and implement action plans. With project management support from the current Early Childhood Systems Reform project manager, an interagency group of division directors (the Interagency Leadership Team), will dedicate a portion of their monthly agenda to developing action plans based on the recommendations which will outline the administrative and practice changes they will make over the next year to implement the ECSR recommendations. Once these action plans are developed, the Interagency Leadership Team will focus on directing implementation and problem solving day-to-day hurdles. Minnesota Management and Budget's "Results for Children" process, also discussed above, will provide the opportunity for cross agency Commissioners and Assistant Commissioners to reflect on the progress of these efforts and collaboratively problem solve major barriers to success. Children's Cabinet staff are working to formalize consistent and ongoing interagency commitment to the ECSR Recommendation Framework and the to-be-developed action plans through cross-agency partnership agreements. To ensure state agency actions continue to be informed by community input, a community-based advisory committee will be convened quarterly to engage in bi-directional action updates and provide community-informed input on state-identified issues.



Children's Cabinet Core Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State owners of ECSR Recommendation Framework.</li> <li>• Act as conveners.</li> <li>• Ensure interagency commitment to action.</li> </ul>
Early Childhood Systems Reform Project Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides project management support.</li> </ul>
Interagency Leadership Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group of interagency division directors who collaboratively use the ECSR Recommendation Framework to develop and implement charters to drive action.</li> </ul>
Minnesota Management and Budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existing results-based-accountability vehicle for interagency Commissioners to assess progress and collaboratively problem solve high level barriers.</li> </ul>
Early Childhood Systems Reform Steering Committee members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunity to participate in a systems reform community advisory committee that will be convened quarterly to engage in bi-directional action updates and provide community-informed input on state-identified issues.</li> </ul>

# Community Immersive Partnerships

To support communities in developing community-specific action plans to advance the Early Childhood Systems Reform recommendations, staff are developing opportunities for Early Childhood Systems Reform community-based representatives and the Minnesota 2-Generation Policy Network to partner<sup>15</sup>. These include, but are not limited to:

- **Hosting or participating in Family Centered Design workshops**  
These 1-2 day workshop will bring together representatives of a local ecosystem (state, county, nonprofit, and others) to place families at the center of identifying challenges and defining possible actions. This may include potential identification of small scale changes that could implemented and evaluated with support from the state. These workshops will use human centered design methods adapted for the whole family.
- **Capacity Building Support for Whole Family System Reform Efforts**  
Engaging in whole family systems reform requires relationship and partnership. Recognizing this, the state is developing an opportunity to foster relationship building with a group of cross-sector partners to allow for effective multi-level problem identification and solution generation.
- **Collaborative Catalyst Funding for Whole Family Approaches to System Reform**  
Through a collaborative application, community partners will receive financial support to co-develop and implement a policy or practice change that uses a whole family approach and that responds to Early Childhood Systems Reform recommendations. Early Childhood Systems Reform community-based members are encouraged to apply for this funding.
- The Request for Proposals (RFP) process by which communities will be able to apply for funding to support prototype implementation will be shaped by the Early Childhood Systems Reform recommendations. In addition, Early Childhood Systems Reform Steering Committee members may also have the opportunity to participate in a community review panel of submitted applications, if they are not applying for funding.

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<sup>15</sup> Please see [Minnesota 2-Generation Policy Network](#) for more information.

# Conclusion

When dismantling the impacts of ongoing structural racism and historical trauma to develop a truly equitable and effective early childhood system, the path forward is a long one that requires committed and collective action from all those involved. Through a purposeful and intentional focus on relationship building and through the sharing of personal values, hopes, and lived experience, the Early Childhood Systems Reform Steering Committee was able to bridge diverse, and at times competing, world views and cultural identities to develop a unified recommendation framework that provides a path for the needed collective action.

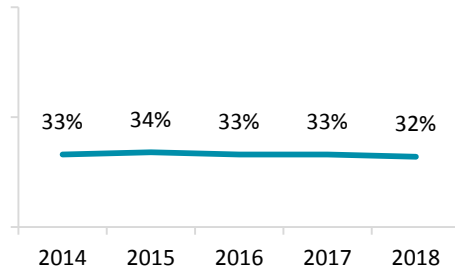
State agency staff will continue the work by identifying internal mechanisms to ensure movement from recommendation to action in authentic partnership with the communities involved in generating the recommendations. Community-based members of the steering committee have identified key stakeholders and coalitions to whom the recommendation framework can be presented to further strengthen the collective action, and have voiced their expectations for ongoing accountability and feedback loops.

A framework has been developed for families, communities and government agencies to partner to eliminate the structural racism and inequities that exist in access, policies, programs and practices. Through an intentional focus on children facing racial, geographic and economic inequities, an equitable early childhood system that supports pregnant and parenting families with young children to ensure that all children in Minnesota are born healthy and able to thrive in their families and communities is being created.

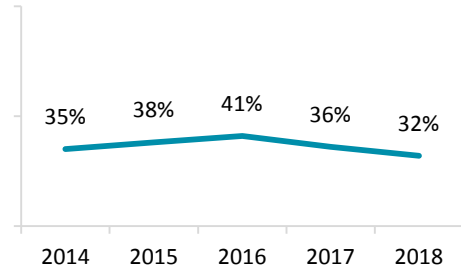
# Appendix A: Data on Racial Disparities in Early Childhood

## 3rd Grade Reading Proficiency

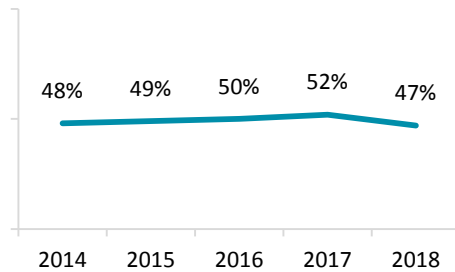
Black



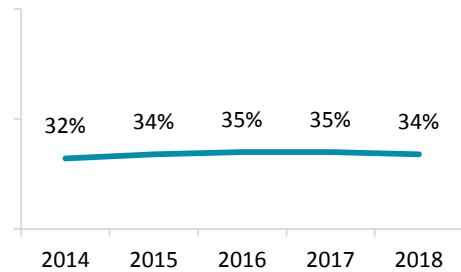
American Indian



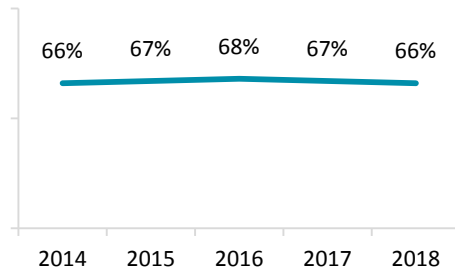
Asian



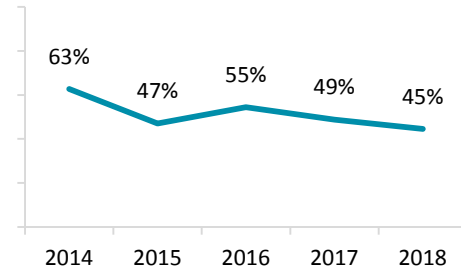
Hispanic



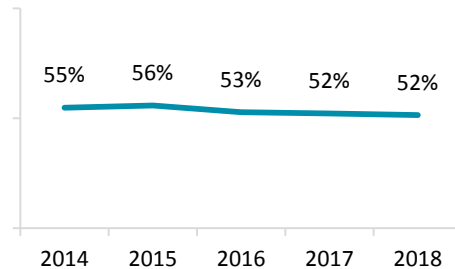
White (non-Hispanic)



Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander



Two or more races

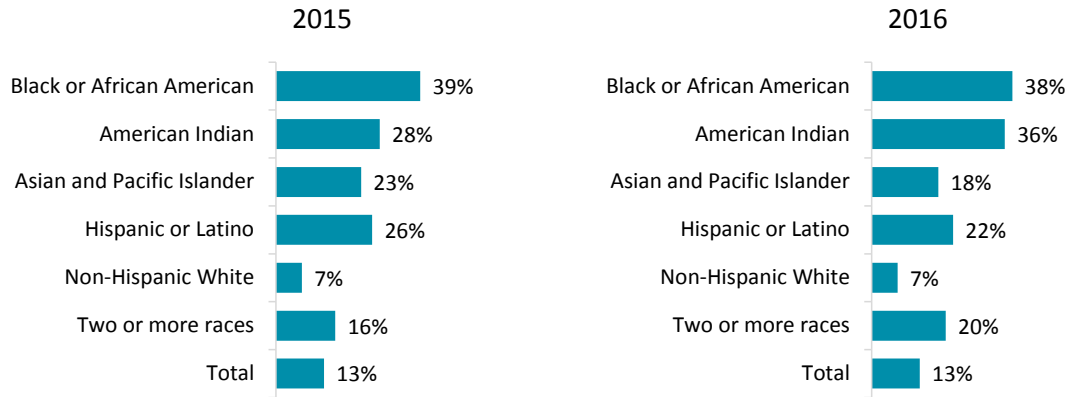


The figures show the percentage of third graders who meet or exceed state reading proficiency standards on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) from 2013-2017, by racial group. Third grade reading is an important measure that often predicts students' later success in school. After the third grade level, students are expected to be able to read in order to understand and gain information, and children that aren't proficient face major barriers to academic success.

It is clear from the figures that there are wide gaps in reading proficiency for white students and students of color, with white third-graders meeting proficiency standards at twice the rate of African American, American Indian, and Hispanic third-graders.

Source: Minnesota Compass (Wilder Research): [3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading scores](#)

## Children in poverty by race and ethnicity

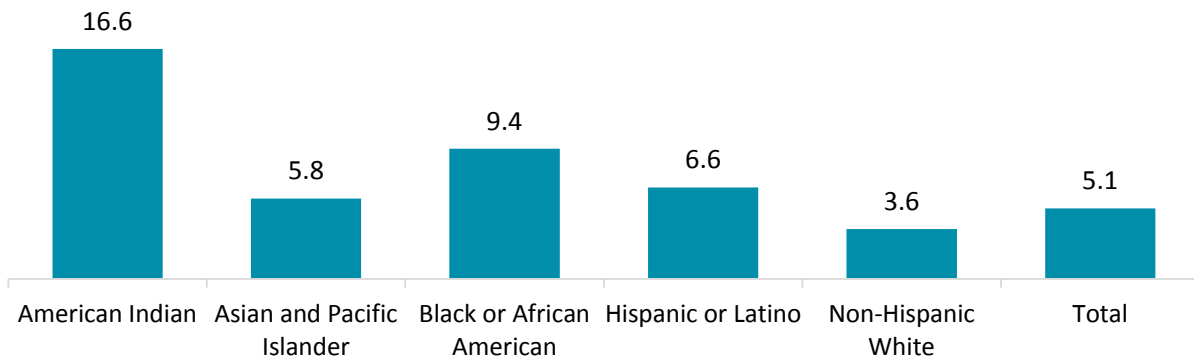


The federal poverty definition consists of a series of thresholds based on family size and composition. In calendar year 2016, a family of two adults and two children fell in the “poverty” category if their annual income fell below \$24,339. Poverty status is not determined for people in military barracks, institutional quarters, or for unrelated individuals under age 15 (such as foster children).

The data are based on income received in the 12 months prior to the survey. This figure shows the percentage of children under age 18 who live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level, as defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget, by race and ethnicity. For 2016, a family of two adults and two children fell in the poverty category if their annual income was below \$24,339. As can be seen in the figure, there are stark differences in poverty experienced by white children and children of color, particularly for American Indian and Black or African American children. It is also important to note that the percentage of American Indian children experiencing poverty increased from 2015 to 2016, while holding steady or decreasing for other races.

Source: Kid’s Count Data Center: [Children in poverty by race and ethnicity](#)

## Infant Mortality

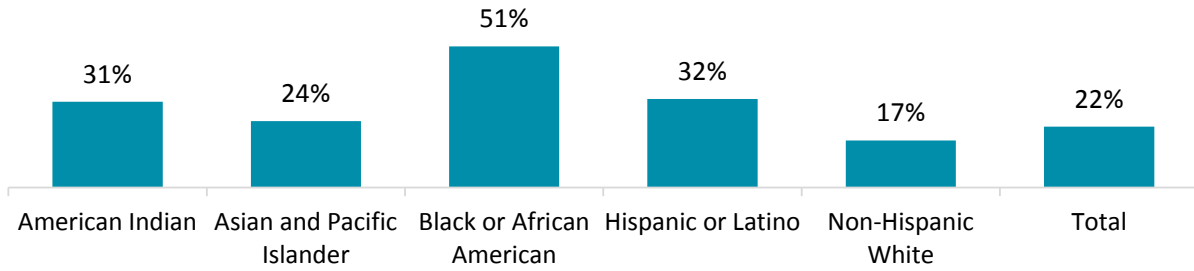


*This figure shows the rate of deaths for infants under 1 year of age per 1,000 live births for 2016, by racial group. Infant mortality has long been an important health indicator and salient public health issue.*

*This figure shows that American Indian infants die at almost 5 times the rate of Non-Hispanic White infants, almost twice the rate of Black or African American infants, and approximately three times the rate of Hispanic and Asian infants.*

Source: Kid's Count Data Center: [Infant mortality by race](#)

## Housing Cost Burden



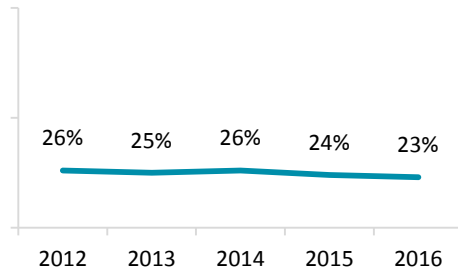
*This figure shows the percentage of children under 18 who live in households with a high housing cost burden, defined as paying 30 percent or more of the monthly household income on rent or housing costs. Families that pay this much for housing are often left with fewer resources to afford other basic needs and are forced to drop crucial expenses such as health insurance or child care, which influences children in a variety of negative ways.*

*This figure makes clear that the percentage of children of color who live in families experiencing housing cost burden is significantly higher than the percentage of white children living in families that experience housing cost burden*

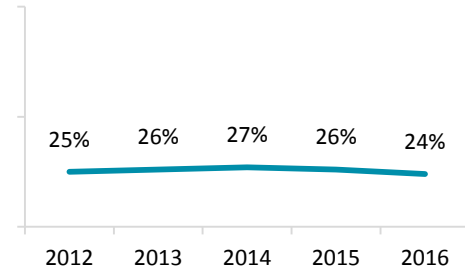
Source: Kid's Count Data Center: [Children living in households with a high housing cost burden by race](#)

## High Poverty Neighborhoods

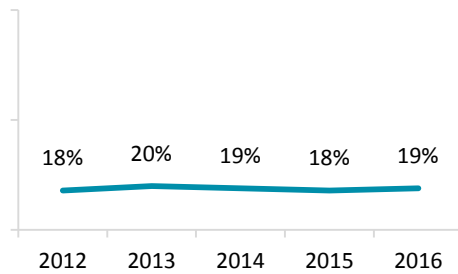
Black or African American



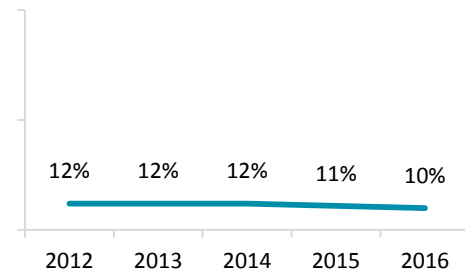
American Indian



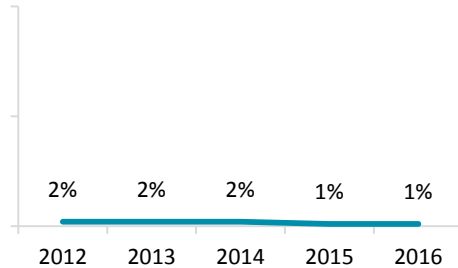
Asian and Pacific Islander



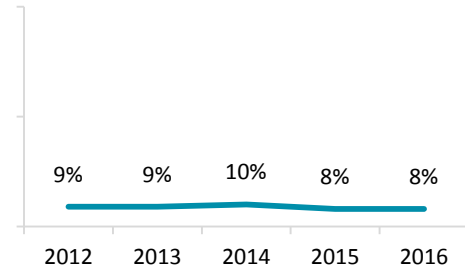
Hispanic or Latino



Non-Hispanic White



Two or more races



*This figure shows the percentage of children under 18 in households that live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, defined as a neighborhood where 30 percent or more households have incomes below the poverty line. Concentrated-poverty neighborhoods often have unstable housing, poor-quality schools, high crime rates, and little civic or political opportunity. Children growing up in neighborhoods with high poverty rates have been shown to perform poorly in school and have higher odds of experiencing poor health, regardless of their own family's socioeconomic status.*

*This figure shows stark and severe racial disparities. While only 1 percent of white children live in high-poverty neighborhoods, 24 percent of American Indian children, 23 percent of African American children, and 19 percent of Asian children do.*

Source: Kid's Count Data Center: [Children living in areas of concentrated poverty by race and ethnicity](#)



# Appendix B:

## Early Childhood Systems Reform Steering Committee Members

Organization	Representative	Organization	Representative
Minority Child Care Association	Ikram Mohamed	Local Public Health Association (LPHA)	Lorna Schmidt
Special Education and Family Voice	Mai Chang, Zang Vang-Lee	Minnesota Coalition for Targeted Home Visiting	Laura LaCroix-Dalluhn
People Serving People	Daniel Gumnit	Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	Lee Tourney
Tri-Valley Opportunity Council	Laurie Coleman	Coalition of Asian American Leaders	KaYing Yang
Voices and Choices for Children	Bharti Wahi	Isuroon (Somali Women's Health)	Fartun Weli
American Academy of Pediatrics	Krishnan Subrahmanian	Comunidades Latinas Unidas en Servicio (CLUES)	Ruby Azurdia-Lee
Minnesota Initiative Foundations (MIFs)	Nancy Jost	Minnesota Association for Family and Early Education	Monica Potter
Head Start Association (Early Head Start)	Kraig Gratke	Cultural and Ethnic Communities Leadership Council	Vayong Moua
Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center	Patina Park	Think Small, Voices & Choices, Early Learning Council	Dianne Haulcy
City of St. Paul	Daniel Yang	Indigenous Visioning (Greater Minnesota Tribal Voice)	Barb Fabre
Family Voice: Urban (St. Paul) Minnesota Communities Caring for Children	Danielle Swift	Family Voice: Head Start Parent Council	Loren Groves
Family Voice: Rural (Duluth) Minnesota Communities Caring for Children	Melissa Meyer	Family Voice: Rural (Ely) Minnesota Communities Caring for Children	John Soghigian
State Agency Ex-officio Members			
Minnesota Department of Human Services	Jim Koppel, Cindi Yang, Jovon Perry	Minnesota Department of Health	Jeanne Ayers, Joan Brandt
Minnesota Department of Education	Hue Nguyen, Bobbie Burnham	Minnesota Housing Finance Agency	Ryan Baumtrog

# Appendix C: Personal Stories and Problem Statements

As described in the body of the report, steering committee members shared personal stories that highlighted how early childhood system problems impact the day-to-day lives of children, families and communities. Problem statements were used as a framework for analysis and mapping of the details of these shared stories. Problem statements are a specific Human Centered Design tool that increase the likelihood that solutions lead to intended outcomes by clarifying the problem to be solved.

Prior to the story-sharing exercise, a list of potential problem statements per Focus Area was generated based on analysis of steering committee discussion of existing white-dominant narratives that serve as barriers to achieving equity goals. This list is included below. A problem statement prioritization process was attempted, but group consensus on prioritization and wording of the problem statements was not attained. Instead, through small and large group discussions, problem themes that cut across focus areas were identified that served as a basis for generating recommendations.

Working in small groups with a specific problem statement or problem theme, committee members shared stories that illustrated real life examples of how the problem affected their life or the lives of a family they served. The small groups then mapped the state programs, policies and practices contributing to the problem, as well as those already attempting to solve it. They also mapped community-based resources in the system that are both sources of potential solutions and areas of potential energy if the problem were solved. From this mapping exercise, problem themes that cut across focus areas were identified and community members worked with specific solutions that were lifted up in the process to arrive at the broad recommendations depicted in the Early Childhood Systems Reform Recommendation Framework.

# Potential Problem Statements

## Focus Area: Government and Institutional Partnerships

1. Government is not designed to share power and does not know how to share power.
2. Government uses a one-size fits all approach to meeting the needs of families and communities, which are too diverse for a common approach.
3. Government is designed to fix children and families, but there is nothing wrong with children and families.
4. Government systems are designed to keep poor people poor.
5. Federal, state, county and city policy makers are a few elected individuals who often represent their own interests or desire to maintain the status quo.
6. Policies tend to be more narrowly defined as they are applied in counties and communities leading to less flexibility to meet the needs of families or individuals.
7. Current hiring practices at the state, local and county levels prevents employees from reflecting the diversity of the community.
8. Policies are often developed by officials who have not had a shared experience or understanding.
9. Universal policies create one solution for all rather than being customized to meet the needs of each cultural group/community which have very different experiences.
10. Policies created by separate programs in separate agencies create redundancies and lack of coordination causing families to meet multiple requirements and work with multiple service providers.

## Focus Area: Family and community supports

1. Government and institutional systems are making decisions (designing programs) based on a narrow, incorrect definition of family that uses traditional gender roles and ignores non-traditional family structures.
2. Government and institutional systems don't understand historical and current systemic and structural racism and therefore see people in poverty, especially people of color, as lazy and undeserving of support.
3. Families and communities with less resources are primarily seen through a deficit-based lens and as unable to support themselves.
4. Government and institutional systems are making decisions about what communities need, not communities themselves.
5. Government and institutional systems distribute resources in a way that breeds competition between communities rather than encouraging collaboration between communities.
6. Policies place the responsibility for child well-being on the mother rather than viewing the family, community and society as responsible.

### **Focus Area: Healthy Birth & Development**

1. Institutions aren't supporting families in their birthing process in ways that align with families cultural and spiritual beliefs.
2. Current prenatal support processes don't recognize family stability as essential for healthy births and development; family and economic stability is assumed.
3. Current policies enforce/require a medical model of prenatal care and birthing rather than recognizing midwives, doulas, nurse practitioners, and/or spiritual healers as viable providers of prenatal care.
4. Policies are based on the accepted knowledge base and child rearing practices of white culture.
5. Policies reflect a belief that healthy births and costs associated, are the sole responsibility of the mother; additional family members are not invited nor is there are sense of societal responsibilities.
6. Policies that are not customized to meet the needs of an individual prevent people of various cultural groups from participating and prevents adequate identification of need.
7. Current policies do not support the value this time of life, family and culture for those of all income levels.

### **Focus Area: Early Care and Education**

1. Policies reflect a belief that costs associated with care and education is the responsibility of the parents/family rather than a societal responsibility.
2. Quality of programing varies often leaving those with the least ability to pay in lowest quality programs.
3. Policies create a cliff effect or families are dropped when their economic situations improves or if they have a couple of months when they are doing better.
4. Early Care and Education Systems base their definition of "best practice" on white culture and child rearing beliefs.
5. Systems are set up to acclimate children to white culture rather than reinforce the image of the child as a part of a legitimate and strong cultural heritage that leads to a child's strong sense of self.
6. Training and education in early care and education does not adequately equip teachers/providers to effectively work with cultural groups.
7. Training and education in early care and education does not adequately equip teachers/providers to effectively support children who are dual or multi-language learners.
8. Early Care and Education Systems are set up to focus solely on the child, not recognizing or addressing needs within the family and community system.
9. Policies based on the belief that little experience and relationship-based skills are needed to care for and educate young children which leads to low wages and does not encourage people to enter the field or remain in the field.
10. Policies that mandate that lower income families should get out and work leaving their children in the care of others, but encourage higher income families to stay home with their children.

### **Focus Area: Housing and Community Design**

1. Government affordable housing programs focus only on providing physical safety without considering families' broader cultural, spiritual and practical needs.
2. The definition of family that government systems use when designing housing programs does not match the definition of family for many cultural groups.
3. Policies are based on a belief that housing is the responsibility of the family.
4. Current housing policies define families narrowly and does not match the definition of family held by many cultural groups.
5. Housing policies are based on a belief that one narrowly defined family should occupy one house or housing unit.
6. Policies that limit numbers of people living in one household can break up or fine families.
7. Housing policies that limit ownership to those who are economically advantaged, prevents renters from building equity and wealth.
8. State, city councils and local commissions make housing decisions based on ability to generate revenue from developers.
9. Public housing policies and investments are more likely to support builders/business than to support the accrual of wealth of a family through housing opportunities.
10. Current housing policies create concentrated areas of families needing support with housing.

# Appendix D: Glossary for Steering Committee Key Terms

**Acute Trauma:** Traumatic events can include physical and sexual abuse, neglect, bullying, community-based violence, disaster, terrorism, and war. [1]

**Brain Science:** The basic [architecture of the brain](#) is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. Early experiences affect the quality of that architecture by establishing either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all of the learning, health and behavior that follow. Scientists now know that [chronic, unrelenting stress](#) in early childhood, caused by extreme poverty, repeated abuse, or severe maternal depression, for example, can be toxic to the developing brain. Toxic stress is the strong, unrelieved activation of the body's stress management system. In the absence of the buffering protection of adult support, toxic stress becomes built into the body by processes that shape the architecture of the developing brain. [2]

**Cliff Effect:** An outcome of current policies in which as a family's earnings increase and they rise above the official poverty level, they begin to lose eligibility for tax credits, child care subsidies, health care coverage, and food stamps even though they are not yet self-sufficient. So although parents may be working and earning more, their families can't reach financial security. [3]

**Disparity:** A population-based difference in any outcomes (e.g., women have higher rates of breast cancer than men). [4]

**Dominant narrative:** The lens in which history is told by the perspective of the dominant culture. This term has been described as an "invisible hand" that guides reality, perceived reality, assumptions, practices, and cultural norms. [5]

**Early Childhood:** The Early Childhood Systems Reform project intentionally focused on children prenatal to age three, who are necessarily interdependent with their families and communities.

**Early learning and development:** The foundational process of child brain development encompassing full social, emotional, physical and cognitive well-being for children prenatal through age eight. [6]

**Education Equity:** The condition of justice, fairness and inclusion in our systems of education so that all students have access to the opportunity to learn and develop to their fullest potential. The pursuit of education equity recognizes the historical conditions and barriers that have prevented opportunity and success in learning for students based on their race, income, and other social conditions. Eliminating those structural and institutional barriers to educational opportunity requires systemic change that allows for distribution of resources, information and other support, depending on the student's situation to ensure an equitable outcome. [7]

**Equity:** When every person, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic status, or geographic location has the opportunity to realize their full potential of physical, social, emotional, and cognitive well-being, without limits imposed by structural inequities. Equity is ensuring everyone has what they need to be successful. This is different from equality which involves treating everyone the same. [4]

**Family:** The unit of support surrounding a child including anyone related by blood, adoption, or affinity in close association with the child. [8]

**Government and institutions:** Overlapping administrations and entities including all state, county, and local government agencies, along with service providers, community organizations, healthcare centers, hospitals, school districts, law enforcement agencies, banks, etc.

**Historical Trauma:** Historical trauma is a form of trauma that impacts entire communities. It refers to the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, as a result of group traumatic experiences that are transmitted across generations within a community. This type of trauma is often associated with racial and ethnic population groups in the United States who have suffered major intergenerational losses and assaults on their culture and well-being. [1]

**Inequity:** An avoidable difference caused by systematic differences in socially determined circumstances (e.g., American Indians have higher rates of diabetes due to the disruption of their way of life and replacement of traditional foods with unhealthy commodity foods). [4]

**Policy:** Refers to both decisions, plans, and actions what are undertaken to achieve specific early childhood goals within a state (big P policy), and also refers to rules and regulations within a program or service. We refer to this as “little p policy.”

**Power:** The ability to influence outcomes in order to get what one wants or needs, often comes from privileges associated with gender, race, sexuality, class, or education. [9]

**Practice:** The work, and how people do the work. Practice can be dictated by program rules and regulations, but is also influenced by individuals’ values, worldviews, cultural identities, and biases.

**Program:** Administered by the federal, state, local government or non-profit which provides services to children, families and communities.

**Reform:** Partnering with families and communities to identify system barriers and working to align program requirements, funding structures, and policies so that we and our partners can better provide holistic, integrated services that recognize the interconnectedness of parents and children and advance equitable outcomes for all.

**Structural inequities:** Structures or systems of society (such as finance, housing, transportation, education, social opportunities, etc.) that are arranged in such a way that they benefit one population unfairly (whether intentional or unintentional). [4]

**Structural racism:** the normalization of an array of dynamics – historical, cultural, institutional, and interpersonal – that routinely advantage white people while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color and American Indians. [4]

**Systems:** an orderly and comprehensive assemblage of interrelated elements, programs, policies, and practices that creates equitable, accessible, comprehensive, and quality services for young children. [10]

**White Dominant Culture:** The dominant culture is the group whose members are in the majority or wield more power. In the United States, the dominant culture is white. White dominant culture shapes society's norms, values, beliefs and standards to validate and advantage white people while oppressing People of Color. White dominant culture overtly and covertly assigns value and normality to white people and whiteness in order to rationalize the unequal status and degrading treatment of People and Communities of Color. [11]

**White Supremacy:** The ideology that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are superior to People of Color and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions. White supremacy is ever present in our institutional and cultural assumptions that assign value, morality, goodness, and humanity to the white group while casting people and communities of color as worthless (worth less), immoral, bad, and inhuman and "undeserving." White supremacy also refers to a political or socio-economic system where white people enjoy structural advantage and rights that other racial and ethnic groups do not, both at a collective and an individual level. [11]

**Whole Family approach:** an approach to practice, program and policy decision making that recognizes and addresses the needs of children and the adults in their lives simultaneously. This approach recognizes that families come in all different shapes and sizes and that families define themselves. [12]



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