

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PARTICIPATION

for children in foster care

In consultation with the Minnesota Departments of Human Services and Education, researchers at the University of Minnesota conducted a study on participation in early childhood education (ECE) programs for young children aged 0-5 in foster care in Minnesota.

In 2023, study researchers conducted focus groups and interviews with 69 foster and biological families, child welfare workers, and ECE program administrators across Minnesota to better understand the barriers and facilitators to ECE participation for young children in foster care.

Center for Advanced Studies
in **Child Welfare**

CEED | Center for Early Education
and Development

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Existing research suggests that participation in ECE positively impacts:

- School readiness and achievement
- Cognitive and social-emotional health and development
- Parenting practices and school involvement

ECE is especially important for children in foster care, who are at greater risk of academic and developmental challenges, and adverse outcomes.

Study participants shared several barriers to ECE participation:

- Lack of ECE program availability
- Scheduling conflicts and transportation challenges
- Lack of information about ECE programs and scholarships
- Lack of funding for ECE programs



Less than half (43.7%) of young children in foster care in Minnesota participated in ECE in 2019.

Participants also emphasized facilitating factors that support participation and engagement in ECE for children in foster care.

Child welfare workers are often the first point of contact for hearing about ECE benefits and programming.

Child welfare workers can help connect families to information on priority seats in ECE programs and scholarships.

Child welfare and ECE staff support can help increase awareness of ECE for families and support a smooth enrollment process.

Existing federal and state policies that prioritize children in foster care for ECE program seats and scholarships can help improve ECE access.

How Can We **IMPROVE ECE ACCESS** for Children in Foster Care?

PRIORITIZE RELATIONSHIP BUILDING between child welfare and ECE staff and systems, as well as with community-based programs.

STRATEGIZE INFORMATION SHARING by creating “one-stop shop” materials (e.g. brochures, pamphlets, etc.) and maintaining up-to-date information on local (e.g. county) resources and availability.

ESTABLISH FOLLOW-UP MECHANISMS by checking in with families after initial contact so they don't get “lost in the cracks.”



Visit <https://z.umn.edu/94tj> for more information!



March 18, 2026

Children and Families Finance and Policy Committee

HF3665 / SF3981: Out-of-home placement plan requirements modified to include early childhood education and child care programs, and agencies and guardians ad litem required to provide information on early childhood education and child care programs for children in foster care.

Dear Chair Kotyza Witthuhn, Chair West, and Members of the Children & Families Committee,

Minnesota's Prenatal to Three Coalition (PN-3) is writing to express our support for HF3665, to ensure all children are supported during their earliest years. This policy would require out-of-home placement plans to consider early childhood education and child care programs participation, to provide foster parents and caregivers with information about early childhood education, child care programs, and information on how to access the child care assistance program and early learning scholarships for the young children in their care.

All future learning is based on brain development that occurs in a child's first few years of life. Young children learn about the world around them by first establishing trusting relationships with responsive caregivers. Strong serve and return interactions between children and caregivers are the foundation for early language and social skills.¹ This policy would encourage ongoing enrollment and participation in early learning and child care programs whenever feasible, to support emotional stability and maintain a familiar routine for young children transitioning to an out-of-home placement.

Please join Minnesota's PN-3 Coalition in supporting HF3665, to maintain existing trusted relationships between caregivers and children in out-of-home placements, and to support foster parents with the resources and programs needed to promote healthy brain development in the young children they care for.

Thank you for taking time to the stability and healthy brain development of Minnesota's young and vulnerable children.

Alisha Porter,
Children's Defense Fund-Minnesota, Director
Minnesota Prenatal to Three Coalition, Chair

Nancy Jost,
Early Childhood Advisor
Minnesota Prenatal to Three Coalition, Chair

¹ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004). Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships: Working Paper No. 1. Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu.

March 6, 2026

Re: HF3665 | Early Childhood Education and Childcare Program Notification and Support

Dear Chairs West, Kotyza-Witthuhn, and Members of the Children and Families Finance and Policy Committee:

The Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsperson (OOFY) strongly supports the out-of-home placement plan requirements to be modified to include early childhood education and childcare programs, and the requirement for information notification. This bill is in alignment with the intent of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a federal law passed in 2015 which requires foster youth to remain in their educational setting of origin, and thus, be supported in maintaining their relationships and educational development in their communities, whenever possible.

Access to early childhood programming and support is essential in supporting the trajectory of a young person's educational and social future. We know that Fosters experience significant disruption and often have multiple placement changes. Educational and social stability for foster youth, no matter their age, is extremely important for development, social skills, and ensuring normalcy.

This modification to the out-of-home placement plan requirements ensures that Fosters have the opportunity to maintain connections to their communities and educational supports. Thank you for supporting this legislation and your continuing efforts to improve the experiences of Fosters.

Sincerely,



Ombudsperson for Foster Youth
651-946-2941
Misty.coonce@state.mn.us

Website: mn.gov/oofy

Letter of Support



March 18, 2026

RE: Support For House File 3665 - Continuity of Care for Young Children in Foster Care

Dear Chair Kotyza-Witthuhn and Members of the Children and Families Committee:

Children's Defense Fund Minnesota (CDF-MN) researches, develops and advocates for policies and programs that improve the health and well-being of children, and increase the economic security of families. **Today, we write in strong support of HF 3665, which takes important steps to promote stability and continuity of care for young children in out-of-home placement and to ensure foster parents receive critical information about early childhood education and child care programs that support children's healthy development and well-being.**

CDF-MN believes every child deserves to grow up safe, healthy, and supported by stable relationships and environments that allow them to learn, grow, and thrive. When a child enters foster care, they often experience significant disruption - separation from caregivers, changes in living environments, and uncertainty about what comes next. **For infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children, early learning and child care settings can provide critical sources of stability during this time.** These environments offer consistent routines, nurturing relationships with trusted adults, and developmental supports that help buffer the stress children may be experiencing.

Research on early childhood development consistently shows that stable caregiving relationships are foundational to healthy development. The Harvard Center on the Developing Child has found that young children build the foundations for learning, emotional regulation, and resilience through stable, responsive relationships with caring adults. Similarly, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's landmark report *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* emphasizes that consistent caregiving relationships in early childhood are essential for healthy brain development. Studies of continuity of care in early childhood settings have also found that children who remain with consistent caregivers demonstrate stronger language development, improved social competence, and fewer behavioral challenges.

Early childhood education programs are especially important for young children in foster care. Research consistently finds that children involved in the child welfare system are at significantly greater risk of developmental delays, learning challenges, and adverse long-term outcomes. High-quality early care and education programs can play a critical role in recognizing developmental delays early and connecting children to services such as early intervention and developmental supports. These programs also provide stable relationships, structured routines, and supportive learning environments that help mitigate the impacts of early adversity.

This stability is particularly important for children who have experienced trauma. Children entering foster care often face multiple disruptions in relationships and environments, and research in child welfare shows that repeated instability can compound stress and make it more difficult for children to form trusting relationships. Maintaining continuity in early learning and child care programs can help provide predictable routines and trusted adults who support children's healing and development during a difficult transition.

Young children are also significantly represented in Minnesota's foster care system. In 2024, approximately 21 percent of children in foster care were under the age of three. Children in Greater Minnesota are also heavily represented, with approximately 64 percent of children in foster care living outside the seven-county metro area. At the same time, disparities persist in children experiencing out-of-home placement - American Indian children are approximately sixteen times more likely than their White peers to experience foster care, children of two or more races are eight times more likely, and Black and Hispanic or Latino children are approximately twice as likely. These realities underscore the importance of policies that strengthen stability and supportive relationships for young children experiencing foster care.

Research from the University of Minnesota's Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare and Center for Early Education and Development (see attached) further highlights the importance of improving access to early childhood programs for young children in foster care. **A 2023 study found that more than half of young children in foster**

care in Minnesota were not enrolled in any early care and education program, despite the important developmental and stability benefits these programs can provide. The study also identified barriers such as difficulty navigating application processes, limited information about available programs, and challenges maintaining continuity when placements change.

House File 3665 addresses both of these challenges. The provision requiring that out-of-home placement plans include efforts to maintain a young child's enrollment in an early childhood education or child care program recognizes the importance of continuity during an already difficult transition. Maintaining connections with familiar caregivers and learning environments whenever possible helps reduce additional disruption and supports healthy development.

Equally important, the bill ensures that foster parents receive clear information about early childhood education and child care options in their geographic area, the Northstar foster care benefits child care allowance, eligibility requirements for the Child Care Assistance Program and Early Learning Scholarships, and the application processes for those programs. Child welfare workers are often the first point of contact for foster parents navigating these systems. Ensuring that information about early childhood programs is shared as part of placement planning can help families access resources that support children's learning, stability, and well-being.

Too often, access to early childhood programs depends not only on eligibility but also on awareness and the navigation of unfamiliar and complex systems. By ensuring that families receive clear information about available programs and supports, HF 3665 helps remove barriers that might otherwise prevent children from participating in high-quality early learning and care.

Together, these provisions recognize what decades of research and experience tell us: stable relationships, consistent routines, and access to nurturing early learning environments are foundational to young children's well-being. For children who have already experienced disruption, these supports can make a meaningful difference. Children entering foster care have already experienced significant upheaval. Policies like those included in HF 3665 help ensure we do not unintentionally add to that disruption, and instead prioritize the stability, support, and learning opportunities that young children need to heal and thrive.

Thank you for your commitment to the well-being of Minnesota's children and for your consideration of HF 3665. We are grateful for your service and your continued commitment to the well-being of Minnesota children.

Together For Children,

/s/ Alexandra Fitzsimmons, Esq.
Senior Policy Director

Enc. Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare, *Early Childhood Education Participation for Children in Foster Care*, 2023.



March 18, 2026

Representative Kotyza-Witthuhn and Representative West
Children and Families Finance and Policy Committee
Centennial Office Building (COB)
St. Paul, MN 55155

RE: HF 3665 – Out of Home Placement Plan Early Education Modification

Dear Chair Kotyza-Witthuhn, Chair West and Members of the House Children and Families Finance and Policy Committee:

MACSSA supports the inherent goal of the legislation – to strengthen placement stability and promote continuity in young children’s developmental environments. By prioritizing early childhood education and childcare stability, the legislation supports social-emotional development, learning readiness, and attachment security to children in foster care.

While counties support the goal of HF 3665, we estimate that the proposal will increase statutory duties without corresponding funding or workforce capacity and rely on SSIS for support documentation. The Out of Home Placement plan (OHPP) is a highly regulated, statutory driven document. Each new requirement to the plan decreases the amount of time and direct work with children and families, research backed indicators of better family outcomes. In 2024, the legislature passed a requirement that the OHPP contain a one-page summary component. This proposal would add to the document length – and while SSIS modernization is underway, this additional element would require manual workarounds by the county-based workforce. Notably, the OHPP is also a court-reviewed document, additional statutory requirements will require updates to documentation systems, training, and case planning procedures used by counties.

Importantly, the proposal adds new requirements without addressing service capacity. Many communities across Minnesota experience childcare shortages, waitlists, transportation barriers and limited providers making continuity difficult or impossible to achieve. Counties do not influence childcare availability, yet they would be responsible for documenting compliance when services are unavailable. The documentation this policy requires would need to be reflected in the existing technology platform, SSIS and would result in numerous workarounds and time spent away from supporting families by seeking childcare, early education opportunities or supporting foster children remaining in the foster home.

Additionally, maintaining a child’s existing childcare program or early education program may require transportation across communities or counties when the available foster home is not located near the child’s previous childcare provider. Counties recommend clarifying that early childhood program continuity is a factor to be considered during placement planning, but not a determining requirement that could limit placement flexibility in emergency and kinship placement situations. Also, further clarity would be helpful on who would be responsible for transportation, whether mileage or travel costs, or what expectations would be placed on foster parents. Without clarification, this requirement could unintentionally create new logistical and financial burdens for foster parents and counties.

Finally, counties share the commitment to supporting the healthy development of young children in out-of-home care. Clarifying the operational and fiscal concerns noted above will help ensure the policy can be implemented effectively while maintaining the flexibility needed to secure safe and appropriate placements for children.

Thank you for your attention to these considerations and for your continued work supporting children and families across Minnesota.

Sincerely,



Angie Thies
Child Wellbeing Policy Analyst
Association of Minnesota Counties



Paul Verrette
Director, MACSSA
Human Services Policy Analyst, AMC

Cc: Representative Pinto