

# Mixed Delivery in Minnesota: Lessons Learned from the Action Lab Project and Suggested Strategies for Future Success

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Wei-Bing Chen, Mandy Reeve, Karin Ganz, and Jennifer Tschantz (SRI Education)

*The goal of Minnesota’s Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five (PDG B-5) is to “make it easier for children and families – particularly the ones furthest from opportunity – to get what they need to thrive.” Minnesota has focused on developing coordinated state- and local-level early care and education (ECE) systems that align funding, programs, and services in an approach known as mixed delivery. The Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) contracted with partners<sup>1</sup> to design, lead, and implement Mixed Delivery Action Labs in seven local Minnesota communities to build local capacity to strengthen mixed delivery and ensure that community voice and lived experience inform mixed delivery efforts moving forward. **This brief summarizes lessons learned from the Mixed Delivery Action Lab project and suggests strategies that DCYF and other state agencies can use to promote mixed delivery success. Additional details can be found in the [full project report](#).***

## Participating communities included:

- Cook County
- Itasca County
- Mankato
- Rochester
- Thief River Falls
- Wilmar
- Worthington

## Mixed Delivery in Minnesota

Families and children navigate a variety of early learning programs and services from birth to kindergarten entry, to meet their needs. These programs are often siloed, being funded through separate mechanisms with varying eligibility and enrollment requirements. When programs do not collaborate, it can impact their availability to families and reduce access.

The programs and settings that young children are in prior to kindergarten are part of:

- formal systems (e.g., licensed family- and center-based child care, Head Start, early childhood special education, school districts);
- informal systems (e.g., Family Friend and Neighbor [FFN] care); or
- a combination of both.

An early care and education (ECE) mixed delivery system utilizes a combination of public and private funding to deliver programs and services in a variety of settings to maximize access to high-quality affordable options for all children through kindergarten entry.

<sup>1</sup> Partners included [SRI Education](#), [Third Sector Capital Partners](#), [The Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement](#) at the University of Minnesota, and state partners from the [Department of Children, Youth, and Families](#), the [Minnesota Department of Education](#), and the [Minnesota Children’s Cabinet](#).

## Mixed Delivery Action Labs

The purpose of the Mixed Delivery Action Lab project was to broaden and deepen the state’s approach to building ECE mixed delivery systems. The Mixed Delivery Action Labs were a forum in which members of local communities could organically identify challenges, set goals and problem-solve together, and plan for increasing mixed delivery of services and programs.

## Cross-Community Successes and Challenges

### *Variability in Mixed-Delivery Across Communities*

Mixed Delivery Action Lab communities varied in how they defined and conceptualized mixed delivery. The idea of formal mixed delivery, in which ECE providers across the system coordinate services and share resources through shared family access, staffing, professional development, or funding, did not come to fruition during this short pilot. The issue of schools, Head Start, and child care competing to serve 4-year-old children was in the background of the project and created barriers to collaboration. The challenges that community members identified and chose to work on reflected the early state of partnership in many locales.

Participants in many communities expressed that having dedicated support from an outside project team was the catalyst for their community members coming together in a structured way. The project team heard from participants and directly observed that the human and financial resources of this project benefited the local communities, as few communities have dedicated resources to put toward coordination work. Individuals also had little capacity outside of their “day jobs” to participate in or co-lead a community process.

### *Strengthening Mixed-Delivery Is Iterative*

Almost all Mixed Delivery Action Lab participants recognized that strengthening mixed delivery is challenging but important work. Moving forward, they would like to see a **deeper understanding of mixed delivery among service providers and the broader community**, leading to shared goals around best meeting families’ needs and more integrated service delivery in their communities.

*“I would like the community at large to understand the mixed delivery concept and be able to access programs and sites that meet their needs.”*

*“Ideally, we would be able to have shared professional development so that all children have access to licensed teachers’ birth through kindergarten entry. I would like to see funding mechanisms in place that would enhance the collaboration and integrated funding to sustain both school and child care centers so that the needs of all children and their families are met.”*

Participants also described how their local communities **need more resources** to support mixed delivery. This includes **financial resources to support collaboration, and opportunities to share experiences with others** outside of their communities.

Ideas from this project work are permeating their way into how the larger DCYF team is working together.

—DCYF staff

*“[I would like] Resources to continue to support innovative thinking around how to collaborate across environments. This includes fiscal resources to be able to strengthen shared use of curriculum, assessment, and coaching support.”*

## Suggested Strategies for Future Success

Below are two overarching strategies suggested for future mixed delivery success. These strategies are based on the project team’s reflections from community sessions, direct input from participants through session and end-of-project surveys, and feedback collected through reflection meetings with state partners and participants. The strategies also reflect the project team’s expertise and experience in working on mixed delivery in other states.

### **Strengthen and Model ECE System Coordination Within DCYF and Between State Agencies**

- **Build on the establishment of DCYF by modeling collaboration** and leveraging the opportunity to organize many ECE programs under one agency while also strengthening cross-agency collaborations (e.g., between DCYF, Minnesota Department of Education, and Department of Employment and Economic Development).
  - **Increase cross-program and cross-agency communication as well as communication *within* programs about mixed delivery.** Include state staff from the range of ECE programs (e.g., child care, voluntary prekindergarten [VPK], Head Start, early childhood special education, and others) in regular presentations and communications regarding the what, why, and how of implementing mixed delivery of services. Also recognize that state staff within programs are not always aware of ongoing efforts.
  - **Similarly, engage state staff from all ECE programs to hear information and give input when major initiatives or policy changes are being designed and launched**, such as the redesign of the [Quality Rating and Improvement System \(QRIS\), Parent Aware](#). This represents an opportunity for alignment of quality standards across ECE programs.
  - **At the state level, model collaborations that are desired at the local level.** For example, include a leader from child care licensing, alongside those from VPK and Head Start, when making presentations to local communities on mixed delivery of ECE for 4-year-old children. This will ensure there is state-level representation of child care interests and that a three-way partnership is modeled for local program staff.
- **Continue aligning program, policy, and funding requirements across ECE programs to support mixed delivery.**
  - **Expand the state’s existing ECE collaboration grids—[Head Start and Local Educational Agency \(LEA\) Collaboration Grid for Providing Services to Children with Disabilities in Part B](#) and [Head Start and LEA Collaboration Grid for Providing Services to Children with Disabilities in Part C \(Birth to 3\)](#)—to include other ECE**

program types. Through this process, identify ways to reduce misalignment across ECE programs as well as offer technical assistance and mediation support for programs/communities.

- To facilitate expanding the grids, conduct an analysis of the various ECE program and funding requirements to identify and address unintended barriers to mixed delivery (e.g., variation in access to public funding and unaligned program standards).
- **Have ECE agencies and programs coordinate their efforts to strengthen program quality and do so by leveraging existing investments.**<sup>2</sup> For example:
  - Coordinate and streamline existing efforts to support and strengthen the child care industry, such as the [Child Care Wayfinder](#), [Great Start Compensation Program](#), and [Child Care Economic Development Program](#), and identify opportunities within these initiatives to promote mixed delivery.
  - Expand state efforts to address the ECE workforce shortage with consideration of all ECE settings, including leveraging preparation programs like [Empower to Educate](#).
  - Coordinate and streamline [Develop](#) and Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (PELSB) professional development reporting systems to recognize approved professional learning courses and training documentation. This will enable professionals to avoid submission duplication. Work across ECE programs to create individualized training pathways that are less arduous than current offerings.
- **Better understand, document, and make transparent the ECE funding landscape. Also persist in developing cross-system funding approaches** that promote ECE mixed delivery, similar to the Walz-Flanagan Administration’s Fiscal Year 2024 proposed expansion of mixed delivery through [dedicated VPK funding](#) for Head Start and child care.
  - As part of developing a next legislative proposal, consider holding community engagement activities to share information, road-test ideas, and gather interest-holder feedback.
- **Promote the [Minnesota Children’s Fiscal Map](#) across ECE programs** at the state level and identify resources within the tool that can be used by local communities to support program implementation and build mixed delivery partnerships. Determine if increased messaging or clarifications to the Children’s Fiscal Map are needed to help improve usability of the tool. Also undertake cross-program and cross-agency review of how ECE funding is awarded to local

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<sup>2</sup> Some of these existing investments have built-in barriers to leveraging them for mixed-delivery purposes. For example, the statute authorizing Wayfinder specifies that it is to help people start, sustain, or expand *licensed* child care programs. As agencies and programs work to coordinate efforts, it will be important to identify those structural barriers to coordination and work to change them, which may require more than administrative action.

communities and consider if any changes can be made that will incentivize and facilitate mixed delivery partnerships.

## ***Provide Universal, Targeted, and Intensive Supports to Local Communities to Promote Minnesota's Vision for ECE Mixed Delivery***

DCYF can promote and scale up Minnesota's vision for ECE mixed delivery using a tiered framework of universal, targeted, and intensive supports to local communities.

### ■ **Provide universal supports such as:**

- **Clear and regular communication of the vision for mixed delivery** that is inclusive of all ECE program types and settings. There is a lack of awareness or misunderstanding of state efforts and initiatives, and state leaders could **develop and implement a strategic communication plan** for use with local communities. In the words of one Mixed Delivery Action Lab participant, *"Get the word out about what mixed delivery is!"*
- **Identification and active sharing of examples of successful local mixed delivery partnerships.** Local communities may be more motivated to prioritize partnership and work through challenges when the benefits of doing so are demonstrated for them. They may also experience more success when there is a clear path laid by others to follow. Participants expressed interest in learning from communities that have experienced success.

*"I would like to see models from other places that are working. I would like the opportunity to do site visits or networking opportunities with successful mixed delivery communities."*

*"[I would like] Examples of how mixed delivery is working, can't see how it will work in my community because I don't understand it. The school has a big building that could house a child care center, but there was historically a lot of clashing between child care and [the] school district ... Child care does not want to send families to screenings, they don't want to tell families about resources offered through the school district because they can't compete with free."*

For each example, articulate the overall benefits of a mixed delivery partnership, solutions to any funding or other challenges, and what may be unique to that community or partnership versus what can be transferred to other communities.

- **Provide targeted supports such as ongoing opportunities for groups of local communities to network and share learning as well as engage in feedback with the state about mixed delivery (e.g., communities of practice).** Mixed Delivery Action Lab participants overwhelmingly reported interest in this idea.

*"I want to continue to collaborate with other EC stakeholders. We want to build relationships so that we can encourage and support one another rather than view each other as competitors."*

*“I am interested in networking with people where mixed delivery is already working.”*

- **Use information gathered through the targeted supports to identify individual local communities that could benefit from intensive support tailored to their needs.**
- **Work with communities to implement a pilot intended to scale up a previously identified success or solve a particular problem.** Example challenges include promoting collaborative ways for ECE programs across types to access public funding; identifying and addressing specific gaps in state-to-local communication; and supporting community-based child care to stay healthy as businesses. ECE providers need to see what is possible, and it can be helpful to have the specific steps to reach a goal modeled for them. Successful efforts can then be further scaled up in an iterative way and highlighted through the strategic communications plan. In the words of one Mixed Delivery Action Lab participant, community members would like to see *“funding mechanisms in place that would enhance the collaboration and integrated funding to sustain both school and child care centers so that the needs of children and their families are met.”*
  - **Additionally, create a process for communities to request intensive support.** It may be beneficial to communities to receive intensive support when they are in the beginning stages of creating their first mixed delivery partnership or when they encounter a barrier they cannot address on their own.



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Learn more on Minnesota's Preschool Development Grant webpage: <https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/early/preschqr/>