



From Barriers to Breakthrough: A Better Future for Child Care Licensing and Quality

WeVision Minnesota Final Report

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Executive Summary

Minnesota’s early care and education (ECE) system is not delivering what families, educators, and program leaders say they need. Families pay high costs yet cannot reliably count on quality in every community or setting, and providers are navigating fragmented rules, underfunding, and punitive systems that make it “impossible” to deliver the level of quality ECE they aspire to. As one parent put it, “quality child care should be standard,” not something families have to fight for or get lucky to find. Together, families, educators, and community leaders have articulated a clear vision: reliable, high-quality ECE should be a standard every family can access, with governance and accountability shared with those closest to children.

This report translates that vision into a concrete, actionable framework for Minnesota. It proposes a simplified landscape of child care options, a field-led governance structure with real authority, and a coherent set of quality pathways and supports that align expectations, funding, and accountability. The recommendations do not replace the need for greater public investment; instead, they ensure that current and future investments work better by clarifying options for families, rebuilding trust with providers, and involving those closest to children in governance. When this happens, it makes it easier for all to see resources being used in ways they can believe in.

Clear Options and Matched Expectations (Recommendation 1)

Minnesota families currently face a confusing mix of “licensed,” “rated,” and informal arrangements, with no clear signal about who is responsible for safety, who is responsible for quality, or what level of public funding each option is resourced to offer. Recommendation 1 responds by establishing three clearly defined options—Health & Safety Licensed Programs, Recognized Early Care & Education programs, and Trusted Caregivers—so everyone understands the distinct role of each. Health & Safety Licensed becomes the safety floor, Recognized Early Care & Education Programs are resourced and held accountable for delivering quality on top of meeting health and safety expectations, and the Trusted Caregivers designation acknowledges and supports unregulated care happening in communities. Public funding levels are explicitly matched to what the state expects each option to provide, so ultimately when the system is fully resourced, families are not forced to choose between affordability and quality, and programs are not set up to fail.

A Board That Shifts Power and Builds Trust (Recommendation 2)

Today's decision-making structure leaves families, program leaders, and educators feeling shut out, with rules that "just show up," feedback that disappears into agencies, and hearings that feel performative rather than impactful. Recommendation 2 proposes a Minnesota Board of Early Care and Education—a public body where educators, program leaders, families, and community experts hold real decision-making seats. The Board would hold authority over core elements of Minnesota's ECE system, including quality pathways and recognition, educator and program leader standards, and oversight of key supports, while advising on legislation and budgets and requiring agencies to either implement its recommendations or explain departures publicly. Modeled on effective boards in other fields, it is designed to be diverse, insulated from political swings, and explicitly charged with monitoring impacts on equity, child outcomes, program supply, and workforce stability.

Quality Pathways, Right-sized Licensing, and Aligned Supports (Recommendations 3, 3a, 3b, 3c)

Within the regulated options outlined in Recommendation 1, today's compliance-heavy regulatory and quality landscape leaves program leaders navigating unclear expectations, excessive paperwork, fear of penalties, and lack of partnership and support for growth-oriented accountability. Recommendation 3 lays out a coherent statewide pathways structure in which Health & Safety Licensing is a clear floor, and where quality is pursued through growth-oriented, relational supports and multiple credible pathways that programs can choose from.

- Recommendation 3a focuses licensing squarely on what keeps children safe, updating regulations and implementation practices so they are clear, proportional, and separated from quality measures.
- Recommendation 3b creates an industry-led recognition system that gives licensed programs more than one rigorous way to demonstrate quality, without lowering the bar. In addition to well-known national accreditations, the system allows flexible, innovative pathways designed for programs whose models do not fit standard accreditation, while still requiring shared standards, comparable evidence of practice, and arm's-length third-party validation so families and the public can trust the results.
- Recommendation 3c organizes supports around this recognition framework, calling for a comprehensive mapping and consolidation of existing initiatives so that limited resources go deep, not wide, to help programs become and stay recognized, with the Board guiding priorities over time.

A Framework Ready for Action

At its core, this framework is about finally building a system that delivers what parents say they want: reliable, high-quality ECE options in every community. Parents in this process were clear; they want environments where their children thrive, without having to trade off affordability against quality or decode a maze of labels to figure out what assurances are in place.

Program leaders and educators were just as clear about wanting to offer that level of quality, but being blocked by chronic underfunding, layers of complexity, and systems that feel more like policing than partnership. They described being “crushed under all these burdens,” navigating a “never-ending maze,” and trying to meet expectations that far exceed the resources they receive.

These recommendations respond directly by creating a set of clear options that make sense to families; moving decisions about quality pathways and supports into a public Board where families and educators hold real power; and reorganizing licensing, quality recognition, and supports so programs are set up to deliver the kinds of relationships and learning experiences parents want and need for their children.

If leaders push to enact this framework, Minnesota can move from decades of patchwork fixes to an ECE system where parents can see how their state is making good on what they have been asking for and where those providing ECE can finally work in a system that makes the quality they aspire to both possible and sustainable.





Forward

At Think Small, we believe in the power of bold ideas and collaboration to build a strong system of early care and education. When we first learned of the WeVision EarlyEd initiative and considered what it might mean for Minnesota, we saw it as a chance to explore important questions: *How can we better align family needs, workforce realities, and community priorities to create a system that is both equitable and sustainable? Is now the time to move beyond making incremental adjustments and make the ideal early care and education system a reality?*

Over the past year, our work was centered on a deep collaboration and engagement process focused on the WeVision EarlyEd model and its potential for Minnesota. This report reflects the voices of families, educators, and early care and education community leaders who came together to move beyond the status quo and reimagine a system that truly works for all. The findings show what we already know: our current system is overly complex and overlooks the needs of those most affected — children, their families, and their educators. Yet, there is hope. Those closest to the work have spoken up about what matters most, offering a vision for what a well-functioning, well-funded, people-centered system could look like for Minnesota.

I invite you to read this report with both curiosity and commitment. Together, we can build a system and a future where every child in Minnesota has the opportunity to thrive, every family has the support they need, and every educator has the resources necessary to provide the highest quality early care and education to Minnesota's youngest learners.

Cisa Keller

President & CEO, Think Small

Introduction

Minnesota is ready to move boldly to improve the quality of all early care and education (ECE) programs in the state, regardless of setting or funding source. Momentum is gathering among educators, families, and advocates around a new vision for an ECE system that empowers professionals while ensuring health, safety, and quality for children. But without shared definitions, clear governance, and meaningful accountability, progress will remain fragile and the outcomes children, families, and ECE programs need will not be realized.

This work is urgent because of the daily realities families and ECE programs experience. Across Minnesota, outcomes for young children are still shaped by family income and ZIP code. Parents consistently say they want affordable, high-quality options. Programs want to deliver quality but face chronic underfunding, overwhelming complexity, and punitive systems. With broad agreement that sweeping change is needed, Minnesota has an opportunity to take big strides forward.

How These Recommendations Were Developed

Against this backdrop, Think Small secured a grant from Bainum Family Foundation to bring together nearly 40 dedicated early educators, program leaders, and other field experts to map a new path forward for Minnesota's ECE system. The group set guiding principles for their work together: center effectiveness for children, search for the simplest solutions, focus on equity, and align with policy embedded in other systems.

In addition to the group meetings, a statewide grassroots engagement effort reached roughly 900 people across Minnesota's early childhood landscape, including families, educators, and community partners. Engagement activities ranged from large conference presentations and roundtables to smaller in-person and virtual meetings, focus groups, and tabling at community events, creating multiple opportunities for dialogue, questions, and feedback. Participants were invited to define quality, share their experiences with licensing and Parent Aware, and describe what an ideal ECE system would look like, with intentional outreach to racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse communities.

The intended impact of these recommendations is simple and ambitious: build the ECE system Minnesota's children and families need and deserve. Programs should be able to focus on children, not paperwork. Licensing should ensure health and safety without being overbearing or unnecessarily punitive. Quality should be defined by high, equitable standards set by the field itself, and accountability mechanisms should be meaningful. Parents, programs, and others with a vested interest in children's outcomes should play a key role in governing the system. If advanced into policy and practice, the changes recommended in this report will open more doors for families seeking affordable, quality ECE and will set the stage for true transformation. Together, the following sections provide a clear framework and starting point for legislation to make that vision real.

Minnesota's Early Care and Education Context and Strengths

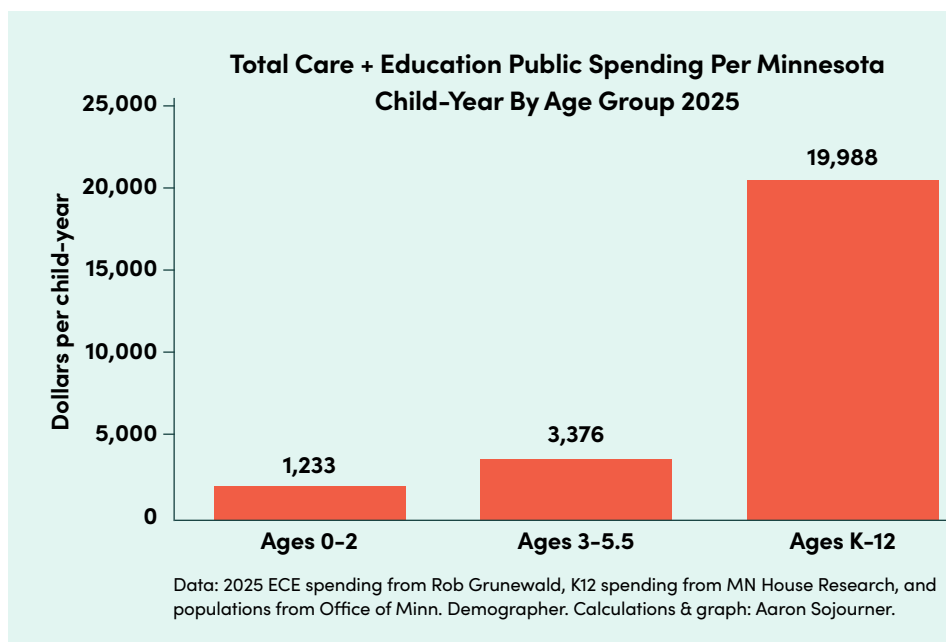
Minnesota enters this conversation with important assets, which throughout the process were described as providing the scaffolding to support a clean, uncluttered workspace where the work groups could develop recommendations. A description of that scaffolding follows.

The state's Great Start Task Force has provided a clear, supported blueprint for action, and leaders have already begun putting resources, programs, and new policy projects in place to advance its recommendations. Today, there is stronger bipartisan support than ever for addressing the persistent lack of affordable, quality care for young children. Growing public awareness and advocacy mean the issues facing children, families, and the sector are widely understood, setting the stage for broad accountability and shared solutions. Ongoing reforms such as the Parent Aware Redesign, the Child Care Licensing Modernization Project (which grew out of the Licensed Family Child Care Task Force), and targeted investments in the workforce mean that Minnesota is not starting from scratch and signal readiness to do things differently. These efforts contain promising elements, but each advances only part of the puzzle, and none yet maps a course toward a fundamentally transformed ECE system.

Minnesota's legacy in ECE is another strength. The state is well known for its commitment to children and its history of policy innovation in the field. At the same time, disparities in access to quality ECE by race, geography, and family income persist. This moment represents a rare opportunity to close gaps, build on what is working, and demonstrate real policy leadership for children and families.

Momentum for bold reform is building. Programs, parents, and policymakers are increasingly unified behind a straightforward agenda: every child in Minnesota deserves access to quality ECE. Multiple coalitions and advocacy groups in and beyond the ECE field are coming together to push for aligned action and investment, increasing the likelihood that Minnesota can move from small fixes to real, lasting change.

“Public investment in children under age five continues to lag far behind per-capita spending for school-age children.”



Still, challenges are significant. Public investment in children under age five continues to lag far behind per-capita spending for school-age children. The business model for ECE programs is broken. Many Minnesotans have not yet fully embraced the science of early brain development and the necessity of robust public investment to match children's needs. Skepticism about the sector's role and readiness for accountability also remains a barrier. Building solutions that center both equity and excellence, and that inspire shared ownership and urgency, will define Minnesota's next ECE chapter.

Guide to Language Used in This Report

Consistent with the Bainum Family Foundation's WeVision EarlyEd project which inspired this work in Minnesota, we are very intentional about the language used in this report. The terminology used to describe the ECE field often reflects outdated mindsets. We use the following terminology through this report (paraphrased from WeVision EarlyEd's *It is Possible: Making the Ideal Child Care Real*, March 2025):

- **Child care:** situations in which families, caregivers, and/or early childhood educators are responsible for the care and development of young children for a significant portion of the day. In the WeVision EarlyEd model, "child care" includes ECE programs and Trusted Caregivers.
- **Early care and education (ECE):** A specific child care option that focuses on supporting child and program outcomes, typically outside the child's home. ECE is designed to support the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development of young children through experiences facilitated by early childhood educators. We also refer to this option as **ECE programs**, or just "**programs**." (i.e., licensed family child care, center, school-based child care, and Head Start programs)
- **Trusted Caregiver:** A specific child care option where a child or small group of children are cared for by a family member; a trusted community member (i.e., individual, organization, or network); or a nanny or an au pair. Trusted Caregivers must meet families' caregiving expectations and comply with state/federal laws that protect the welfare of children, but they are not licensed and they are not considered ECE programs.
- **Proximity Experts:** Families, educators, program leaders, and advocates involved with WeVision EarlyEd whose expertise informs these recommendations. These people have specialized knowledge and lived experience within the child care field.

The following terms were also used in the Minnesota project and thus this report:

- **Educator/early educator:** A person working directly with children in an ECE program.
- **Program leader:** A person working in an ECE program in an administrative or leadership role.

Finally, we want to clarify the use of a key term used throughout this report:

- **Equitable vs. Equal/equality:** In the early childhood space, we want to clearly state that what is "equitable" is that which meets the needs of a particular child, family, and/or educator, so that all children and families have access to quality care that meets their needs. By definition, something that is equitable may not necessarily be "equal" (which means it's exactly the same for everyone). Throughout this report and the Minnesota work, we have emphasized equitable solutions.

WeVision EarlyEd Core Concepts: Addressing Gaps

The Great Start Task Force defined effective ECE with three pillars: equitable standards with growth-oriented accountability, clear and consistent regulations, and a cohesive infrastructure that supports programs statewide. While this offers Minnesota a compelling vision, it does not fully answer how to deliver these components in practice. WeVision EarlyEd helps to fill this gap.

WeVision EarlyEd is a national effort funded by Bainum Family Foundation. It began with a human-centered design process involving proximity experts to define the ideal child care system. Together, these proximity experts identified the elements of an ideal system, and those elements were further vetted around the country by thousands of additional individuals with direct experience in the ECE field. The Minnesota process grows out of and builds on this foundation, adapting it to Minnesota's needs, goals, and policy context.

WeVision proposes a bold shift toward industry-led standards and governance, following the model used by many other professions. Instead of layering more complexity onto an already fragmented system, WeVision champions simplicity by offering families two clear options: ECE programs across all regulated settings (child care centers, licensed family child care homes, Head Start, and schools) and Trusted Caregivers. WeVision also offers a single set of expectations for all ECE programs. Licensing is refocused squarely on health and safety, while industry-led standards and measures provide accountability and drive continuous quality improvement.

WeVision's approach is not only conceptual. Bainum Family Foundation brought these concepts to life in 22 Solutions Lab sites in Arkansas, Colorado, Washington, D.C., Florida, Maryland, Michigan, Montana, North Carolina, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. Recently, Minnesota's WeVision work groups heard directly from ECE programs piloting this approach. The panelists' excitement and optimism about professionalizing the field reinforced the power of putting educators and programs in a leading role and informed the recommendations in this report.

Timing is critical. WeVision helps Minnesota plan for the ECE system families and programs will need in the future, not just react to today's problems. It pushes the state to design policies that are ready for what comes next, instead of patching the current system year by year. Families, programs, and advocates are asking for the very elements WeVision puts forward. With increased alignment, Minnesota can take inspiration from this approach and build out what works for diverse communities. The challenge and the opportunity will be maintaining simplicity as changes roll out. If Minnesota heeds this guidance in statute, budgets, and implementation, the state can deliver a system that is accessible and built for every child and family.

How to Use This Report

The recommendations that follow draw on the WeVision EarlyEd model and extensive input from families, educators, and program leaders across Minnesota. Each recommendation includes community evidence and needs, a rationale and vision, and specific policy directions to guide statutory changes, appropriations, and implementation. Policymakers and agency leaders can use these elements as a starting framework for action.

Overarching Vision for Minnesota's Early Care and Education System

In Minnesota, having reliable, quality ECE should be standard, something every family can access, without having to be in the right income bracket or ZIP code. Programs share this vision and want to offer consistent, nurturing, developmentally rich care, but are working in systems that too often make that impossible to offer or sustain. Parents describe a system that should feel simple, fair, and trustworthy, but too often feels confusing, uneven, and out of reach.

What parents say they need

Parents emphasized the need for real options so children can be in environments where they thrive:

"It would be nice if there were some in-home child care and there were child care centers ... because some kids would thrive better being in a home ... where they can get that one-on-one attention. Maybe they just thrive better in that environment. You know, having that type of like, having options."

Parents stressed that they should not have to choose between affordability and quality for their children:

"Quality should be consistent ... our children are not Coach bags or Target bags ... It should be a standard of quality. And it should be high for our children ... We already pay a lot of money for daycare ..."

"There should be affordability, but not at the expense of quality, because ... that shouldn't be a choice you have to make as a parent."

What This Vision Requires

Making this vision real will ultimately require Minnesota to increase public investment to pay the true cost of providing quality ECE to ensure fair earnings and sustainable ECE businesses, so educators can stay in this work over time. Related efforts are working to advance this financing side of the work, expanding public investment, so ECE is more affordable for families, quality is high for children, and earnings are fair for educators.

At the same time, efforts to increase public investment will not succeed without reforms to governance, regulations, and accountability that build public trust and demonstrate that resources are being used effectively. This work builds on that foundation by focusing on the pieces this group can move now: simplifying and right-sizing regulations, defining clear and flexible quality pathways, and creating governance that keeps families and providers at the center. The recommendations that follow translate this vision into concrete changes in regulations, quality recognition, and governance so that, as this movement progresses, Minnesota's ECE system is ready to deliver what parents are calling for.

"Making this vision real will ultimately require Minnesota to increase public investment to pay the true cost of providing quality ECE to ensure fair earnings and sustainable ECE businesses, so educators can stay in this work over time."

Recommendation #1: Clear and Funded Child Care Options for Every Family

Options Assured by Families



Recognized ECE Program
Center-Based



Recognized ECE Program
Home-Based



Recognized ECE Program
School-Based



Industry-led Assurance
Early Care & Education Programs meet state licensing rules for health and safety and industry-led quality standards; receive public funding aligned with the cost of delivering quality ECE.



Health & Safety Licensed Program

Home or center meets state licensing rules for health and safety; quality defined by families.



Trusted Caregiver

*(family, friend, neighbor, nanny, etc.)
Not regulated. Health, safety, and quality are defined by the family.*



Family-led Assurance

Families take the lead in defining and monitoring quality, with health and safety assured either by state licensing or by the family; graduated public funding matches expectations.

Community Evidence and Needs

Process participants described a current reality where reliable, safe, quality care is not yet a basic expectation, where ECE programs are asked to do more than the system makes possible, and where Trusted Caregivers are an important piece of the system.

Parents want reliable quality to be the norm, not a stroke of luck.

"I think having reliable, quality child care should be ... standard and something that everyone has access to and the systems should make that accessible and possible for everyone. Like that's how it should be. And ... I know that's how it works in a lot of other countries and it's not how it works here. And that, I think, is a problem. Like I think that should be the standard."

Program leaders are committed to quality but blocked by underfunding and complexity.

"It is complicated for providers because we are getting so many rules and regulations and so much complexity on top of extreme underfunding ... I do think most providers are grounded in wanting to be able to deliver quality care, but it is hard."

Families choose Family, Friend, and Neighbor care because they trust the caregivers.

"Parents use family, friend, and neighbor care because they value having a trusted family member, someone who understands their child's needs and who can provide care at their level."

Rationale and Vision

Minnesota can only deliver on its promise to children and families by creating an ECE system that is effective, simple for families to navigate, and reliably safe and high quality no matter where a family lives or what type of program they use. Today, fragmented funding and mixed signals about what "licensed" and "quality" mean leave families confused about their choices and unsure who is responsible for assuring quality. In addition, providers are asked to meet expectations that are not matched by the resources they receive.

This recommendation responds by establishing a clear landscape of options—Health & Safety Licensed programs, Recognized Early Care & Education Programs, and Trusted Caregivers—so everyone understands the distinct role of each. For regulated programs, it separates the state's safety role from industry-led quality recognition and then aligns public funding with what the state is asking each type of program to deliver, instead of expecting quality ECE to be provided on a basic licensing budget.

The vision is that families see a short list of clearly described options, know what assurances are provided and by whom, and can choose care that fits their needs and values without having to decode multiple systems. At the same time, providers operate within expectations that are transparent and realistic, and public leaders can see how different levels of regulation and funding fit together as part of one coherent ECE system.



The Policy Direction: Clear Options and Matched Expectations

The table below summarizes the recommended options, showing responsibility for safety and quality assurance, and how public funding expectations match what each option is asked to provide.

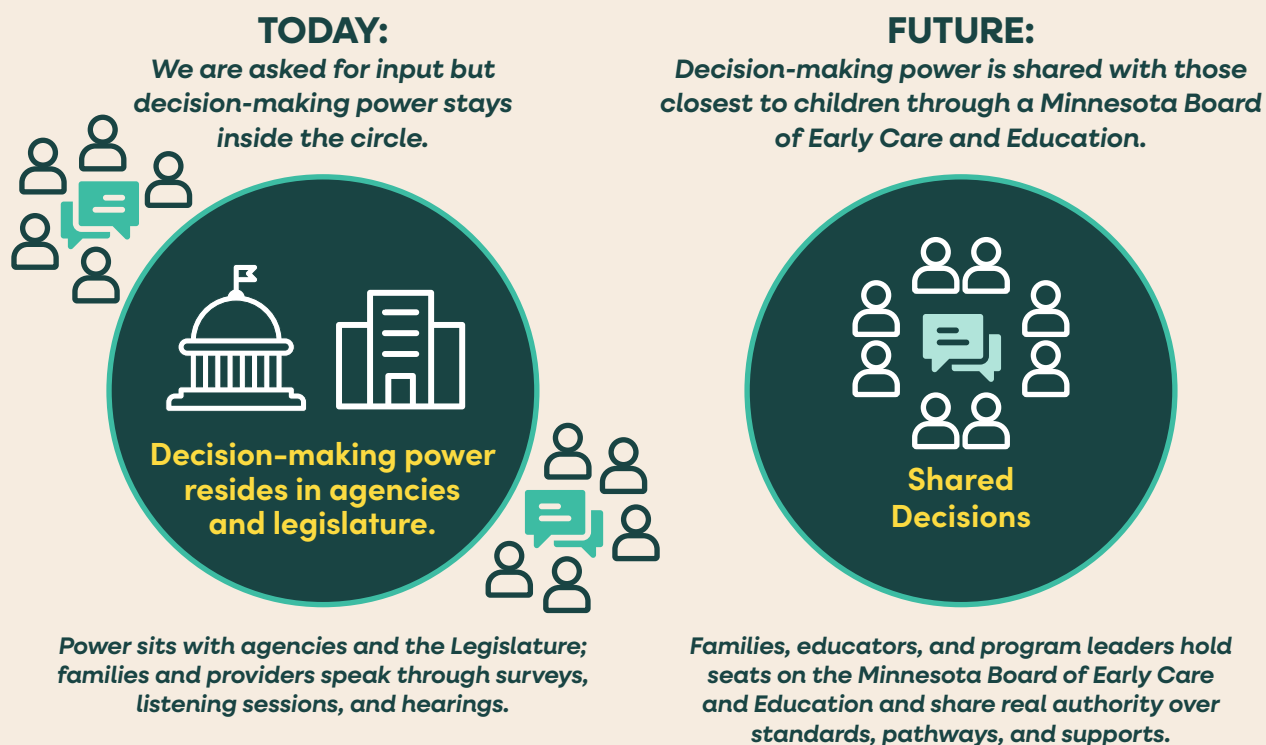
| REGULATED PROGRAMS | UNREGULATED OPTION |
|--|--|
| <p>Licensed (Health & Safety Only)</p> <p>Families choose care in a licensed center or home.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject to state health and safety regulations, as described in Recommendation 3a. • Government does not assure quality; families are responsible for judging whether the care meets their expectations for quality. • Public funding expectations are aligned with this role: programs receive resources sufficient to meet health and safety requirements, but not the full cost of delivering a comprehensive quality ECE experience. | <p>Trusted Caregiver</p> <p>Families choose care from a relative, friend, neighbor, nanny, or community member.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government does not regulate health, safety, or quality; families are responsible for judging whether the care meets their expectations for quality. • Public funding expectations are aligned with this role: caregivers receive some public funding. |
| <p>Recognized Early Care & Education Program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject to state health and safety regulations, as described in Recommendation 3a. • Quality assurance via industry-led quality recognition framework described in Recommendation 3b. • Public funding is explicitly matched to expectations: these programs are funded based on the cost of delivering quality ECE, including fair earnings for staff and family child care owners. | |

What Will Be Different

If policymakers adopt this recommendation, Minnesota's ECE landscape will be easier to see, easier to understand, and better aligned with what families and providers said they need.

- Families statewide will see a clear layout of options described consistently, each with transparent information about who is responsible for safety.
- "Licensed" will be understood as a necessary safety baseline, not a stand-in for quality, so families no longer assume that a license means their child is in a learning environment and providers are no longer evaluated against expectations that licensing was never designed to meet.
- Recognized Early Care & Education Programs will be clearly identified as the options that are both held to and resourced for quality ECE, including fair earnings for educators, instead of being asked to deliver comprehensive quality on a basic licensing budget.
- Trusted Caregivers will be explicitly named and valued as a legitimate option in the landscape.
- For policymakers, decisions about where to invest can be made against a simple, shared frame: more funding for a given option comes with clearer expectations, and clearer expectations come with the level of funding needed to meet them, so families are not forced to choose between affordability and quality and programs are not set up to fail.

Recommendation 2: Establish a Minnesota Board of Early Care and Education



Today, formal authority over early care and education rests with the Legislature and the Department of Children, Youth, and Families, with no defined governing role for those closest to children. The current decision-making structure leaves families, program leaders, and educators feeling shut out, with rules that “just show up,” feedback that disappears into agencies, and hearings that feel performative rather than impactful. If Minnesota wants policies that match on-the-ground realities and rebuild trust, people closest to children must share clear, lasting authority over the system that governs them. This recommendation proposes a Minnesota Board of Early Care and Education—a public body where educators, program leaders, families, and community experts hold real decision-making seats within authority delegated by the Legislature.

Community Evidence and Needs

Process participants described how the current ECE decision-making environment feels on the ground, highlighting patterns of lack of transparency, performative engagement, and limited influence over final outcomes. They pointed to changes that arrive without clear explanation, hearings that feel more symbolic than impactful, and feedback processes that rarely lead to visible shifts in policy or implementation.

Participants described the Board as a way to replace opaque, agency-driven processes with transparent, shared decision-making:

“The thing we all really appreciated [about the Board idea] is that it felt like an opportunity for co-creation. It is a public entity, and there is transparency that goes along with that as opposed to how Minnesota currently creates rules—none of us really know where they come from. For example, the licensing re-write, each revision comes forward to us, and we’re not sure how it was created. Our feedback is maybe taken into consideration but we’re not really sure.”

They also described the Board as a way to move beyond performative hearings toward spaces where people with expertise hold power:

“I got to stand in front of a committee at our state capitol and I just felt like they were entertaining me because that was their job and they had to be there, not because they were actually interested in what I was saying. Which is just unfortunate because child care is such a building block to a working economy. So, this [a Board] just feels more hopeful that people are sitting in the seats that care to be and not because that’s just where they were placed.”

Participants echoed that providers are not well represented in current structures and saw the Board as a way to change that:

“I am excited about this idea ... It feels like such a stretch to go to a national organization where our providers aren’t overly involved or don’t feel represented in decision-making.”

Rationale and Vision

Minnesota's ECE system is governed by a patchwork of state and federal policies, with formal authority concentrated in the Legislature and the Department of Children, Youth, and Families and no defined governing role for those closest to children. Too often, decisions are removed from the perspectives and direct experience of educators, program leaders, families, and community experts, producing inefficiency, inconsistency, and policies that feel out of sync with on-the-ground realities. In this structure, practitioners and families are typically invited in only through time-limited advisory processes or public hearings, with no clear recourse when their feedback is not incorporated.

Process participants are clear: doing the other recommendations included here will not be enough if power remains where it is today. This recommendation therefore calls for a meaningful shift in the power dynamic by creating a Minnesota Board of Early Care and Education and asking the Legislature to vest core ECE system decisions in this field-led body, rather than locating that authority almost exclusively within a state agency. The Board is envisioned as a public body where educators, program leaders, families, and ECE experts hold real decision-making seats with clearly defined statutory authority.

Boards in other fields or states, like the North Carolina Child Care Commission and Minnesota's professional licensing boards, demonstrate how field-led governance can produce better-aligned policies, stronger accountability, and more durable results. The vision is a Board that is diverse, insulated from political swings, and explicitly charged with monitoring impacts on equity, child outcomes, ECE program supply, and workforce stability, while state agencies continue to administer programs and funds and the Legislature sets statutes and budgets. In this arrangement, those closest to children share clear, lasting authority over core elements of the system, creating governance that is transparent, trusted, and genuinely co-owned by the field it regulates.

Policy Direction: A Board with Real Independence and Authority

The Legislature should establish a Minnesota Board of Early Care and Education as a public body that brings educators, program leaders, families, and ECE experts together to set the direction for Minnesota's ECE system. The Board's role is to move key decisions out of closed rooms and into a transparent, field-anchored forum where those closest to children have real authority. The Board should be charged to:

- Set shared, industry-led standards for Recognized Early Care & Education Programs, including program expectations and educator and program leader standards, grounded in child development and equity.
- Approve multiple rigorous, industry-led recognition pathways, including national accreditations and field-led pathways.
- Provide direction on the overall framework for program supports (such as coaching, technical assistance, and quality improvement initiatives) so existing and new efforts align with the recognition system and reach the programs families rely on most.

- Provide review and approval over agency proposed statutory changes, major system changes, and other significant policy decisions related to ECE quality recognition pathways, ECE educator qualifications, and program supports.
- Monitor and publicly report on the impact of policies on child outcomes, ECE program supply, and workforce qualifications and stability, so legislators, the state agency, and communities can see whether changes are working.

State agencies would continue to administer programs and funds and manage day-to-day operations, but within a clearer framework set by the Board, making it easier for families, educators, and program leaders to understand who is responsible for what.

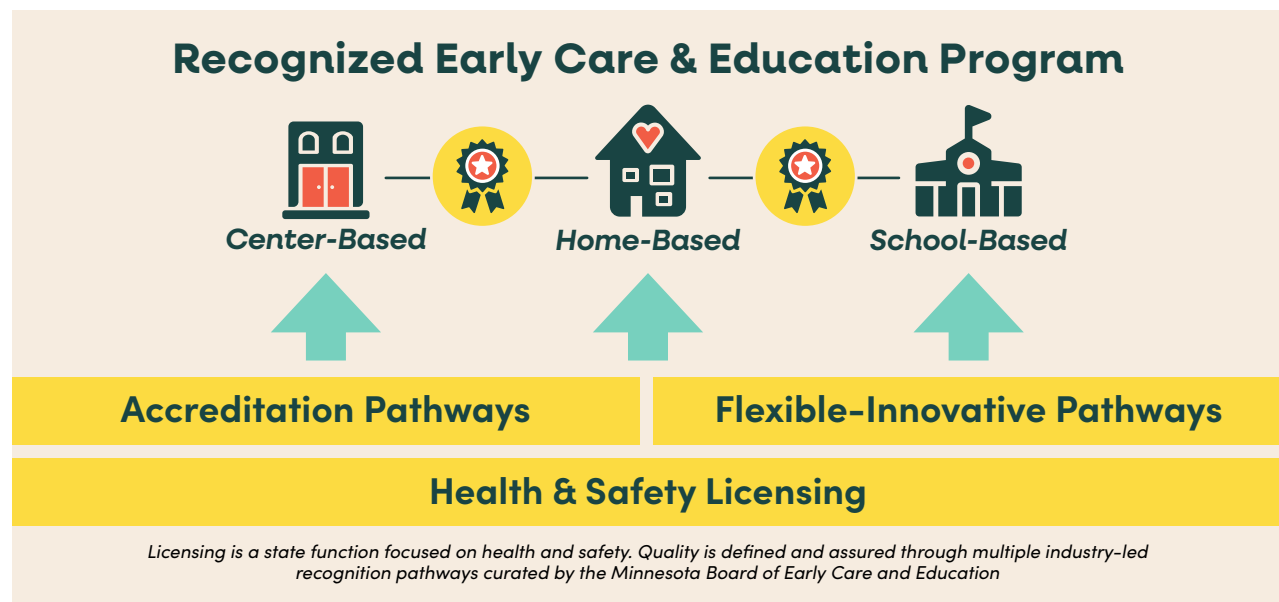
What will be different

- The authority for setting key ECE policies and standards will move toward those closest to children (educators, program leaders, families) making the Board the central locus of power rather than a peripheral advisory group.
- Administration of programs and funds will continue in state agencies, but within a clearer, more coherent framework set by the Board, increasing transparency and public trust in how resources are used.
- Educator and program leader standards will be shaped and updated in a public forum that centers field expertise, rather than being scattered across disconnected initiatives.
- Families, programs, and communities will have a stable governance structure that is insulated from short-term political swings, where they can bring their expertise and concerns and see how their input influences policy over time.
- Legislators will have a clear partner responsible for aligning standards, recognition pathways, and supports, making it easier to assess proposals, target investments, and hold the system accountable for results.



Recommendation 3: Establish Early Care and Education Program Pathways

Within the regulated options defined in Recommendation 1, today's fragmented, compliance-heavy regulatory and quality assurance landscape leaves program leaders and educators navigating unclear expectations, excessive paperwork, and fear of penalties rather than genuine partnership. If Minnesota wants to deliver the reliable, safe, and high-quality options parents are demanding, it must replace the current push for "one right way" with a simple system where multiple routes to recognition are available and valued equally. This recommendation proposes streamlined quality pathways grounded in rigor, accountability, and respect for diverse approaches to quality care.



Community Evidence and Needs

Minnesota licensed family child care providers described a deep desire for quality systems that feel like partnership, not policing. They emphasized that support for quality should be done with them, not to them, and that improvement works best when it is grounded in coaching, relationships, and shared goals rather than inspections and punitive processes alone.

Providers want partnership, not policing.

"If you want us to improve, walk beside us. Don't just come in with a checklist."

They also stressed that quality systems must start from trust in their expertise and local context.

"We don't need more hoops—we need people who actually understand what it looks like to do this work in small towns and homes. Start with trust."

Getting support feels like a maze, not a pathway.

"Every new person I talk to has another person to talk to; it is a never-ending maze. I am crushed under all these burdens. I can't keep following the web. I would consider myself an expert and I still struggle."

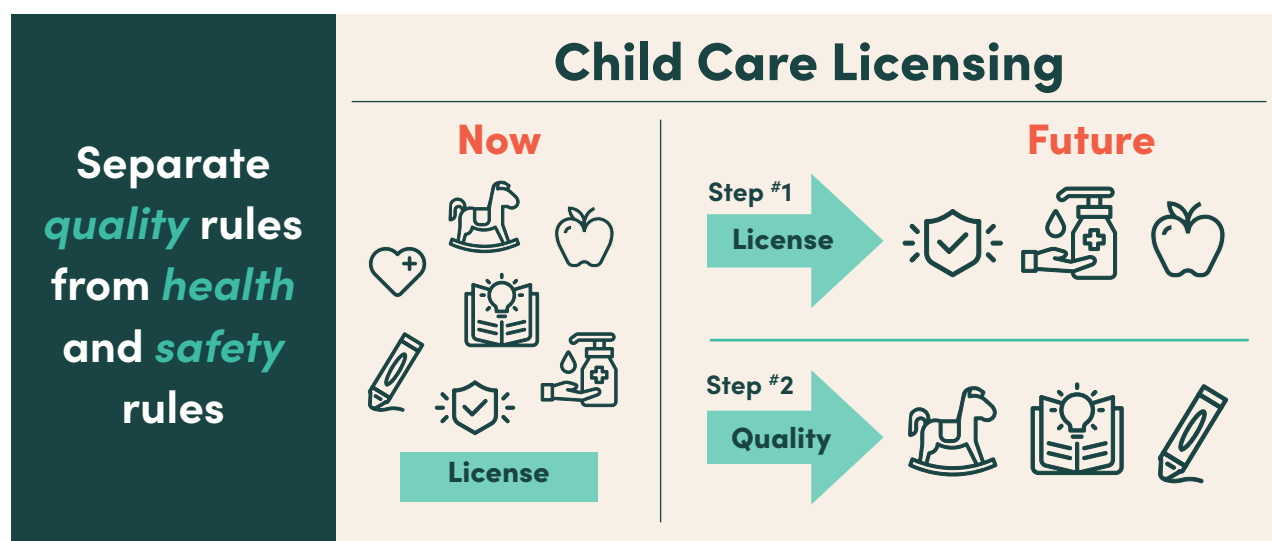
Rationale and Vision

Recommendation 1 lays out the types of options families have access to, including Health & Safety Licensed Programs, Recognized Early Care & Education Programs, and Trusted Caregivers, and clarifies who is responsible for safety, who is responsible for quality, and how funding levels match expectations in each. This recommendation builds on the first by focusing on the pathways for programs that choose to become Recognized Early Care & Education Programs.

The vision is a system where Health and Safety Licensing is a clear, right-sized baseline, and quality is pursued through growth-oriented, relational supports and multiple credible pathways that programs can choose from. Quality recognition should honor relationships and context; center families' experiences; and treat providers as partners and professionals, not as subjects of one-size-fits-all compliance. With Minnesota already redesigning Parent Aware and modernizing licensing, now is the time to simplify and align quality pathways, so they support programs instead of adding another layer.

The next set of recommendations (3a–3c) describe how Minnesota can build this vision into a concrete framework that programs can navigate, and that families can understand and trust.

Recommendation 3a: Right-Size Health and Safety Licensing



Minnesota should update its child care regulations and licensing process, so they are clear, right-sized, and focused on what keeps children safe, while separating core safety requirements from quality measures. If Minnesota wants providers to spend their energy caring for children and improving quality rather than navigating fear and confusion, it must right-size the regulations and their implementation by replacing outdated systems, approaches, and a punitive culture with focused regulations and a systematic approach to implementation. This recommendation responds directly to what licensed child care providers have been calling for. This recommendation also addresses long-standing challenges such as complexity, lack of clarity, and punitive experiences.

Community Evidence and Needs

Participants expressed relief that conversations are finally centering health and safety as the true focus of licensing, while also naming serious problems with how licensing is implemented in practice, describing experiences that feel confusing, punitive, and unsupportive. They described a desire for clear, right-sized health and safety expectations, delivered through fair and consistent implementation, with quality pursued and supported through other tools and pathways.

Program leaders welcome a focus on health and safety.

"I'm really tired, but I'm really glad to be here. I'm like 'Oh my gosh, here it is!' I've been talking to people about limiting licensing to health and safety. You've finally come up with how to put a rubric to the health and safety standards."

Quality has been folded into licensing without support.

"They say quality is in licensing, and that we have to have it there. No, if these [list of quality standards] are the indicators of quality, it's not. I am made to write a rule about things and then that's it. There is no support. So, licensing does not include quality. That is not their focus because I never feel supported in any one of those quality areas from my licensor."

In practice, licensing feels like a guessing game.

"Licensing shouldn't feel like a guessing game. We want clear expectations and fair processes—without feeling like the rules change depending on who shows up."

Rationale and Vision

This recommendation is grounded in a simple idea: licensing should do one thing very well, which is to protect children's health and safety. Items related to program quality should be shifted into the statewide quality recognition pathways and supports described in Recommendations 3b and 3c, so that quality is pursued through dedicated, supportive systems instead of licensing. This requires changing both the content of the rules and how they are implemented. When health, safety, and quality regulations are all mixed together, and when licensing tools rely on checklists and proxies like item counts or paperwork rather than meaningful observation of practice, no one is well served: licensors become enforcers of an overgrown rule set, providers feel punished rather than partnered with, and families are left unsure what "licensed" really guarantees.

The vision is a modern licensing system that is streamlined, transparent, and consistently implemented, where every provider and family understands the safety floor and where quality is supported through the pathways framework in Recommendation 3. In this vision, rules are right-sized and up to date, and licensing interactions are predictable, fair, and problem-solving in tone, so providers no longer experience licensing as a "guessing game" or a game of "gotcha!" but rather as a clear, trustworthy system that protects children and respects their professionalism.

By narrowing licensing to the essentials, reducing unnecessary compliance burden, and insisting on consistent implementation, Minnesota can make the system more workable for licensors and programs alike. This will free up time and energy and rebuild trust, so educators and program leaders can focus more fully on child-centered relationships, improvement, and quality practices, while quality is advanced in parallel systems led by the field rather than embedded in a diffuse compliance regime.

Policy Direction: Use Process-developed Tools to Right-size Licensing

Minnesota should use the shared tools developed through this process (see table below) to realign licensing around its core purpose of protecting children’s health and safety and to improve how it is carried out day to day. These tools give the state a coherent way to decide what belongs in licensing, how expectations are communicated, and how licensors and providers work together, instead of continuing to layer new requirements onto an already overgrown system.

Using these tools, Minnesota should first update and reorganize licensing rules so they clearly distinguish between non-negotiable health and safety protections and quality expectations that belong elsewhere. At the same time, the state should reshape implementation by revising visit protocols, guidance, training, feedback loops, and due process for providers so that practice matches the new standards.

| PROCESS-DEVELOPED LICENSING TOOLS | PURPOSE |
|---|--|
| Program Components for Health and Safety | List of the essential elements programs must have in place to maintain children’s health and safety, guiding policymakers on which areas should be regulated within licensing. |
| Selection Criteria | A clear, evidence-informed set of questions to evaluate each potential regulation for fit with a licensing system built to protect health and safety, helping prevent over-regulation and mission creep. |
| Key Implementation Elements | Guidance for regulators on how to implement child care regulations enacted by the Legislature in a consistent, fair, and non-punitive manner. |

“A clearer, right-sized set of health and safety expectations and more consistent implementation will free up time, energy, and resources so providers can focus on working with children and families instead of managing conflicting rules.”

What Will Be Different?

- A clearer, right-sized set of health and safety expectations and more consistent implementation will free up time, energy, and resources so providers can focus on working with children and families instead of managing conflicting rules.
- For families, “licensed” will clearly signal a strong, consistently enforced safety floor, while information about quality will come through more appropriate recognition pathways, making it easier to understand what is guaranteed and how programs go beyond the basics.
- Licensing will be focused on what it is best suited to do—protect children’s health and safety with clear rules and strong implementation—while quality is measured and supported through better-suited tools and pathways, creating a more coherent and trustworthy ECE system and reducing churn from burnout and frustration.

Recommendation 3b: Establish Industry-led Criteria and Flexible Pathways for ECE Program Recognition

Minnesota should create and sustain multiple, credible pathways for programs to have their quality recognized, separate from health and safety licensing, so that quality can be measured and supported with tools designed specifically for that purpose. If Minnesota wants programs to improve in ways that reflect their strengths, communities, and cultures (not just comply with a single statewide standard) it must offer clear options for recognition that honor different communities, approaches, and models while holding a high shared bar for quality. This recommendation creates concrete options for programs to pursue recognition in ways that fit their philosophy, community, and context.

Community Evidence and Needs

Participants described multiple quality pathways as essential for honoring diverse program models while ensuring that families can access quality in every setting, cultural context, and ZIP code. They emphasized that families want clear, trustworthy signals of quality whether they choose a home, school-based, or center-based program, and that a single rigid model cannot deliver that.

Families want access to quality in every setting.

“Families in Minnesota don’t feel that they have equitable access to quality care ... They want to know that their child is going to get the same level of quality whether they choose someone providing care in a home, or a school, or a center ... So, it is not equity within the care itself, but it is equitable access to quality.”

Programs need more than one credible way to show quality.

“Minnesota could use a hybrid system: National accreditations recognized as one pathway, plus state-led culturally relevant measures, plus provider-driven Continuous Quality Improvement plans. This would reduce the ‘square peg in round hole’ issue by giving providers multiple entry points and respecting the diversity of family child care.”

Quality definitions should be industry-defined and streamlined, not dictated.

"We're trying to develop something solid so we can move beyond this ever-revolving conversation around who gets to say what quality is and the best way to do that per Bainum Family Foundation's recommendations is to have a group of your peers contribute to that basic understanding of quality ... This is not about asking a board to design something, this is about asking a board to streamline what quality pathways are available in Minnesota."

Quality must be locally defined.

"Local voice should define quality. Leech Lake is different than Ely. It depends on resources around them, what they have access to and what they can afford ... When institutions dictate quality we lose a lot, it needs to be local and culturally specific."

Rationale and Vision

This recommendation responds to three core needs that emerged across the process: ensuring reliable access to quality in every setting and ZIP code; recognizing multiple legitimate ways of doing quality ECE; and grounding definitions of quality in expertise in the ECE field rather than in a single, top-down model. Families want confidence that if they choose an Early Care & Education Program their child will experience strong quality whether they choose a home-based program, a school-based program, or a center, while programs and community leaders want pathways that reflect their cultures, contexts, and pedagogies instead of forcing them into an "only one right way" system.

The vision is a coherent statewide pathways structure in which all routes for becoming a Recognized Program rely on existing, industry-led and holistic quality standards and measures, and the Board's role is to curate and approve a set of recognition pathways that put those standards and measures to work in Minnesota, rather than creating a new definition of quality. National accreditation pathways provide one option, while alternative industry-led pathways that are more flexible and innovative in their design and evidence requirements offer another option for programs whose models do not align well with traditional accreditation. Flexible-innovative pathways must meet the same developmental quality floor, use comparable evidence of practice, and undergo rigorous arm's-length validation just as accredited programs do.

In this frame, the Board is not writing one master set of standards; it is curating and maintaining a set of equally rigorous pathways built from existing accreditations, certifications, and measures. The Board's role is to identify and approve qualifying accreditation processes and to set clear parameters for alternate options. This allows for variation while ensuring families and the public can trust that recognition through any pathway meets the same high bar for children's learning and development.

"Flexible-innovative pathways must meet the same developmental quality floor, use comparable evidence of practice, and undergo rigorous arm's-length validation just as accredited programs do."

Policy Direction: Build Pathways So Families Can Count on Quality Everywhere

This approach builds a straightforward statewide recognition system: shared, industry-led standards; multiple vetted pathways; a clear progression for programs to advance through; and public plans and arm's-length validation, so quality is real and visible, not just paperwork.

This approach is reflected in WeVision EarlyEd's Solutions Lab Sites deliverables, which call for Recognized Early Care & Education Programs to:

- Meet industry-recognized and holistic baseline quality standards
- Document impact on child growth and learning

In Minnesota, "holistic" is understood to mean that, taken together, the standards and measures in a pathway align to the domains identified in the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress. These deliverables anchor the recognition framework in real outcomes and industry-led accountability, while avoiding models that feel too rigid, too bureaucratic, or too far removed from on-the-ground realities.

The solution centers on empowering the Board to:

Approve multiple, equally rigorous recognition pathways. Establish multiple pathways so programs can demonstrate quality in ways meaningful for their setting, philosophy, and community, including Board-approved accreditations and alternative industry-led pathways that are more flexible and innovative in their design and evidence requirements.

All pathways must:

- Align with holistic industry-led quality standards.
- Use comparable evidence of practice and child development.
- Include arm's-length verification by an approved third-party or community partner.

Identify and partner with trusted verifiers. Identify and approve third-party and community partners (for example, higher education institutions, research organizations, Tribal and cultural organizations, independent observational assessors, and formal provider collaboratives) that can verify whether programs have met the requirements of a given Board-approved pathway, so verification is real but not administratively burdensome.

Use data to refine options over time. Use data to review and continually refine recognition options, so they remain effective, practical, inclusive, and responsive to diverse communities over time.

Within this framework, regulated programs (this part of the framework does not apply to Trusted Caregivers) voluntarily progress from Licensed to Recognized:

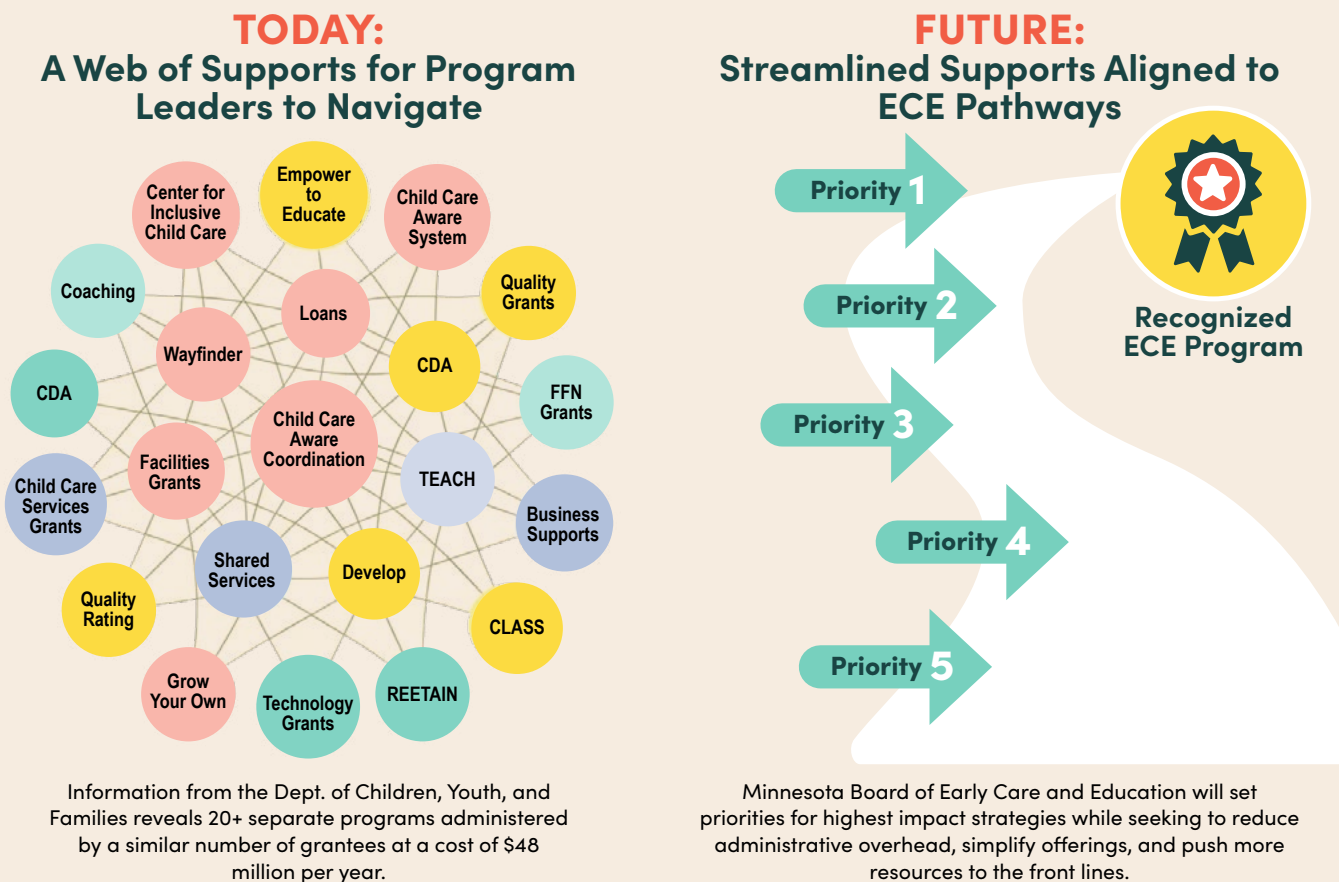
- **Health & Safety Licensed:** Programs meet licensing requirements but have not yet opted into an ECE recognition pathway.
- **Early Care & Education Candidate:** Programs are licensed and have formally committed to an accreditation pathway or an alternative industry-led pathway.
- **Recognized Early Care & Education Program:** Programs that have completed their chosen pathway either by earning accreditation from a Board-approved accrediting body or by meeting all requirements of an alternative pathway are Recognized Early Care & Education Programs.

Programs seeking ECE recognition would select the pathway that best fits their strengths and context. Each Candidate and Recognized Program would maintain a short, public plan that explains its chosen pathway, how it tracks children's growth and learning, and how it uses family feedback and independent validation to keep improving over time. Validation must be at arm's length so that results are credible to families and the public.

What Will Be Different

- Families will see clear, trustworthy signals of quality across settings (home-based, school-based, and center-based).
- Accreditation pathways will offer a central, well-understood route to recognition, while alternative industry-led pathways provide additional options for programs whose models or contexts do not fit available accreditations without lowering the bar for quality.
- Quality will be defined and organized by the field itself: industry expertise will shape what quality looks like in different contexts, while the Board curates and approves a set of equally rigorous pathways instead of dictating one rigid model.

Recommendation 3c: Support ECE Recognition via Clear, Aligned Supports



Minnesota should consolidate and align supports so that programs working toward recognition have a coherent, feasible pathway to improvement and quality. The state is already investing roughly \$50 million in various supports for educators and programs, yet providers in this process described a landscape where assistance feels fragmented, hard to access, and disconnected from their day-to-day needs. This recommendation builds on Recommendation 1 by acknowledging that, while Minnesota works toward long-term fixes in funding, workforce, and system design so the sector is no longer trying to deliver quality on a permanently unstable foundation, the state must also make sure that existing oversight and support resources are organized and deployed in ways that actually help providers, children, and families navigate the system they are living in today.

Community Evidence and Needs

Providers highlighted that the core problem is not only misalignment of supports, but basic insufficiency in how people and programs are resourced.

“That’s a lot of money. Why are we making and paying minimum wage. There is a lot of money we could invest in our people.”

They described a stark imbalance between pressure and help, with licensing and other compliance demands far outweighing tangible support for quality.

“I think what providers are feeling is licensing pressure significantly more than any support offered. It is so imbalanced. That’s why we’re here.”

Leaders also emphasized how fragmented and opaque the support landscape feels in practice, making it hard to access what does exist.

“It feels like we spend more time figuring out where to go for help than actually getting help. It needs to be one door—not ten.”

They expressed a desire for data and decision-making that start from providers’ experiences of support, not just existing funding structures.

“I think it would be fascinating to survey providers. Where do you feel most supported, and does that align with how the state is choosing to make financial investments? As an administrator, that would be interesting information to have when formulating a budget. I would hope our state legislators and staff could use it the same.”

Even among programs that meet current quality benchmarks, leaders reported feeling largely unsupported by the state in the areas that matter most for quality practice.

“My centers are all Parent Aware rated. When I look at this list of quality standards and ask myself, ‘Do I feel supported by the state in any of those areas?’ the answer is no.”

Rationale and Vision

Participants emphasized that the most effective supports are those that go deep, not wide. They are looking for fewer, high-impact strategies that lead to meaningful improvements for children and programs rather than many shallow initiatives that add complexity. They pointed to what they experience as truly helpful supports: relationship-based coaching, sustained mentorship, and flexible grants that can be adapted to regional and program-specific needs.

At the same time, participants noted that existing supports are fragmented and often routed through multiple intermediaries, which steers too many resources toward administration instead of reaching programs and families. They saw a need to consolidate and better organize these efforts, with strong Board oversight and clear input into key funding streams such as the CCDF quality set-aside, so Minnesota can align resources with what actually works and where needs are greatest, especially for programs working to attain and maintain ECE recognition.

Policy Direction

Comprehensive Mapping: Analyze all supports currently provided, with data disaggregated by program type, region, race, language spoken, and impact, and engage program leaders alongside researchers and evaluators in assessing to review which approaches help them move toward or maintain ECE Recognition.

Go Deep, Not Wide: Require the state to consolidate and rebalance existing initiatives so that a larger share of resources flow into a small set of high-impact models, such as intensive coaching, peer networks, and educator development. Support should be grounded in the best available evidence about what improves practice, rather than maintaining a fragmented menu of shallow, incomplete strategies that consume significant resources without changing daily practice for children and educators.

“Require the state to consolidate and rebalance existing initiatives so that a larger share of resources flow into a small set of high-impact models, such as intensive coaching, peer networks, and educator development.”

Board-Driven Oversight and Targeted Flexibility: Charge the Board with making regular, public recommendations on how quality-related funds (including the CCDF quality set-aside budget and related state appropriations) should be organized to support programs becoming and staying recognized, to hold state leadership accountable for the necessary move away from the current hodgepodge toward a coherent support system.

Guardrails Against New Fragmentation: Establish expectations that any new initiative or pilot support must show how it aligns with the ECE pathways framework, helps programs progress toward recognition pathway, complements existing high-impact strategies, and includes a plan for integration or sunset, preventing future layers of disconnected efforts from rebuilding the same problems described today.

What Will Be Different?

- Providers will experience a simpler, more coherent set of supports that are easy to find and designed to help them become and stay Recognized Early Care & Education Programs, instead of a confusing mix of disconnected initiatives.
- A larger share of quality-related dollars will reach programs and educators through high-impact strategies rather than being absorbed by fragmented administration and low-impact initiatives.
- The Board, state agencies, and the Legislature will have clear, public information about which supports actually help programs improve and achieve recognition and will be held accountable for organizing funding and new initiatives around those strategies instead of rebuilding the current hodgepodge.

Putting the Framework to Work

At its core, this framework is about making Minnesota's long-stated vision real: reliable, high-quality early care and education as a standard, not a stroke of luck, with governance and accountability shared with those closest to children. It builds directly on the Great Start Task Force vision of equitable standards with growth-oriented accountability, clear and consistent regulations, and a cohesive infrastructure of supports, offering a concrete way to deliver those pillars in practice.

The recommendations in this report do not replace the need for greater public investment. Making the vision fully real will ultimately require Minnesota to pay the true cost of quality ECE and fair earnings for educators and business owners, so programs are no longer asked to deliver high quality on a basic licensing budget. What this framework does is ensure that current and future investments work better by simplifying options for families, clarifying who is responsible for what, and moving key decisions about quality pathways, supports, and educator standards into a Board where families, educators, and program leaders hold real power.

Minnesota is not starting from scratch. The Great Start blueprint, Parent Aware redesign, licensing modernization, and workforce investments have already laid important groundwork and demonstrated a bipartisan appetite for change. Advancing this framework is the next step: aligning those efforts into one coherent system in which licensing provides a clear safety floor, quality is defined and recognized through industry-led pathways, and supports are organized to help programs become and stay recognized.

The call to action is straightforward. Use these recommendations as a shared starting point for statutory, budgetary, and implementation decisions related to ensuring effective programs for children, insisting on reforms that are simple to explain and grounded in what families and providers have asked for. At the same time, leaders must continue to press for the sustained public investment Great Start called for, so that the structures described here are matched with the resources needed to make them work in every community.

This report details the WeVision Minnesota process at a high level and presents the group's recommendations. Significant additional information from the process, including documentation of each stage of the design process, a summary of engagement efforts, and technical materials that informed these recommendations is available at thinksmall.org/mn-child-care-licensing-quality; readers are encouraged to explore these resources, share them widely, and stay engaged as Minnesota works to move from vision on paper to an improved system families and educators can see and feel in their daily lives.

With Gratitude to All Who Helped Make This Work Possible

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