



Guiding Principle 8:



Invest Early

Michigan children should have access to safe, quality, and affordable early childhood care and education that prepares them for long-term educational success and supports whole-child development.



Rationale

Early childhood education and development matters. Experts have demonstrated what parents and families already know: children are learning from the moment they are born. Their brains develop very quickly in their early years, and this development is not hardwired—it is dramatically affected by children’s environment.¹²² Investments in quality early childhood education and care are a critical step to ensuring that children are developmentally on track and ready to succeed in school.

Research has shown that investments in high-quality programs and interventions work. For example, home visiting programs pair parents with professionals who provide them with support, knowledge, and resources to promote positive parenting practices, empower families to be self-sufficient, increase school readiness, and more.¹²³ Participants in Michigan’s own prekindergarten program, the Great Start Readiness Program are more likely to pass statewide assessments and more likely to graduate from high school than those who do not participate.¹²⁴

In addition to unequivocal developmental and educational benefits, research has demonstrated clear economic benefits to investing early. Investing in early childhood may be the most effective economic development strategy we can make as a state.¹²⁵ Estimates of returns vary, ranging from \$2.50 to \$17 for every dollar invested, showing the powerful return to children, families, and taxpayers from early investment.¹²⁶

These investments are also critical for families. Access to high-quality, reliable child care, for example, can be a difference-maker for parents trying to enter the labor market. High-quality, reliable child care makes it easier to enter and remain in the workforce. It reduces parents’ absenteeism and turnover, and allows parents to stay in the workforce for longer continuous periods—increasing their productivity and wages.

The structure of Michigan families has changed. In 1960, a single parent led 9 percent of households. In 2010, the portion of households had grown to 34 percent.¹²⁷ The result is more children are living in households where quality early learning development and care is a challenge for their parents.

What does a 21st century Michigan look like?

Michigan is a leader in early childhood development and learning outcomes nationally, and Michigan recognizes that investments in children and their families are critical and that different children and families have different needs. As a result, all children, regardless of their family circumstances, enter kindergarten ready to succeed.

To achieve this, children and families across the state have access to safe, quality, affordable services—starting during pregnancy and going through age eight. Children and families with the highest need receive the most significant support through programs like home visiting, early intervention, infant mental health, and preschool. As family need increases, the intensity of services changes to best fit their needs and effectively leverage public resources. Child care is one example. Michigan offers subsidies that allow families to access quality providers at an affordable rate.

Critically, across all programs and services, Michigan is focused on quality. Programs have skilled staff; small class sizes; developmentally appropriate curricula; safe, stimulating, language-rich environments; and positive relationships between providers, parents, and children.¹²⁸ Michigan now offers universal access to state-funded prekindergarten for all four-year-olds. For our children to thrive in the future, we believe our formal education system must now start at age four, not five. There are a variety of providers (all of whom implement evidence-based programs) that offer prekindergarten from child care providers to school districts.

What does Michigan look like now?

Michigan is more attentive than ever to the importance of investments in young children. Thanks to increased funding for

prekindergarten and home visiting, more children and families can access quality early care. In fact, Michigan's recent prekindergarten expansion was among the largest in the country, and Michigan is now ranked 15th for access to four-year-old preschool nationally.¹²⁹ The Office of Great Start is leading a more intentional effort to align state and federal investments and resources to improve outcomes for young children and their families.

Access to quality, affordable programs and services, however, continues to be a challenge. Too many children arrive at kindergarten inadequately prepared, leading to greater future expenses in areas such as special education and grade repetition. Child care is too expensive for too many families, and quality care is difficult to find. As a result, some families make tradeoffs between staying home to care for their children and pursuing work to increase their household income, or they may have their children in substandard care.¹³⁰ Child care workers (those charged with supporting children during these critical years of development) are, on average, paid minimum wage. In fact, qualified early childhood and care educators, regardless of program type, are increasingly difficult to find and retain. Investments in early interventions like Early On[®] are inconsistent across the state and often underfunded. Stakeholders, however, report optimism that the system can improve, and they note that Michigan understands the challenges in providing access to quality services and is actively working to improve access, service quality, and coordination.¹³¹

In addition, Michigan lacks a consistent measure of readiness for children entering kindergarten, while other states have benchmarks in place already. This prevents assessment of prekindergarten programs and interventions and limits the ability to scale or replicate successful efforts.

Measuring Success

While we implement these strategies, we must track progress and outcomes by asking questions such as:

- Are children developmentally on track?
- Do children arrive at kindergarten ready to learn?
- Can children read by fourth grade?
- Do families have access to quality child care?
- Do families have access to quality preschool?
- Are families able to afford and access the services they want and need?

Key Strategies

- 8.1** Support universal preschool for all four-year-olds
- 8.2** Develop and retain a quality early childhood workforce
- 8.3** Increase access to quality services through improved coordination
- 8.4** Enhance early learning outcome measurement and tracking

8.1—Support Universal Preschool for All Four-year-olds

Michigan must provide universal access to preschool for every four-year-old in the state.

Details

Michigan currently provides universal access to preschool for all four-year-olds based on a set of risk factors and a means test. Michigan should eliminate these requirements and offer state-funded, voluntary prekindergarten to all 117,000 four-year-olds in the state.¹³²

To achieve universal access to preschool, Michigan must increase investments in GSRP to allow every four-year-old in the state to attend state-funded preschool.

Rationale

Nearly every leader Commissioners spoke with during listening tour events, from Detroit to Traverse City to Houghton, highlighted the importance of ensuring that students arrive to kindergarten ready to learn. Preschool is a proven strategy to improve school readiness, and the GSRP—Michigan’s homegrown preschool program—is among the best in the country.¹³³ Currently, GSRP targets low-income children and works in partnership with Head Start to create universal access to prekindergarten for children below 250 percent of the federal poverty level. The program is voluntary and operated by school districts and community-based organizations. Families below 250 percent of the federal poverty limit do not pay tuition. The program includes instruction in language and early literacy; social, emotional, and physical health and development; and early math, science, and social studies. This program, working synergistically with Head Start, should be expanded to all four-year-olds in Michigan.

Three states—Georgia, Florida, and Oklahoma—offer examples of how to provide universal access to all four-year-olds.¹³⁴ Of the three, Oklahoma serves the largest proportion of students with the highest quality rating and may be a model for Michigan. In 1998, Oklahoma began offering universal access to state-funded prekindergarten, and today, 75 percent of four-year-olds participate in the program. Participation is voluntary for both children and school districts, and many other providers may offer the program, including Head Start programs and other community-based providers. Throughout implementation, Oklahoma has maintained an intense focus on quality. All programs must maintain strict quality standards, including requiring teachers to have bachelor’s degrees, requiring parity with elementary teacher pay, and setting student-teacher ratios intended to improve learning. Researchers have reviewed Oklahoma’s program extensively and have found that participants across all racial and ethnic groups and all socioeconomic groups benefit from the program and see improved literacy and numeracy skills.¹³⁵

Potential Responsible Party

The Governor and Legislature must lead the effort to increase funding, and current GSRP providers must collaborate with the Office of Great Start to craft a sustainable statewide implementation plan.

8.2—Develop and Retain a Quality Early Childhood Workforce

Michigan must develop and retain qualified personnel in order to have quality early childhood programs and services.

Details

In order to attract and retain qualified professionals in the early childhood field, Michigan must ensure that they are competitively compensated for their knowledge and skills. There are a variety of ways to accomplish this goal, including policies such as offering state-subsidized salary increases after completing professional development, offering tax credits for child care workers, and offering scholarship opportunities, loan forgiveness, and more.

Rationale

Investment in early childhood is a powerful strategy to improve school readiness and increase long-term school success. For this strategy to be effective, we must have quality programs and services and an early childhood workforce that is paid competitively and supported with professional development. Rightly so, programs and services expect a workforce that can support early development in areas such as language and social-emotional health. This expectation of quality—generally seen as increased investments in professional development and higher levels of education—has not yet been met with an increase in salaries, particularly for preschool teachers and child care workers.

Michigan preschool teachers have an average salary of \$27,740 annually. Kindergarten teachers, meanwhile, make \$52,460 on average, and elementary teachers' salaries average \$63,530.¹³⁶

This discrepancy minimizes the skills and knowledge needed to support early development and limits the ability to attract and retain the qualified educators necessary to have high-quality instruction and programs.

Child care workers, another critical part of the early childhood workforce, are among the lowest paid workers in our economy. The average child care worker makes minimum wage, and rarely receive benefits like health insurance or a pension plan.¹³⁷ Low hourly wages make it difficult to implement the quality measures needed to offer high-quality services to our youngest Michiganders. It also often means that child care providers have high levels of turnover, running counter to best practices which suggest that having a consistent caregiver is essential for early childhood development. As our state demands increased quality, increased professional development, and higher levels of postsecondary education for child care workers, we must also increase wages to attract and retain quality talent.

This wage gap cannot be addressed simply by increasing the cost of programs and care for parents. Currently, there is a tension between parents' ability to pay and programs' ability to pay teachers. The state must step in with strategies such as subsidizing salaries for early childhood and care

educators or increasing investments in child care subsidies to ensure that we are recruiting and retaining professionals to the workforce.

Potential Responsible Party

The Legislature, in collaboration with early childhood stakeholders across the state, must take the lead on identifying how best to implement this strategy.

Photo taken at Starfish Family Services in Inkster



8.3—Increase Access to Quality Services Through Improved Coordination

Michigan must continue to improve the coordination of service delivery and the use of existing resources across federal funding streams, state departments, nonprofit agencies, philanthropic partners, local school districts, and other partners to ensure that all children and their families have access to high-quality early childhood programs and services.

Details

Michigan needs to ensure that early childhood resources are spent efficiently, resources are deployed strategically, and programs reach the children and families who need them most. Given the wide range of service providers from social service agencies to healthcare systems to school districts, this goal can only be accomplished if services and existing resources are well coordinated. Recent efforts to improve coordination have resulted in significant progress, but much more needs to be done.

Rationale

Early childhood initiatives include a wide range of programs aimed at improving the health, wellbeing, and development of young children and their families. These programs cross multiple state agencies and systems, leverage different sources of federal funding, and are implemented by a diverse set of community partners. Too often, these programs operate in silos, creating problems for families, providers, and policymakers. A parent seeking services often needs to complete multiple and often complex applications with a variety of service providers. Literacy challenges, gaps in access to technology, and geographic challenges can all work to prevent families in the most need from receiving service. Providers also struggle with coordinating multiple funding streams coming from a variety of government and philanthropic sources. These silos make it difficult for policymakers to create a coherent, aligned system that both serves families effectively and strategically leverages resources. As Commissioners heard from leaders in Northern Michigan, coordinating agencies, providers, and funding streams is difficult but necessary work if Michigan is going to effectively serve young children and their families.

Recent efforts in Michigan led by the Office of Great Start have worked to identify and align existing efforts for families. They have also worked to align strategic priorities to ensure investments are deployed in the most effective and efficient way possible, but there is more work to be done to eliminate the complexity of navigating programs and best meet the needs of young children and their families.

Potential Responsible Party

The Office of Great Start must lead this work in partnership with other state agencies, regional entities, and community partners. The Legislature must invest in this effort and recognize that coordination and alignment requires an upfront and sustained investment of both time and resources.

8.4–Enhance Early Learning Outcome Measurement and Tracking

Michigan must continue to enhance the early learning portion of the state's longitudinal data systems to inform service delivery, improve program alignment, and increase our understanding of what works.

Details

Michigan must improve early learning participation and outcomes data by expanding the number and types of programs participating in existing data collection and use developmentally-appropriate kindergarten entry assessments statewide to gauge the impact of early investments on readiness.

Rationale

Over the past decade, Michigan has committed to building a longitudinal data system that tracks children and students from early learning to K–12, postsecondary education, and workforce development. The Michigan Statewide Longitudinal Data System is maintained by the CEPI, and these data are presented to the public via the MI School Data portal. While early childhood data collection is nascent, significant progress has been made. Michigan now issues a unique identification code to all children enrolled in state-funded preschool and early childhood special education and publicly reports aggregate child counts. These data are being used in combination with K–12 data to show which kindergarten students participated in a state-funded early learning program and future reports will attempt to show the connection between attendance in the early grades and participation in a state-funded early learning program.

For this system to be comprehensive, however, Michigan must move beyond the small suite of state-funded programs currently participating. In Pennsylvania, for example, children are assigned a secure identifier when they apply for services, even if they do not enroll, and this information is captured to allow researchers and policymakers to better understand the effects of participation. This assignment process captures up to 40 percent of children ages birth to five in Pennsylvania.¹³⁸

In addition, data must extend beyond program participation and demographics to child outcomes. Michigan must join 29 other states and implement a statewide kindergarten assessment.¹³⁹ When implemented statewide, this tool will improve our shared understanding about whether children are ready for kindergarten when they arrive and which programs are most effective in improving readiness. These results can also be used to help program staff improve programming and to help policymakers make important decisions about how to allocate resources to achieve our state's early learning goals. Two important notes: first, kindergarten assessments are not standardized tests. Rather, they are observational tools that educators use to measure readiness. These assessments are not, and should not, be used to determine if a child is allowed to attend kindergarten. Instead, they provide important information for parents and educators about a child's development. Second, school readiness is an important and laudable goal. It is not, however, the only objective of early

learning programs. This tool and its results must be coupled with other measures to fully determine the impact of early learning investments.

Potential Responsible Party

CEPI should continue to lead this effort. The Legislature must allocate the funding required to launch and sustain statewide implementation.