

Using integrated data to examine access to services for children of color: State spotlight on Minnesota



Many states are building systems and structures to integrate their early care and education data. Combining data from different programs and agencies that serve young children allows policymakers and program decision makers to better answer critical questions about the needs of families in their communities, as well as questions about services and programs. Building the data system or developing a process to link existing data is an important first step. However, after the data are integrated, they must still be analyzed and interpreted to improve programs, services, and policies.

To spur use of these data in decision making related to policy and practice, the Annie E. Casey Foundation funded KIDS COUNT state organizations in Mississippi, Minnesota, and Rhode Island as they worked to access and use integrated early childhood data. This state spotlight focuses on recent work in Minnesota, where state agency leaders and the Children's Defense Fund-Minnesota are working together to use and share early care and education data.

Using integrated data in Minnesota to understand access to early learning programs

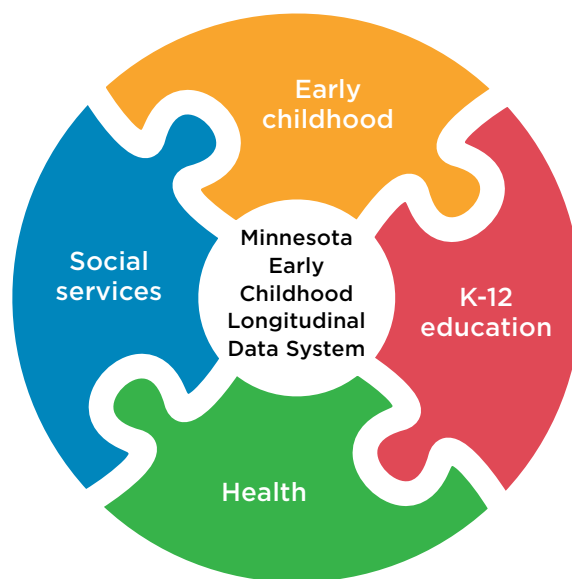
High-quality early care and education services help young children grow, learn, and get ready for elementary school. As states across the country, including Minnesota, invest more in such services, state leaders are grappling to understand which children participate in these programs and how they perform as they enter school. To facilitate this understanding, data must be linked across programs and to the K-12 data system.

Minnesota launched its Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System (ECLDS) in early 2016 to understand how state investments support and help young children. The Children's Defense Fund-Minnesota used the ECLDS data to explore whether children of color and children enrolled in public assistance programs have equal access to early childhood programs. Using ECLDS, they explored:

- Participation rates in early learning programs prior to kindergarten entry
- Participation rates in early learning programs for children in families receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and the School Meal Program
- Participation rates in early learning programs for children of color and American Indian children

Findings from this analysis and best practices and recommendations for increasing access to early childhood programs were shared broadly in a report: [Evaluating Early Childhood Program Access](#).

Minnesota's ECLDS connects information to answer key policy questions.



Lessons learned from Minnesota

Several strategies stand out for their usefulness to other state leaders and advocates interested in using integrated early care and education data:

- **Invest in using the data** generated by an integrated early childhood data system. Although Minnesota had a robust data system in place, staff were still needed to analyze the numbers, write findings, and share them with the community. Without analyzing and sharing these data with decision makers who could incorporate it into their work, investments in an integrated data system will not yield their full benefit.
- **Research partnerships foster data use.** Children’s Defense Fund-Minnesota worked closely with the Minnesota Department of Education in developing its research questions and conducting the analysis. Each organization served as a resource for the other, providing context in using and understanding the data. To ensure that data are used accurately, it is important to have a process to help users understand the data available through an integrated data system.
- **Engage communities and organizations in your state** that are interested in this issue, or those who could benefit from using integrated early childhood data. Such entities may be advocates, practitioners, care providers, or state agency leaders. All stakeholders play important roles in gathering, analyzing, and understanding data. Children’s Defense Fund-Minnesota engaged with stakeholder groups to gather input from families about their experiences, develop recommendations, and share their findings. They worked closely with community partners to ensure that recommendations would represent the needs and circumstances of children of color, their families, and child care providers. Similarly, they shared findings in a variety of ways to ensure that information reached all members of the early childhood community: presentations across the state, webinars, social media, press outreach, and direct outreach to state legislators.
- **Additional data could increase the value of the ECLDS.** Although the ECLDS contains an impressive amount of information, there are some notable gaps. Not all programs that serve young children and their families are included in the system, including Family Home Visiting and Head Start. If such data were added, analysis could be richer and provide more nuanced findings for stakeholders in Minnesota.

Minnesota’s Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System (ECLDS) securely links data from the state departments of education, human services, and health.

Users can pull deidentified aggregate-level standard reports on birth records, program participation, financial assistance programs, child and family demographics, and other data sources that impact young children.

Check out the ECLDS at <http://eclds.mn.gov/>

For information about early childhood integrated data systems in your state, go to www.ecedata.org.