

JUNE 2021

# QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION:

## BUILDING & WEAVING SKILLS FOR SUCCESS IN LIFE



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**The Children’s Foundation of Mississippi set as its first goal to seek to understand the areas where the Foundation can most effectively make a positive impact in the lives of children and families in Mississippi.** We asked those who have been working with children and their families in the state where the greatest needs were and which interventions were most likely to gain the support needed for change to occur. Using data from multiple surveys and reports, and detailed interviews with state leaders, we began to narrow our focus.

The result was the *CFM Blueprint for Improving the Future for Mississippi’s Children*, an in-depth, data-driven overview of pressing issues facing children in Mississippi today. Each document in this series of excerpts addresses one of these emergent areas: Developmental Screening, Quality Early Childhood Education, the Digital Divide, and Earned Income Tax Credit. For the full *Blueprint* report, including methods and references, please visit: <https://childrensfoundationms.org/research/blueprint-for-improving-the-future-of-mississippis-children>.

Like a GPS, we have used research and data to guide our efforts, charting a course forward that takes into consideration the many contributing systems, factors, policies, and procedures that structure positive outcomes. We employ an innovative approach that comprises a holistic and comprehensive view of children and helps us envision what outcomes are possible.

Our research directed the focus of this phase of the Blueprint into five priority strategies:

**Developmental Screening:** To ensure that all children are prepared to succeed in school, it is important to identify any developmental delays as early as possible and provide the appropriate therapies to correct problems before school entry. While Mississippi has made recent improvements, the state has historically documented very low rates of children receiving comprehensive developmental screening. By working together to structure an integrated system that ensures all children are screened at appropriate ages, referred for follow-up, and provided needed therapies, Mississippi can better equip our children for academic success.

**Quality Early Childhood Education:** There is a growing body of evidence supporting the effectiveness of quality early childhood education, and Mississippians strongly support expanding access to publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs. The Mississippi Legislature recently increased funding for the state’s Early Learning Collaboratives, but only enough to support enrollment of approximately 6,000 four-year-olds statewide. Quality improvement initiatives for early childhood education are also gaining ground among states, and surveys show strong support in Mississippi for proposals to assess quality of early childhood education programs. Mississippi discontinued its previous quality rating system and has yet to develop a replacement quality improvement system. Mississippi is fortunate to have a strong cadre of dedicated professionals working in early childhood education, as evidenced by the robust response to our surveys. With concerted effort, we can improve both the quantity and quality of education provided to preschool children in our state and reap the benefits of having better prepared children in kindergarten.

**The Digital Divide:** Participation in 21st Century society in the United States necessitates competence in the use of technology. During the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, children must have access to the Internet for educational purposes, as well as for development of the skills they will need to compete for jobs upon graduation. Mississippi lags behind the nation in broadband access, particularly for rural areas and lower income households, but has commenced two major initiatives to correct this situation: the Mississippi Connects Program sponsored by the Mississippi Department of Education and the support of Mississippi’s electric cooperatives to expand broadband spearheaded by the Public Service Commission. With continued commitment to expanding the digital infrastructure, Mississippi will realize major benefits for the education of our children.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Earned Income Tax Credit:** The federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is a poverty reduction strategy that assists low-income working families by rewarding work and providing an incentive for unemployed people to join the workforce. The antipoverty effect of the EITC is double for households headed by single mothers. Currently, 32 states have implemented a state EITC that supplements the federal EITC. At the state level, a refundable state EITC has been associated with improvements in employment, family incomes, and healthier births. Because of Mississippi's high poverty rates, particularly for families with children, a state EITC could help reduce the high poverty rates of Mississippi families and children.

**Children and Youth Ages 9 – 18:** While it is critical for Mississippi to focus on preparing young children to succeed in school, it is also imperative for the state to establish policies and systems that ensure older youth graduate from high school and are well prepared to enter college and/or the workforce and ultimately become independent, productive adults. There were some primary issue areas that arose from our surveys and reports pointing to the needs of this age group in Mississippi: access to mental health services, comprehensive health education, life skills training, and transitions out of foster care. Further study is needed, however, to identify the most effective priority strategies for this population in our state and will therefore be the focus of phase two of this Blueprint.

This Blueprint is an invitation to our communities across the state to collaborate. We explore the many domains of health and well-being, holding up innovations and interventions that have been shown to work both here, and in other states, things like data-sharing and pre-kindergarten collaboratives. In the past year, we have shown that we can meet a crisis with solutions like telehealth, and by coming together as a state (public and private sectors) as part of grassroots movements like the Broadband Enabling Act. Together, we can build on these successes to make further strides to ensure that all children and youth have access to what they need to thrive. We illustrate through hopeful and inspiring examples a vision of the Mississippi we are working to create, and a reminder that we all have a role to play.

The past year has taught us a great deal about how much we need one another. We are learning more every day about how we can remove barriers, making it easier to build systems that support improved health and wellness. There is a growing team of dedicated partners who are stepping forward to invest in tomorrow's leaders, citizens, and taxpayers, and we have more knowledge than ever about what works and why.

There are several recurring themes throughout this Blueprint document that point to key strategies that successful states have used to improve the health, education, and well-being of children. These states have committed to long-term, sustainable programs that promote collaboration among all stakeholders and focus on common goals. A critical component is the development of comprehensive, coordinated data systems where stakeholders share data in order to identify needs and gaps, track progress, reduce duplication of services, and make adjustments to improve the system to point a way forward. These data systems allow successful states to measure outcomes, not just process, and to hold service providers accountable for improving outcomes.

Systems should support parents in their efforts to prepare their children for success in school and life. Too often they can unintentionally create barriers for parents. The Children's Foundation hopes to build on the solid work already being done in Mississippi, use research to point us in the right direction, take advantage of the experience of other states who have already reached the destinations we desire, and collaborate with the many individuals and organizations who share this journey. By focusing on a few key areas identified by our partners and stakeholders, the CFM hopes to capitalize on their optimism, interest, and dedication, bringing in resources (and taking advantage of available state and federal funding) and inviting collaboration as needed to create an environment where every child will prosper.

**When Mississippi's children thrive, our state thrives.**

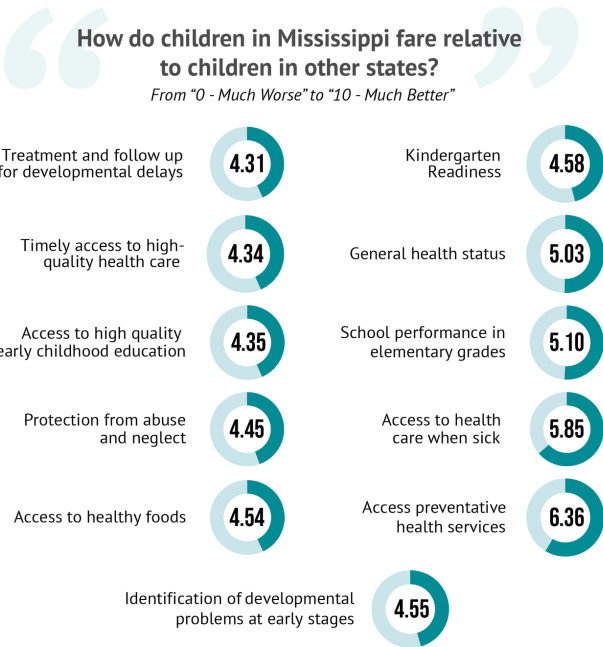
***We have more knowledge than ever before about what works and why.***

# QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

We all play a part and have a stake in the success of the children in our community. Because we know that children’s health and learning are strengthened and supported with high quality early childhood education (ECE) programs, our families, schools, and communities are working together to develop and implement ways of ensuring that our young people have access to learning contexts where there’s a good mix of social and emotional learning. Such opportunities ensure that skills like critical thinking get interwoven with perspective-taking and listening, reinforcing one another to become stronger. If Mississippi is to have a future workforce that has the interpersonal skills that are critical for good teamwork and leadership and the foundational abilities employers desire such as persistence, reliability, resilience, and independence, we must start building these in early childhood. Childcare is important to the state’s economy not only from its impact on the developing child, but also in the way it supports working parents. A report of the U. S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, produced in partnership with the Mississippi Economic Council, noted that Mississippi loses approximately \$673 million annually in economic activity due to breakdowns in childcare.

## Perception of Mississippi’s Early Childhood Education

The Children’s Foundation of Mississippi commissioned a survey of professionals in children’s services in Mississippi (See Appendix) to gauge the status of early childhood in the state and to inform programmatic directions related to the Foundation’s mission. Among other measures, professionals were asked, for eleven key areas, to rate the standing of Mississippi’s children relative to that of children in other states. For early childhood education, the ratings of these professionals indicate substantial room for improvement for children around the state. Kindergarten readiness was the fifth highest ranked item – on average, professionals ranked Mississippi’s children 4.58 out of 10, relative to the performance of children in other states on Kindergarten readiness measures. For access to high quality early childhood education, including child care and pre-kindergarten, professionals gave Mississippi an average rating of 4.35 out of 10, making this the third lowest measure.



## Quality Early Childhood Education Is Critical for Children’s Success

The survey shows that community members and professionals in Mississippi agree on the importance of early childhood education. Action to evaluate and ensure the quality of these early childhood programs enjoys widespread support from professionals and non-professionals alike. Among the early childhood professionals surveyed by the Children’s Foundation of Mississippi, ‘assessing the quality of early childhood education programs’ was identified as the second highest priority item among all available action items.

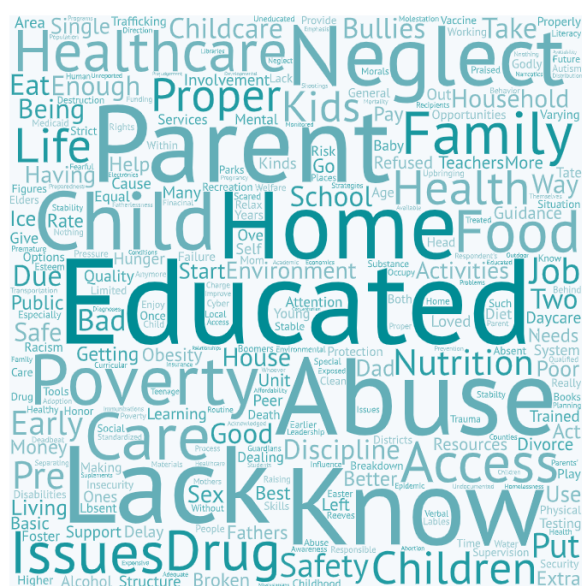
### Priority Ranking of Intervention Strategies

Rank	Action Item
1	Requiring all children to be screened for physical and developmental problems prior to school entry
2	Assessing the quality of early childhood education programs, including child care and pre-kindergarten
3	Expanding publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs to all four-year-old children in the state
4	Providing home-visiting programs statewide to at-risk families to improve parenting skills and prevent child abuse and neglect
5	Expanding access to publicly-funded vouchers for child care assistance
6	Requiring all children in licensed child care centers to be screened for physical and developmental problems prior to entry

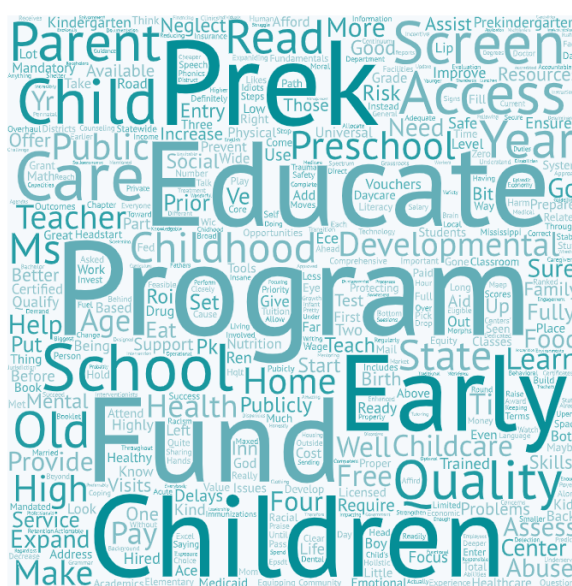
The item receiving the highest priority ranking was ‘requiring all children to be screened for physical and developmental problems prior to school entry,’ which is also a feature of high quality early childhood programs as detailed in the previous section of this document. Of the six action items ranked by these professionals, high quality early childhood education and care is directly related to both top ranked items.

# QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The Children's Foundation of Mississippi commissioned a representative study of adults in Mississippi to assess general population sentiments around issues related to early childhood care and education. Among the survey items, Mississippians were asked the open-ended question: "What would you say is the most serious problem facing children ages birth – 8 yrs old in Mississippi today?" The word cloud below illustrates the response frequency of each word used in participants' responses, revealing that 'educated' is the most frequently cited substantive issue noted for young children.



Among early childhood professionals, a similar word frequency analysis was conducted on responses to the question: "If it were entirely up to you, what are three things you would do to ensure that children in Mississippi are prepared to succeed in school by age eight?" Findings from this analysis indicate a clear emphasis on program quality, as illustrated below. The data from both surveys indicate that professionals and non-professionals alike share similar priorities for young children with particular emphasis on education and quality.



## Monitoring and maintaining quality early childhood education is an achievable goal

In addition to its high importance rating, professionals identified the quality of early childhood education programs as the most feasible intervention strategy among all strategies proposed.

### Feasibility Ranking of Intervention Strategies

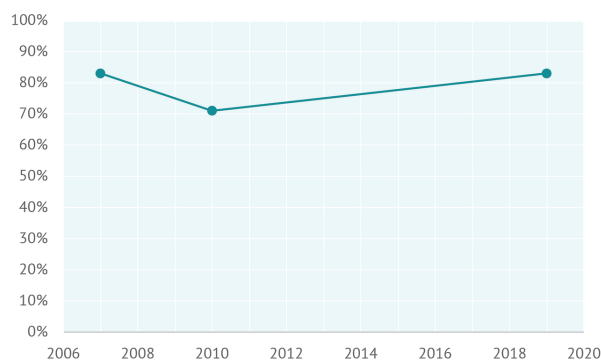
Rank	Action Item
1	Assessing the quality of early childhood education programs, including child care and pre-kindergarten
2	Requiring all children to be screened for physical and developmental problems prior to school entry
3	Expanding access to publicly-funded vouchers for child care assistance
4	Requiring all children in licensed child care centers to be screened for physical and developmental problems prior to entry
5	Expanding publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs to all four-year-old children in the state
6	Providing home-visiting programs statewide to at-risk families to improve parenting skills and prevent child abuse and neglect

# QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Beyond the perceived feasibility from professionals, data from surveys of the general population of Mississippi indicate strong support for the implementation of these interventions. Among general population samples, support for public pre-kindergarten has remained high in Mississippi over time.

A strong majority of general population respondents support tax increases to fund public pre-kindergarten programs. This majority support remains high over time and has withstood national recession, as illustrated in the line graph at right. [1, 2, 3]

Support for Publicly Funded PreK Over Time



According to the 2020 Kids Count Factbook, during the 2019-2020 school year there were approximately 8,924 of the 37,647 four-year-olds in Mississippi enrolled in public pre-kindergarten programs, representing 24 percent of this population. Of those enrolled in public programs, approximately 3,016 were enrolled in the state-funded Mississippi Early Learning Collaboratives, which led Mississippi to be recognized by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) as one of four states to meet all of NIEER's ten quality standards for early childhood education.

Enrollment in the Collaboratives is limited by the degree of state funds appropriated to support the program. The original appropriation for the Collaboratives for 2014-2015 was approximately \$3 million. The annual appropriation was raised to \$4 million in 2016, \$6.5 million in 2018, \$6.7 million in 2019, and \$16 million for 2021. This latter increase is estimated to allow the state to serve approximately 6,000 children.

## Early Childhood Education Quality Improvement Systems

Clearly, many stakeholders in Mississippi involved in developing and implementing early childhood education (ECE) programs agree that evaluating the quality of public preschool/childcare settings is extremely important to creating a system designed to serve children effectively. While there is consensus among parents, policymakers, and professionals on the importance of this metric, the definition of quality in ECE is inconsistent and varies across programs. In preschool, quality is usually measured by assessing adult to child ratios, type of curriculum, teacher qualifications, length of school day and teacher/student interactions, all grouped together into one metric. On the other hand, in kindergarten to third grade (K-3), assessing teachers, the schools or student achievement informs the definition of quality in this system. In general, the definitions of quality usually include four main components:

- Structural Elements – length of school day, teacher education/degree/training, and teacher-student ratios
- Features of the classroom environment – classroom organization, cleanliness, availability of learning and play materials and the daily schedule
- Teacher-student interaction – teacher's behavior, emotional warmth, language and tone during daily classroom activities
- Aggregate indices – Quality Rating and Improvement Systems

With no single definition of what quality means in ECE, it comes with no surprise that multiple tools have been developed to measure quality in early childhood across the country. In 2006, the Mississippi Legislature enacted a law requiring the development of a pilot quality rating system [4]. A quality rating system was implemented in 2007, referred to as the "Quality Stars Program," but was discontinued in 2016.

While there are some aspects of this previous quality rating and improvement system that are debatable, there was research conducted that provides some objective evidence on the impact of the system while it was in effect. One study using licensure data from the State Department of Health documented that centers participating in the system were more than three times less likely to have licensure violations than non-participating centers. In addition, the number of violations decreased as the ratings increased [5].





## References

- 1: Mississippi Center for Education Innovation (2010)
- 2: Mississippi Kids Count (2007)
- 3: Survey of Mississippi Issues Impacting Children (2019)
- 4: Mississippi Code § 43-1-65
- 5: [https://msdatapoint.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/ChildcareViolationsBrief-FINAL-1\\_10\\_18.pdf](https://msdatapoint.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/ChildcareViolationsBrief-FINAL-1_10_18.pdf)
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