

2023 Report on the Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013: A Comparative Analysis of Program Outcomes

A Report to the Mississippi Legislature
Report #695
October 24, 2023



PEER Committee

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Mississippi's constitution gives the Legislature broad power to conduct examinations and investigations. PEER is authorized by law to review any public entity, including contractors supported in whole or in part by public funds, and to address any issues that may require legislative action. PEER has statutory access to all state and local records and has subpoena power to compel testimony or the production of documents.

PEER provides a variety of services to the Legislature, including program evaluations, economy and efficiency reviews, financial audits, limited scope evaluations, fiscal notes, and other governmental research and assistance. The Committee identifies inefficiency or ineffectiveness or a failure to accomplish legislative objectives, and makes recommendations for redefinition, redirection, redistribution and/or restructuring of Mississippi government. As directed by and subject to the prior approval of the PEER Committee, the Committee's professional staff executes audit and evaluation projects obtaining information and developing options for consideration by the Committee. The PEER Committee releases reports to the Legislature, Governor, Lieutenant Governor, the agency examined, and the general public.

The Committee assigns top priority to written requests from individual legislators and legislative committees. The Committee also considers PEER staff proposals and written requests from state officials and others.



Joint Legislative Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review

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October 24, 2023

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Honorable Delbert Hosemann, Lieutenant Governor

Honorable Philip Gunn, Speaker of the House

Members of the Mississippi State Legislature

On October 24, 2023, the PEER Committee authorized release of the report titled ***2023 Report on the Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013: A Comparative Analysis of Outcomes for the Program.***

Senators

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This report does not recommend increased funding or additional staff.

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CONCLUSION: In accordance with state law, the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) submitted an evaluation of its prekindergarten program's effectiveness. PEER determined that MDE's evaluation of the program had limitations that hindered its own conclusions. Although results should be interpreted with caution due to issues with the dataset provided, PEER conducted an independent analysis of the program data captured. PEER's analysis showed mixed results related to achievement outcomes (e.g., state test scores); however, collaborative students performed statistically better than the comparison group on behavioral, non-achievement outcomes (e.g., disciplinary incidents). Also, MDE has made efforts to improve the state's prekindergarten program by beginning to implement a new curriculum with a larger and more substantial evidence base than its previous curriculum, which MDE is phasing out.



BACKGROUND

In its 2013 Regular Session, the Mississippi Legislature enacted the "Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013," which directs MDE to implement a voluntary prekindergarten program in the state on a phased-in basis. The program's purpose is to help ensure that all children have access to quality early childhood education and development services. The collaboratives are intended to be a collaboration among entities providing prekindergarten, including Head Start, licensed child care facilities, and licensed public, parochial, and private school programs.

In FY 2023, 37 collaboratives in Mississippi served approximately 5,329 students.

State law requires MDE to submit a rigorous evaluation of program effectiveness every three years. MDE submitted the first report on July 1, 2023, for PEER to review and submit an independent summary of its findings prior to the 2024 legislative session.

This is PEER's third evaluation of the program, with the first in 2015 and the second in 2019.



KEY FINDINGS

- **Data issues and methodology limitations hinder the conclusions drawn in MDE's three-year evaluation of program effectiveness.**
For example, since the program's inception in 2013, students in Head Start who participated in a collaborative have not been assigned an identification number upon entry into pre-K and are therefore unable to be tracked over time. Head Start accounts for 39% of collaborative sites. MDE is actively working to address this issue for future prekindergarten participants.
- **From the data captured, PEER determined that collaborative students performed statistically better than the comparison group on kindergarten readiness tests, worse on third and fifth grade math achievement tests, and similar to the comparison group on all other achievement tests. Notably, collaborative students outperformed the comparison group in all behavioral outcomes measured (i.e., disciplinary incidents, suspensions, and chronic absences).**
MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 (3) (g) (1972) requires that MDE measure short-term and long-term effects of the prekindergarten program; however, specific measures are not defined in state law. MDE included in its report a range of achievement and non-achievement outcomes. Additional outcomes could be included in future evaluations to ensure the best possible analysis of program effectiveness.
- **MDE has made efforts to improve the state's prekindergarten program by beginning to phase in a new curriculum, Mississippi Beginnings: PreK, which has a larger and more substantial evidence base than Opening the World of Learning (OWL), MDE's previously preferred curriculum.**
MDE requires any collaboratives entering the program during or after the 2022-2023 school year to use the new Mississippi Beginnings: PreK curriculum, while allowing collaboratives existing prior to the 2022-2023 school year to choose to switch to the new curriculum or continue using OWL. MDE is, however, phasing out its use of OWL in favor of the new curriculum.

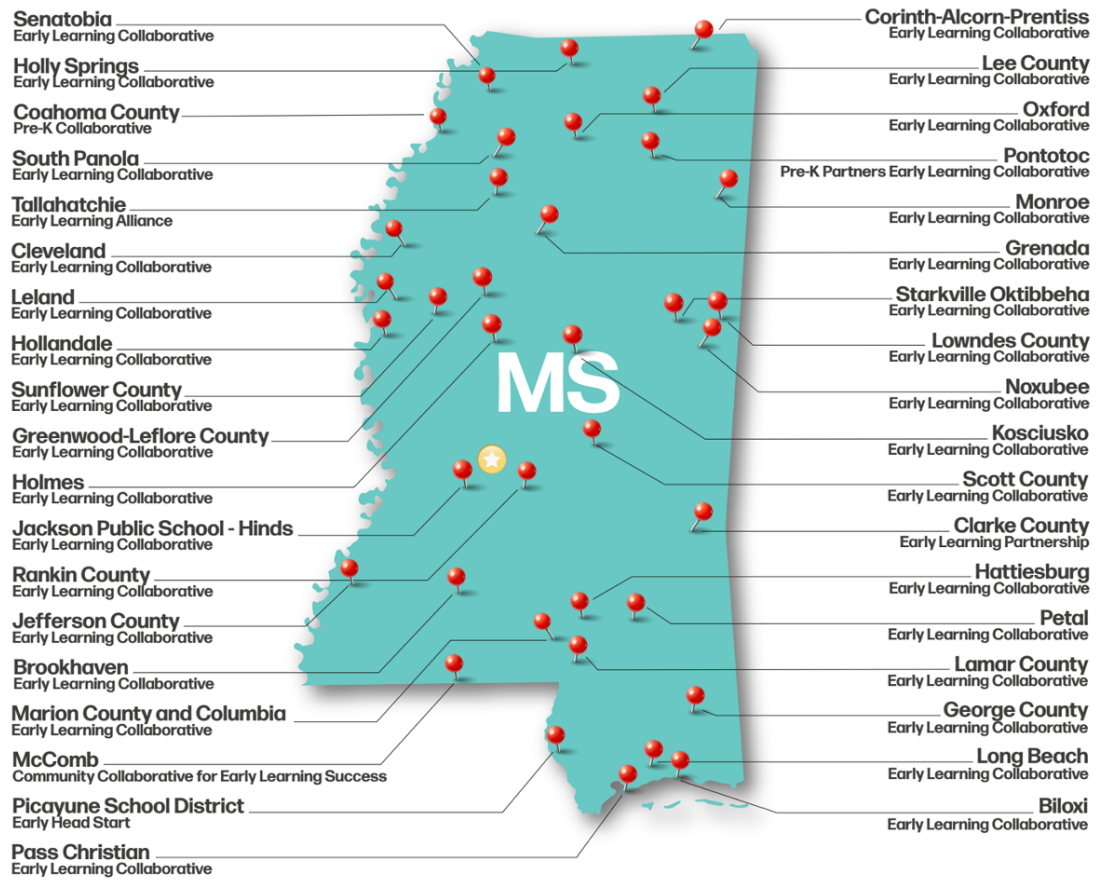
Increased Legislative Support for the Program

The Legislature appropriated approximately \$40 million more in funds to the prekindergarten program from FY 2020 to FY 2023 than from FY 2017 to FY 2019 to fund additional collaboratives and programs.

In addition, during the 2023 Regular Session, the Legislature passed H.B. 817 to increase the minimum funding levels of the program from \$2,000 to \$2,500 per student for a full-day program. This increase became effective on July 1, 2023.

Collaborative Funding

From FY 2020 to FY 2023 MDE disbursed \$48.4 million to the collaboratives and used \$1.9 million for administrative costs.



SOURCE: MDE.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To better measure the outcomes of the state's prekindergarten program, the Legislature should amend MISS. CODE Section 37-21-51 (3) (g) (1972) to define the specific achievement and non-achievement effects that MDE should include in future evaluations of program effectiveness (e.g., kindergarten readiness, disciplinary incidents, grade retention).
2. MDE should require the following of its research staff responsible for conducting the prekindergarten program effectiveness evaluations (whether internal or contracted staff are used):
 - a. Staff should provide MDE reproducible data and documentation for its program evaluation, including documentation of data collection and analyses, operational definitions of variables, and reproducible code.
 - b. Staff should conduct statistical tests necessary to determine whether differences between students are significant or merely a matter of chance and include all test results in MDE's three-year program evaluation report.
3. Using a phased-in approach, MDE should begin requiring collaboratives to use the Mississippi Beginnings: PreK curriculum due to its stronger evidence base than the OWL curriculum. The goal should be to transition all collaboratives to the new curriculum by the 2027-2028 school year.

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Introduction

Authority, Scope, and Purpose

In 2013, the Mississippi Legislature enacted the Early Learning Collaborative Act, codified as MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 (1972), to ensure that all of Mississippi's children have access to quality early childhood education and development services through a voluntary prekindergarten program for four-year-old children implemented by the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE). As enacted, the Act required MDE to provide annual reports on the program to the Legislature and the Governor and required the PEER Committee to review those reports and conduct an independent evaluation of the program's operations and effectiveness.

During its 2021 Regular Session, the Legislature amended MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 (3) (g) to require MDE to submit a rigorous evaluation of program effectiveness every three years, with the first report due on July 1, 2023. The evaluation should use longitudinal data to measure short-term and long-term effects, including both achievement and non-achievement effects. After each three-year report, this CODE Section directs the PEER Committee to review the report and the intervening annual reports and submit an independent summary of its findings prior to the next legislative session.

This is the third evaluation of the prekindergarten program conducted by PEER, with the first evaluation conducted in 2015 (*The Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013: Evaluation of the Operations and Effectiveness of the Program*, Report #600, November 17, 2015) and the second evaluation conducted in 2019 (*2019 Report on Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013: An Evaluation of the Operation and Effectiveness of the Program*, Report #640, December 16, 2019). This is PEER's first review of the rigorous evaluation submitted by MDE under the amended CODE Section.

This report will provide:

- a brief overview of the creation and purpose of the prekindergarten program;
- an update on the amended statutory requirements of the program, funding, and disbursements for the program from FY 2020 to FY 2023; MDE's evaluation of collaboratives and sites; and the status of prekindergarten programs in Mississippi;
- PEER's independent summary of its findings from MDE's evaluation; and,
- analysis of prekindergarten program curricula used by the collaboratives.

Exhibit 1 on page 3 contains the statutory definitions of terms used in this report in reference to the prekindergarten program.

While other public (e.g., Head Start, a federally funded early learning program) and private prekindergarten programs exist in Mississippi, this evaluation addresses the effectiveness of only those public prekindergarten programs implemented as part of the Early Learning Collaborative Act.

The Committee acted in accordance with MISS. CODE ANN. Section 5-3-51 (1972) et seq.

Method

In conducting this review, PEER:

- reviewed relevant sections of state law;
- interviewed MDE staff;
- reviewed MDE's self-reported information in annual reports from 2020 through 2023, as required by MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 (3) (g), plus additional information requested by PEER; and,
- requested and reviewed data submitted to Hanover Research Council by MDE to conduct a rigorous evaluation of prekindergarten programs from 2014 to 2022, as required by MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51.

Exhibit 1: Statutory Definitions of Terms in the Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013

Preschool or prekindergarten children

Children who have not entered kindergarten but will have obtained four years of age on or before September 1 of a school year.

Early Learning Collaborative

A district or countywide council that writes and submits an application to participate in the voluntary prekindergarten program. An early learning collaborative is composed, at a minimum, of a public school district and/or a local Head Start affiliate if in existence, private or parochial schools, or one or more licensed child care centers. Agencies or other organizations that work with young children and their families may also participate in the collaborative to provide resources and coordination even if those agencies or organizations are not prekindergarten providers.

Prekindergarten Provider

A public, private, or parochial school, licensed child care center, or Head Start center that serves prekindergarten children and participates in the voluntary prekindergarten program.

Lead Partner

A public school district or other nonprofit entity with the instructional expertise and operational capacity to manage the early learning collaborative's prekindergarten program as described in the collaborative's approved application for funds. The lead partner serves as the fiscal agent for the collaborative and shall disburse awarded funds in accordance with the collaborative's approved application. The lead partner must facilitate a professional learning community for the teachers in the prekindergarten program and lead the collaborative. The lead partner ensures that the collaborative adopts and implements curriculum and assessments that align with the comprehensive early learning standards. The public school district shall be the lead partner if no other qualifying lead partner is selected.

Comprehensive Early Learning Standards

Standards adopted by the State Board of Education that address the highest level of fundamental domains of early learning to include, but not be limited to, physical well-being and motor development, social/emotional development, approaches toward learning, language development and cognition and general knowledge. The comprehensive early learning standards shall also include standards for emergent literacy skills, including oral communication, knowledge of print and letters, phonological and phonemic awareness, and vocabulary and comprehension development.

Evidence-based Curriculum

An age-appropriate curriculum that demonstrates a statistically significant effect on improving student outcomes or other relevant outcomes based on:

- strong evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented experimental study;
- moderate evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented quasi-experimental study; or,
- promising evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented correlational study with statistical controls for selection bias.

SOURCE: MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 (1).

Background

This chapter provides a brief overview of:

- the creation and purpose of the prekindergarten program; and,
- the statutory requirements of the prekindergarten program.

Creation and Purpose of the Prekindergarten Program

In its 2013 Regular Session, the Legislature enacted the “Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013,” which directs MDE to implement a voluntary prekindergarten program in the state on a phased-in basis. The prekindergarten program’s purpose is to help ensure that all children have access to quality early childhood education and development services.

MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 (2) outlines the following findings of the Legislature with regard to ensuring that all children have access to quality early childhood education and development services:

- (a) Parents have the primary duty to educate their young preschool children;*
- (b) The State of Mississippi can assist and educate parents in their role as the primary caregivers and educators of young preschool children;*
- (c) There is a need to explore innovative approaches and strategies for aiding parents and families in the education and development of young preschool children; and,*
- (d) There exists a patchwork of prekindergarten entities but no coordination of services and there needs to be a coordination of these services.*

Based upon these findings, the Legislature authorized and directed MDE to implement a prekindergarten program in the state on a phased-in basis. MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 (3), also known as the Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013, states:

Effective with the 2013-2014 school year, the Mississippi State Department of Education shall establish a voluntary prekindergarten program, which shall be a collaboration among the entities providing prekindergarten programs including Head Start, licensed child care facilities and licensed public, parochial and private school prekindergarten programs. This program shall be implemented no later than the 2014-2015 school year.

In the 2013-2014 school year, 11 early learning collaboratives began implementing a prekindergarten program. Since then, from FY 2015 to FY 2023, an additional 27 collaboratives have implemented a prekindergarten program.

As of FY 2023, there are **37** early learning collaboratives in Mississippi. During the 2022-2023 school year, the collaboratives served approximately **5,329** students.

Statutory Requirements of the Prekindergarten Program

MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 outlines MDE's responsibilities in administering the prekindergarten program, eligibility criteria for the awarding of funds to collaboratives, and funding requirements of the program.

MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 (3) (b) states that the prekindergarten program "shall be a collaboration among the entities providing prekindergarten programs including Head Start, licensed child care facilities and licensed public, parochial and private school prekindergarten programs." The following section outlines:

- MDE's statutory responsibilities in implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the voluntary prekindergarten program;
- the eligibility criteria for entities requesting funding for their prekindergarten program; and,
- requirements for funding collaboratives.

The Legislature amended MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 during its 2021 Regular Session.

MDE's Statutory Responsibilities

MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 (3) designates MDE as the entity responsible for administering, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the voluntary prekindergarten program, including the awards of funding and the application process. Specifically, MDE's statutory responsibilities include:

- establishing a rigorous and transparent application process for the awarding of funds;
- establishing monitoring policies and procedures that, at minimum, include at least one site visit per year;
- providing technical assistance to collaboratives and their providers to improve the quality of prekindergarten programs;
- evaluation of the effectiveness of each early childhood collaborative and each prekindergarten provider;
- ensuring that collaboratives provide each parent enrolling a child in the program with a profile of every prekindergarten provider participating in the collaborative's geographic area;
- adopting a minimum rate of readiness that each prekindergarten provider must meet in order to remain eligible for program funds (MDE must recognize each child's unique pattern of development when adopting a rate);

Amended by the
Legislature in
2021.

- making an annual report to the Legislature and the Governor regarding program operations and outcomes; and,
- providing to the Legislature and the Governor a rigorous evaluation of program effectiveness using longitudinal data to measure short-term and long-term effects, including both achievement and non-achievement effects, every three years.

Prior to the amendments made by the Legislature during its 2021 Regular Session, MDE only had to submit annual reports to the Legislature and Governor, not a rigorous evaluation. As required by the amended law, MDE submitted its first rigorous evaluation on July 1, 2023.

Eligibility Criteria for the Program

Per MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 (3) (b), eligible entities may submit applications for program funds to:

- defray the cost of additional and/or more qualified teaching staff, appropriate educational materials, and equipment, and to improve the quality of educational experiences offered to four-year-old children in early care and education programs; and/or,
- extend developmentally appropriate education services at such programs currently serving four-year-old children to include practices of high-quality instruction; and,
- administer, implement, monitor, and evaluate the programs; and,
- defray the cost of professional development and age-appropriate child assessment.

According to MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 (3) (d), prekindergarten program funds must be awarded to early childhood collaboratives whose proposed programs meet certain program criteria (e.g., meet certain teacher-child ratios).

Requirements for Funding

During its 2023 Regular Session, the Mississippi Legislature passed H.B. 817 to amend MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 to increase the minimum funding levels for each student enrolled in a full-day program to \$2,500 per student and \$1,250 per student enrolled in a half-day program.

This amendment took effect on July 1, 2023, and will impact collaboratives during the 2023-2024 school year.

According to MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 (3) (h) (iii), funding must be provided to collaboratives on a basis of \$2,150 per student in a full-day program and \$1,075 per student in a half-day program. MDE cannot reserve more than 5% of the appropriation for administrative costs. Funds may be carried over to the next year if they are not used.

Collaboratives must match state funds on a 1:1 basis. Local matching funds can include local tax dollars; federal dollars as allowed; parent tuition; philanthropic contributions; or in-kind donations of facilities, equipment, and services required as part of the program (such as food service or health screenings).

The Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013 provided for a state income tax credit for contributions paid to approved providers or collaboratives not to exceed \$1 million by any individual, corporation, or other entity.

Once MDE approves a collaborative's application and provides funding, the collaborative and/or its prekindergarten providers will receive funds on an ongoing basis unless the collaborative and/or provider no longer meets the criteria to participate in the program.

FY 2020 to FY 2023 Update of the Prekindergarten Program in Mississippi

This chapter provides an overview of:

- the funding appropriated and disbursed to the prekindergarten program from FY 2020 to FY 2023;
- MDE's evaluation of collaborative sites; and,
- the status of prekindergarten programs nationally and in Mississippi.

FY 2020 to FY 2023 Program Funding and Disbursements

From FY 2020 to FY 2023, the Legislature appropriated \$54.5 million to Mississippi's prekindergarten program. This funding assisted 31 of the 37 early learning collaboratives in implementing prekindergarten programs that served approximately 5,329 students in the 2022-2023 school year, and allowed six of the 37 collaboratives to plan (e.g., hire staff, procure supplies) for serving students beginning in FY 2024.

The Legislature appropriated approximately **\$40 million** more in funds to the prekindergarten program from FY 2020 to FY 2023 than from FY 2017 to FY 2019.

From FY 2020 to FY 2023, the Legislature appropriated \$54.5 million to Mississippi's prekindergarten program. In all four years, the Legislature appropriated funds from the general fund, and in FY 2022 and FY 2023, additional funds were also appropriated from the Education Enhancement Fund (EEF).¹

As shown in Exhibit 2 on page 8, the Legislature appropriated:

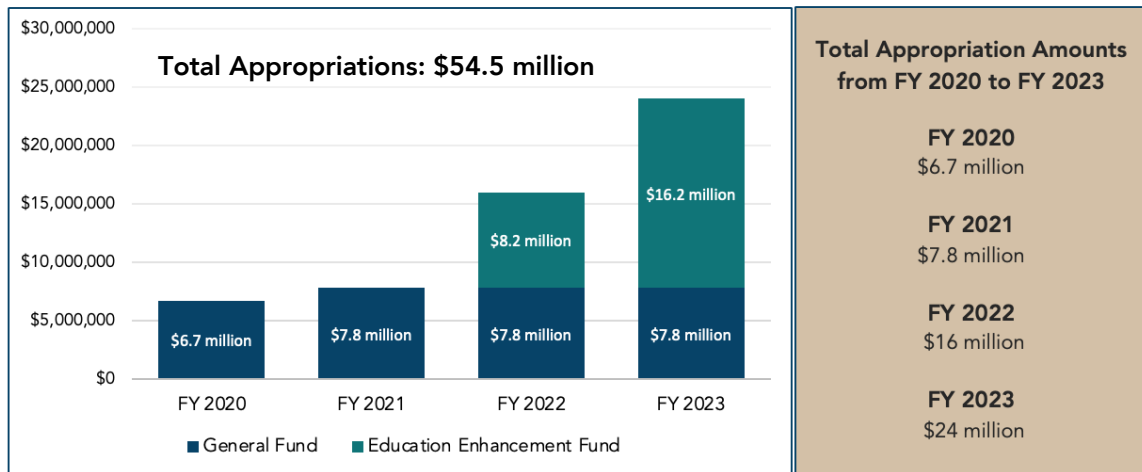
- \$6.7 million in FY 2020;
- \$7.8 million in FY 2021;
- \$16 million in FY 2022; and,
- \$24 million in FY 2023.

Exhibit 2 on page 8 provides the total funds appropriated by the Legislature from FY 2020 to FY 2023, by fund.

In FY 2022 and FY 2023, the Legislature appropriated an additional \$1.5 million and \$3.3 million, respectively, to MDE for early learning coaches. According to MDE, coaches provide support to prekindergarten teachers to ensure program quality and developmental growth in children.

¹ The EEF is a state support special fund created for the supplemental support of K-12, two-year colleges, and four-year Institutions of Higher Learning.

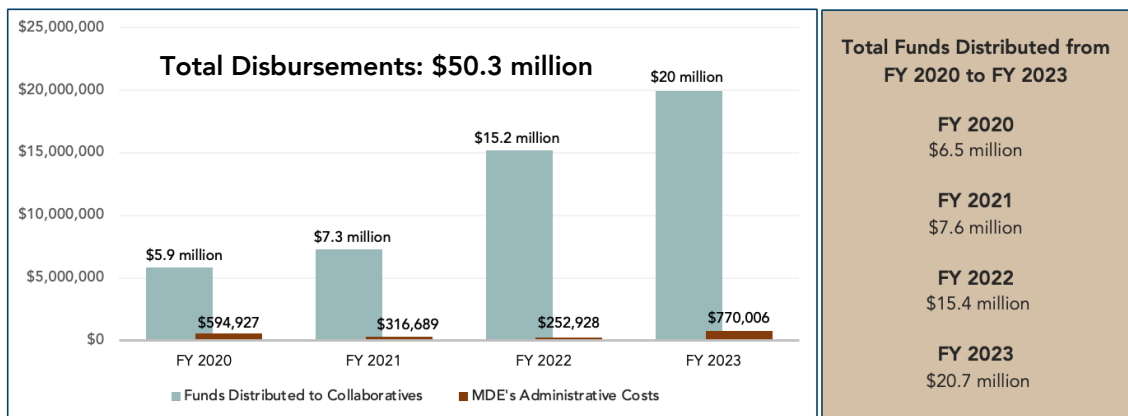
Exhibit 2: FY 2020 to FY 2023 Prekindergarten Program Legislative Appropriations



SOURCE: PEER analysis of MDE’s appropriation bills from the Legislature’s Regular Sessions, 2019 to 2022.

As shown in Exhibit 3 on page 8, MDE has disbursed approximately \$50.3 million to the early learning collaboratives and for administrative costs for the program. As provided in MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51, funds remaining after awards to early learning collaboratives and administrative costs may be carried over in the following year. According to MDE, administrative and carryover funds have been used for grants, travel, an early childhood contractual employee, office supplies, and salaries for staff.

Exhibit 3: FY 2020 to FY 2023 Distribution of Prekindergarten Program Funds



SOURCE: PEER analysis of data provided by MDE.

In its FY 2025 budget request, MDE is requesting an increase in general funds of \$1.4 million to fund an additional 15 early childhood coaches to serve the early learning collaboratives and prekindergarten classrooms. According to MDE, there continues to be a need for more coaches for the collaboratives and prekindergarten classrooms.

Selection Process and Collaboratives that Received Funding in FY 2023

Pursuant to MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 (3) (c), MDE is responsible for administering the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the prekindergarten program, including awards and the application process. As required by state law, MDE created an initial application process for collaboratives seeking funding for their prekindergarten programs. Any collaborative awarded funding by MDE is required to submit an application for continued funding on a timeline set by MDE.

From 2013 to 2023, MDE has selected and approved funding for 39 collaboratives. However, two collaboratives chose not to apply for continued funding in 2016 and 2019. Therefore, there are currently 37 total collaboratives receiving funds through the Early Learning Collaborative Act.

Application Process

MDE groups collaboratives into cohorts based on the year of their initial application and RFP/RFA cycle.

Funding for the Early Learning Collaborative Act is competitive, and when funding is available for new collaboratives, MDE will request applicants for a new cohort. For Cohorts I through IV, MDE

required applicants to respond to a Request for Proposal (RFP) and evaluated collaborative proposals in the following three stages (i.e., review of proposals for eligibility, proposal scoring, and interviews of collaboratives and approval by the Mississippi State Board of Education [MSBE]).

For PEER's additional information on MDE's previous RFP process for collaboratives, refer to PEER Report #640, *2019 Report on Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013: An Evaluation of the Operation and Effectiveness of the Program*.

On July 27, 2022, MDE revised its application process for collaboratives, which impacted Cohort V. MDE now requires collaboratives to submit a Request for Application (RFA) for review, and MDE evaluates these applications in the following two stages:

Stage 1

Review of Applications for Eligibility

Examples of criteria for eligibility include the designation of a Lead Partner that must serve four-year-old children in a classroom by providing direct instruction, and the Lead Partner must have the instructional expertise and operational capacity to implement the collaborative's program. If grantees are deemed not eligible in Stage 1, the application will not be reviewed and will be rejected. During this stage, a team of internal reviewers review the applications based on a set of statutory criteria related to program requirements. During this stage, the reviewers will select grantees with all criteria addressed to be presented to the MSBE for approval.

Stage 2

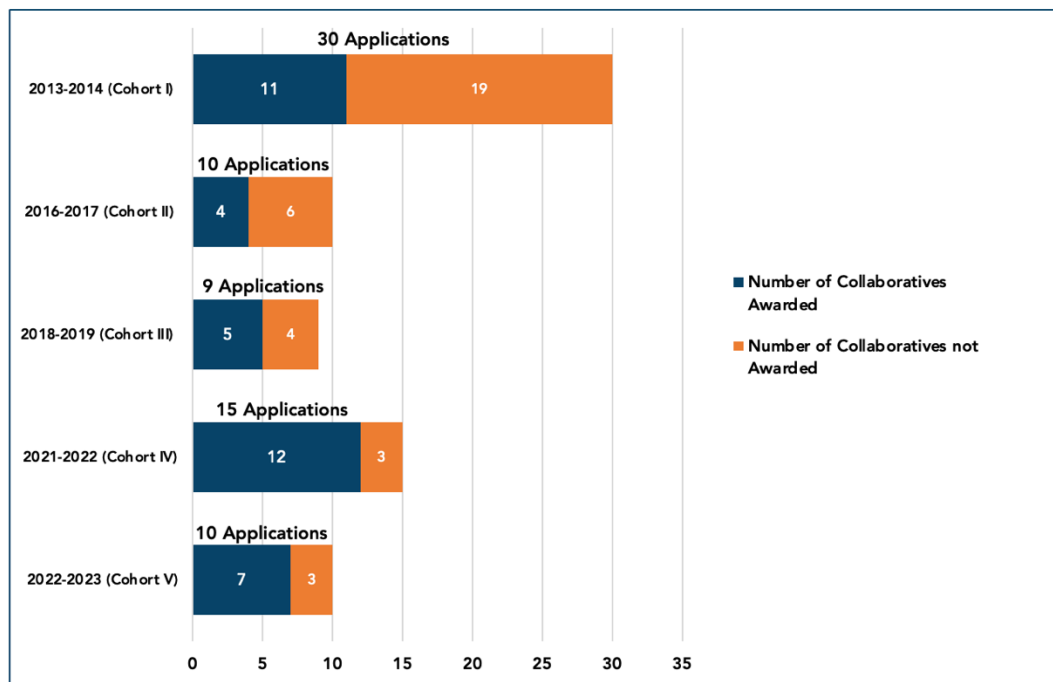
After MSBE Approval

Once applications are approved by the MSBE, applicants will then complete an implementation plan with assistance from MDE's Office of Early Childhood. MDE staff provides technical assistance in the beginning of the process to the collaboratives so they can plan and prepare the set-up, coordination, and implementation of the program. After the implementation plan has been approved, the grant agreements are then signed, and the project moves forward.

According to MDE, the changes to the application process were made to encourage collaboration and provide collaboratives with extra support at the beginning of the process and implementation.

As of FY 2023, MDE has completed a total of five RFP/RFA cycles for Early Learning Collaborative awards. From 2013 to 2023, a total of 74 collaboratives have applied for funding. MDE’s five RFP/RFA cycles have resulted in approved funding for 39 collaboratives within five cohort groups. Exhibit 4 on page 10 shows the number of applications submitted to MDE during each RFP/RFA cycle, including the number of collaboratives awarded funding and the number of collaboratives not selected by MDE to receive funding.

Exhibit 4: Total Number of Applications Submitted to MDE, by Year of RFP/RFA Cycle



SOURCE: PEER analysis of data provided by MDE.

Applications for Continued Funding

To receive continued funding, collaboratives must submit a continuation application, which requires collaboratives to provide information related to the scope of work and the budget and to complete required forms (i.e., the Partner Identification Form, which must be signed by each partner in the collaborative). According to MDE’s continuation for funding application, prekindergarten programs in Head Start centers, licensed childcare facilities, public, parochial, or private schools must maintain a stakeholder council called an Early Learning Collaborative involving a minimum of a school district and a Head Start (if in existence) of the aforementioned entities.

Cohorts I, II, and III have applied for continued prekindergarten program funding. Two collaboratives (one in Cohort I and one in Cohort II) did not reapply for the continuation of funding and are no longer active.

MDE has awarded continued funding three times, including in 2016 for Cohort I, 2019 for Cohorts I and II, and 2021 for Cohorts I, II, and III. This has resulted in:

<p>Cohort I</p> <p>10 of the 11</p> <p>Collaboratives from Cohort I applied for and received continued funding for FYs 2017 through 2019, and again for FY 2020 through 2024.</p> <p>The Desoto County Early Learning Collaborative did not apply for continued funding in 2016.</p>	<p>Cohort II</p> <p>3 of the 4</p> <p>Collaboratives from Cohort II applied for and received continued funding for FYs 2020 through 2024.</p> <p>The Canton Early Learning Collaborative did not apply for continued funding.</p>	<p>Cohort III</p> <p>All 5</p> <p>Collaboratives from Cohort III applied for and received continued funding for FYs 2020 through 2024.</p>
<p>Cohorts IV (12 Collaboratives) and V (7 Collaboratives) are not required to apply for continued funding until FY 2024.</p>		
<p>After the continuation of funding process and the addition of Cohorts IV and V, there are now 37 Collaboratives receiving funding for prekindergarten programs.</p>		

Approved Funding for Cohorts IV and V

In both the 2021 and 2022 Regular Sessions, the Legislature appropriated additional funding to MDE to expand prekindergarten in Mississippi. Given this allocation, MDE released an RFP in 2021 and 2022 to add new collaboratives. As a result, the State Board of Education approved:

- 12 new collaboratives (Cohort IV) in April 2022; and,
- 7 new collaboratives (Cohort V) in September 2022.

Cohort IV began serving students during the 2022-2023 school year. Only one collaborative in Cohort V served students during the 2022-2023 school year. The other six collaboratives in this cohort were allowed to plan (e.g., hire staff, procure supplies) beginning in the 2022-2023 school year to serve children beginning in the 2023-2024 school year.

According to MDE, the number of classrooms and students served varies by each collaborative. The number of students served includes all children served in the classrooms, even children benefiting from the program who were between the ages of three and five. During the 2022-2023 school year, there were children enrolled in 31 of the 37 collaboratives. The 31 collaboratives comprised 155 sites housing 313 classrooms serving 5,329 children as of January 2023. According to MDE, fluctuations in child enrollment can occur from year to year and throughout a school year, as the number of four-year-old children in each collaborative area may change due to population shifts or family relocation.

Exhibit 5 on page 12 provides a summary of collaborative funding, sites, classrooms, and





A site is a school in a collaborative.

students in FY 2023, by cohort. Further, Exhibit 6 on page 13 provides a map of all collaboratives.

Refer to Appendix A on page 29 for detailed information on collaboratives operating from FY 2020 to FY 2023.

In FY 2023, Mississippi provided approximately \$20 million in funding to 37 collaboratives. These collaboratives operated 155 sites with 313 classrooms to serve a total of 5,329 students.

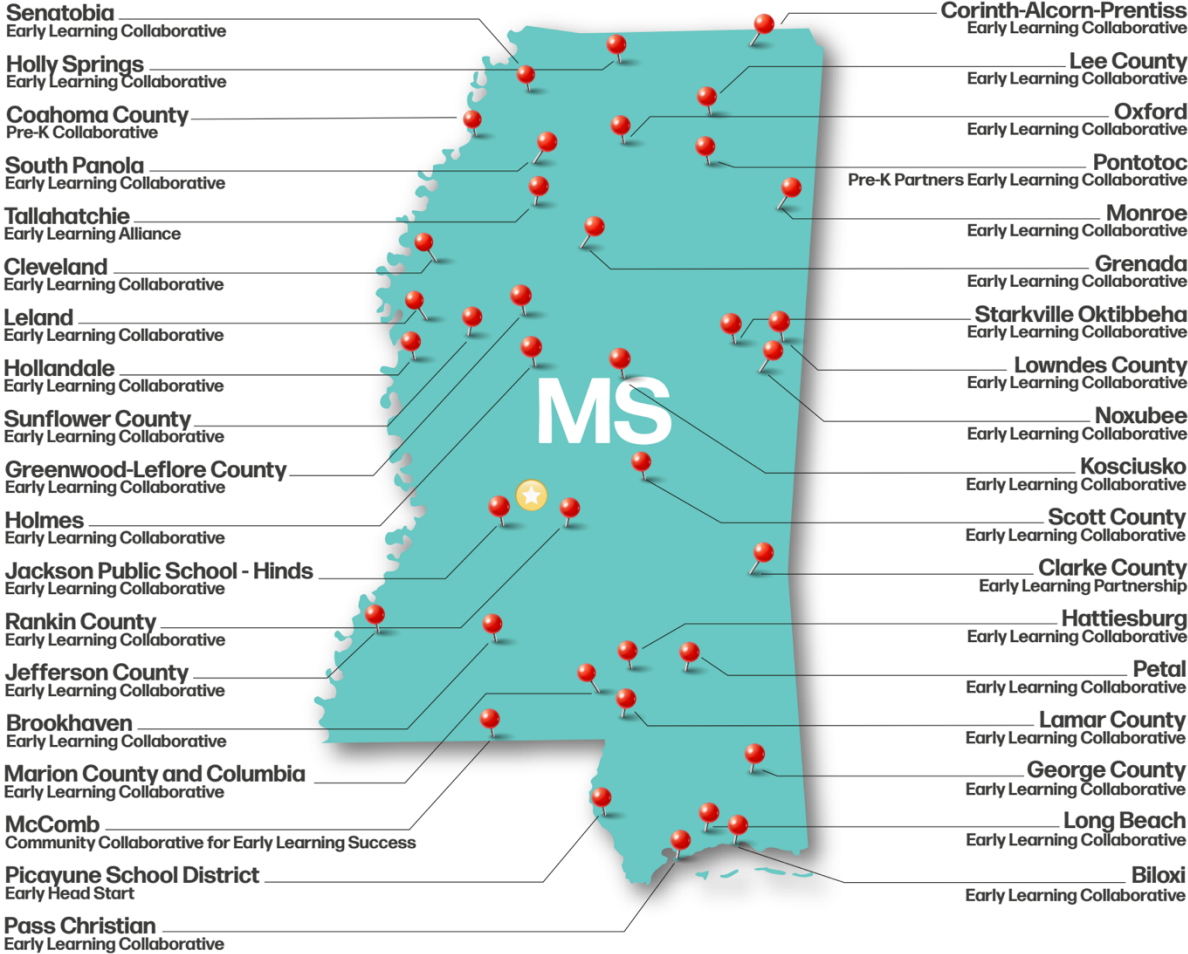
Exhibit 5: Summary of Funding, Sites, Classrooms, and Students in FY 2023

	Cohort I	Cohort II	Cohort III	Cohort IV	Cohort V
 Collaboratives	10	3	5	12	7
 FY 23 Funding	\$4.6 million	\$1.5 million	\$3.5 million	\$7.9 million	\$2.6 million
 Sites & Classrooms	44 Sites with 80 Classrooms	10 Sites with 32 Classrooms	33 Sites with 65 Classrooms	65 Sites with 131 Classrooms	3 Sites with 5 Classrooms
 Students	1,424	575	1,104	2,160	66

SOURCE: PEER analysis of data provided by MDE.

Appendix A on page 29 provides detailed information on collaboratives operating from FY 2020 to FY 2023, including funding, total number of sites, classrooms, and students in FY 2023.

Exhibit 6: Map of Early Learning Collaboratives in FY 2023



SOURCE: MDE.

MDE’s Evaluation of Collaborative Sites

MDE evaluates the effectiveness of collaboratives and sites in two ways: by determining their “rate of readiness” as evidenced by scores on three assessment tools, and by monitoring each site to ensure compliance with program requirements. Based on the rate of readiness scores for the 2022-2023 school year, 138 of 155 sites were rated successful, and 17 were placed on probation.

Pursuant to MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 (3) (c) (iv), MDE is required to evaluate the effectiveness of each early childhood collaborative and each prekindergarten provider. In March 2016, the State Board of Education approved the *Effectiveness*

MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 (3) (c) (iv) requires MDE to adopt a minimum rate of readiness that each prekindergarten provider must meet in order to remain eligible for program funds.

Evaluation for Early Learning Collaboratives and Other Pre-K Classrooms. The evaluation consists of two parts:

- the Rate of Readiness; and,
- Monitoring.

Rate of Readiness

According to MDE, the rate of readiness is a score assigned to each site through the completion of specific evaluation tools that assess:

- how children grow academically and developmentally throughout a school year; and,
- how the classroom environment and teaching practices support children’s learning.

MDE uses the following three assessment tools to measure the rate of readiness:

- **Kindergarten Readiness Assessment:** A computer-based adaptive assessment created by Renaissance Learning, to classify student performance into one of four reading levels. MDE requires all prekindergarten students enrolled in the collaboratives to participate in the assessment each year in the fall and spring.
- **BRIGANCE III:** A comprehensive early learning observational screener used to gather information to drive classroom instruction, identify the need for additional screening, including health screenings, and provide additional information to families about the developmental milestones of their children. In January 2020, MDE entered into a contract with Curriculum Associates, LLC, to provide BRIGANCE III as an evaluation screening tool for all prekindergarten programs (i.e., collaborative and non-collaborative).
- **Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS):** An observational classroom instrument developed by the Curry School Center for Advanced Study of Teaching Learning to assess classroom quality in infant, toddler, prekindergarten, and kindergarten through twelfth-grade classrooms. CLASS is administered by MDE-certified observers, who rate various factors on a 7-point scale, from low to high. CLASS assesses teachers through three domains: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. Each classroom receives a four-cycle observation, with each cycle lasting between 15 to 20 minutes depending on the activity. Observation cycles included whole group, small group, and learning center instruction.

Rate of Readiness Scoring and Results

Each site receives a score based on a 100-point scale, which includes the following categories:

- up to 25 points on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment;
- up to 25 points on the Brigance III; and,
- up to 50 points on the CLASS ratings.

MDE assigns each site one of the following overall rates of readiness:

Successful	Probation	Non-eligible
<p>Site Score of 70+ Points</p> <p>MDE expects each site within a collaborative to achieve a successful score.</p>	<p>Site Score of 69 Points and below</p> <p>The first year in this category results in a one-year probationary period, in which the site must score 70+ points to receive continued funding.</p>	<p>Sites on Probation with a Score of 69 Points and below</p> <p>If the probationary year is complete and the site still does not achieve a successful score, then the program will not be eligible for funding.</p>

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the State Board of Education:

- Passed waivers on April 16, 2020 (school year 2019-2020), to suspend observations for CLASS and Brigrance III, monitoring visits, and the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (passed by the Board at its March 26, 2020, meeting).
- Passed waivers on February 25, 2021 (school year 2020-2021), to suspend CLASS observations and utilization of student assessment results in the Rate of Readiness and provide a one-year suspension of the instructional time and student membership requirement for reimbursement of the collaboratives.

In the 2020-2021 school year, the collaboratives were still required to assess children with the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment and Brigrance III, and then use the data from the assessments to review the growth of children, as well as to address instruction and the needs of the children during the year.

During the 2021-2022 school year, the waivers expired. Based on the rate of readiness scores for 2021-2022, 84 sites were successful, and five sites were placed on probation and were required to achieve a successful rating during the 2022-2023 school year in order to continue receiving funding. The five probation sites were in three collaboratives:

- Corinth-Alcorn-Prentiss Collaborative (one site);
- Hattiesburg Early Learning Collaborative (two sites); and,
- Picayune Early Learning Collaborative (two sites).

Based on the rate of readiness scores for 2022-2023, 138 sites were successful, and 17 sites were placed on probation. The 17 sites were in 10 collaboratives:

- Clarke County Early Learning (one site);
- Cleveland Early Learning Collaborative (one site);
- Hattiesburg Early Learning Collaborative (one site);
- Holmes County Early Learning Collaborative (two sites);

No sites scored below 69 two years in a row. While the Hattiesburg Early Learning Collaborative had sites on probation in both school years, the sites placed on probation were different in each year.

- Jackson-Hinds Early Learning Collaborative (four sites);
- Kosciusko Early Learning Collaborative (one site);
- Rankin Early Learning Collaborative (two sites);
- Scott County Early Learning Collaborative (three sites);
- South Panola Early Learning Collaborative (one site); and,
- Sunflower County Early Learning Collaborative (one site).

According to MDE, its staff provides intensive face-to-face technical assistance and coaching with teachers and administrators located in sites on probation. This includes the creation of an improvement plan for all parties to follow throughout the school year.

For PEER’s findings regarding rate of readiness, refer to PEER Report #640, *2019 Report on Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013: An Evaluation of the Operation and Effectiveness of the Program.*

Monitoring

MDE monitors each site’s compliance with the Early Learning Collaborative Act and other MDE requirements by reviewing documentation submitted annually by each site and by conducting annual site visits. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, which encompassed school years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021, the State Board of Education suspended the monitoring requirement for Early Learning Collaboratives. MDE began monitoring collaboratives again beginning in the 2021-2022 school year.

MDE monitors Early Learning Collaboratives by using a list of questions and documenting compliance with each component. The monitoring process primarily consists of administrative items, (e.g., teacher credentials, square footage of classrooms, lesson planning procedures). Sites must submit documentation to MDE demonstrating compliance with each program component.

Also, MDE representatives visit each site at least once per year. Site visits consist of desk audits, classroom observations, and meeting with staff of the collaboratives.

Results of MDE’s monitoring of collaboratives include:

2021-2022 School Year

MDE completed monitoring visits with all 18 collaboratives (168 classrooms) from April to May 2022.

All collaboratives were within 95% to 100% compliance, except for the Cleveland Early Learning Collaborative.

Eight collaboratives received 100% compliance with MDE’s monitoring requirements.

2022-2023 School Year

MDE completed monitoring visits with 31 collaboratives (313 classrooms) from March to May 2023.

All collaboratives were within 90% to 100% compliance, except for the Hattiesburg (76%), Leland (78%), Marion-Columbia (89%), Pontotoc (89%), Senatobia (88%), and South Panola (78%).

Six collaboratives received 100% compliance with MDE’s monitoring requirements.

For any areas in which sites did not achieve compliance, they were required to create a plan with action items and due dates for compliance.

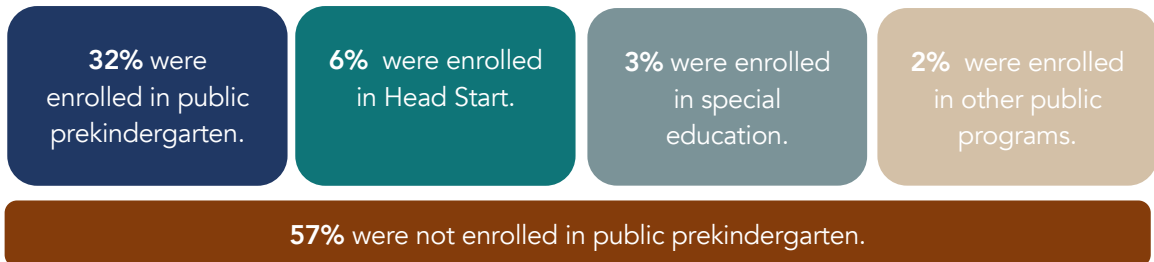
Status of Prekindergarten Programs

According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), almost 1.26 million four-year-old children (32%) were enrolled in public prekindergarten programs in 44 states and the District of Columbia in the 2021-2022 school year. Mississippi enrolled 8% of the state's four-year-old children in its early learning collaboratives; however, when combined with Head Start, Special Education, and other public programs, approximately 53% of the state's four-year-old children were enrolled in public prekindergarten programs in 2021-2022 school year. NIEER's 2022 annual report noted that Mississippi met all ten of NIEER's standards for effective prekindergarten education policies.

The Rutgers Graduate School of Education's National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) publishes an annual State of Preschool report, which contains information related to funding, access, and policies of public prekindergarten programs across the nation.

Enrollment

In its most recent annual report for 2021-2022, NIEER found that approximately 1.53 million students (ages 3 to 4) were enrolled in 62 public prekindergarten programs in 44 states and the District of Columbia in 2021-2022. Nationally, specifically for the four-year-old population:



The report showed that enrollment in public prekindergarten in 2021-2022 varied widely among states. Six states had no prekindergarten program—Idaho, Indiana, Montana, New Hampshire, South Dakota, and Wyoming. The majority of states enrolled between one and 50% of four-year-olds (e.g., Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee). Mississippi enrolled 8% of four-year-olds in public prekindergarten. Eight states and the District of Columbia enrolled between 51 and 83% of four-year-olds (e.g., Florida, Georgia, and West Virginia).

When combined with Head Start, special education, and other public programs, approximately 53% of Mississippi's four-year-olds attended public prekindergarten programs in 2021-2022. Many of the state's children also attend private prekindergarten programs; however, there is no single and complete source from which to obtain data on enrollment in these programs.

Funding

Total state prekindergarten spending reached nearly \$10 billion nationwide. Average state spending per child was \$6,571 although this amount varied widely across the states, with a range

of \$2,027 to \$20,442. Seven states and the District of Columbia spent over \$10,000 per child, while Massachusetts spent the lowest of all states at \$2,027 per child. Nine states spent less than \$4,000 in state funds per child, including Mississippi, which spent \$3,145 per child.

Quality Standards Benchmarks

NIEER set ten quality standards benchmarks as minimums for effective prekindergarten education and measured state policies against those benchmarks. The benchmarks include:

- Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS);
- curriculum supports;
- teacher degree;
- teacher specialized training;
- assistant teacher degree;
- staff professional development;
- maximum class size of 20;
- staff-child ratio (1:10);
- screenings and referrals; and,
- Continuous Quality Improvement System (CQIS).

According to NIEER, Mississippi met all ten quality standards benchmarks in 2021-2022.

In its annual report, NIEER determined that five states, including Mississippi, met all ten standards. Eight states and the District of Columbia met less than half of the quality standards benchmarks.

PEER's Independent Analysis of MDE's Evaluation of the Program

As explained on pages 5 and 6, during its 2021 Regular Session, the Legislature amended MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 (3) (g) to require MDE to submit a rigorous evaluation of program effectiveness every three years, with the first report due on July 1, 2023. The evaluation should use longitudinal data to measure short-term and long-term effects, including both achievement and non-achievement effects (e.g., behavioral outcomes). After each three-year report, this CODE Section directs the PEER Committee to review the report and the intervening annual reports and submit an independent summary of its findings prior to the next legislative session.

MDE contracted with Hanover Research Council (Hanover) from November 9, 2020, through June 30, 2023, to "provide research services on any topic as well as the right to ask Hanover to expedite work of particular urgency." Hanover conducted the three-year evaluation of the prekindergarten program as part of its contract responsibilities.

In accordance with MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 (3) (g), MDE provided PEER with its evaluation of program effectiveness, along with annual reports for the program.

This chapter provides a discussion of:

- the outcomes measured in MDE's evaluation;
- issues impacting MDE's evaluation conclusions; and,
- PEER's independent evaluation of prekindergarten program data.

Outcomes Measured in MDE's Evaluation

MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 (3) (g) requires that MDE measure short-term and long-term effects of the prekindergarten program; however, specific measures are not defined in state law. MDE included in its report a range of achievement and non-achievement outcomes. Additional outcomes could be included in future evaluations to ensure the best possible analysis of program effectiveness.

MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 (3) (g) does not define the specific outcome measures to include in MDE's statutorily required evaluation. The law does, however, require MDE to measure short-term and long-term effects, including achievement and non-achievement effects.

Hanover prepared a report for MDE which included information pertaining to measuring and reporting student outcomes (i.e., effects). Hanover states the following:

Despite various reporting formats, most state agencies assess similar metrics for program quality and short- and long-term student educational outcomes. Some state agencies focus on short-term outcomes such as kindergarten readiness or achievement in elementary grades. In contrast, other agencies focus on long-term outcomes by examining metrics like graduation rates, post-secondary attainment, and operations or teacher quality metrics.

Exhibit 7 on page 20 shows which student outcome measures states commonly assess and which measures MDE (through Hanover) included in its effectiveness evaluation:

Exhibit 7: Student Outcome Measures and Inclusion in MDE’s Report

Outcome Measure	Included in MDE’s Report	Not Included in MDE’s Report	Data Not Yet Available*
Kindergarten Readiness or Early Development Assessment	✓		
Math and Reading Proficiency	✓		
Science Proficiency**	✓		
Chronic Absenteeism	✓		
Disciplinary Incidents	✓		
Grade Retention		✓	
Special Education Services/Exits		✓	
On-time Graduation Rate			✓
College Enrollment			✓

*Students attending collaboratives have not yet reached the age or grade for which this outcome may be measured.

**Hanover did not include this measure as a commonly measured outcome; however, MDE included science proficiency in its evaluation because it measures student achievement in a core subject area.

SOURCE: PEER analysis of data provided by MDE.

See pages 24 through 27 for more discussion regarding the measurement of achievement and non-achievement outcomes.

Issues Impacting MDE’s Evaluation Conclusions

Data issues and methodology limitations hinder the conclusions drawn in MDE’s evaluation of program effectiveness.

Before discussing MDE’s evaluation of program effectiveness, conducted by Hanover, it is important to note that PEER identified numerous data issues and methodology limitations that impact MDE’s evaluation conclusions. One limitation of concern is MDE’s inability to track all students attending prekindergarten through an early learning collaborative. Any student attending

Since the program's inception in 2013, students in Head Start who participated in a collaborative have not been assigned an identification number upon entry into pre-K and are therefore unable to be tracked over time. Head Start accounts for 39% of collaborative sites.

Head Start through a collaborative cannot be tracked by MDE through its Mississippi Student Information System (MSIS) because those students are not provided an identification number. According to MDE, MSIS does not currently have the capability to assign identification numbers to those students. This means that students attending Head Start through a collaborative cannot be accurately accounted for in the analysis due to those students not having a unique statewide identification number. As a result, students in 59 of the 152

collaborative sites (39%) are not counted as having attended prekindergarten. Therefore, these children cannot be tracked or have their performance assessed on indicators selected by MDE. Further, if any of these children enroll in a public school, they will be assigned an MSIS number, and their record will be indistinguishable from that of a child who did not attend prekindergarten at all. This systematic loss of data necessarily distorts analyses of collaborative performance.

According to MDE, it is in the process of transitioning to MSIS 2.0, which will allow students in Head Start participating in a collaborative to be assigned an identification number. However, this will only impact new collaborative students and not existing collaborative students.

It is important to note that there are other issues with MDE's prekindergarten data, including:

- students with test records but no enrollment record; and,
- students with contradictory data (e.g., a Kindergarten Readiness test coded as being a before prekindergarten assessment, taken by an individual enrolled in kindergarten).

While there are several thousand of these errors in the dataset provided by MDE, there are several hundred thousand students included in the data. This means that these errors appear to represent ordinary data entry problems.

As will be discussed in the next section, PEER's analysis did not produce the same numbers as Hanover's. It is possible that the differences are due to differing methodological choices. PEER requested Hanover's operational definitions, but as of September 25, 2023, had not yet received them.

Additionally, Hanover's evaluation does not distinguish between those differences in students' performance that are reasonably attributable to ordinary random variation and those that are a result of participation in the collaborative.

While PEER's analysis considers random variation in student performance, PEER's statistical tests cannot be projected onto Hanover's counts. Therefore, any conclusions in MDE's evaluation of collaboratives should be interpreted with caution.

PEER's Independent Evaluation of Prekindergarten Program Data

From the data captured, PEER determined that collaborative students performed statistically better than the comparison group on kindergarten readiness tests, worse on third and fifth grade math achievement tests, and similar to the comparison group on all other achievement tests. Notably, collaborative students outperformed the comparison group in all behavioral outcomes measured (i.e., disciplinary incidents, suspensions, and chronic absences).

As required by MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 (3) (g), MDE submitted its three-year prekindergarten evaluation, conducted by Hanover, to PEER on July 1, 2023. In its evaluation of collaborative and non-collaborative students, Hanover compared:

- mean scores on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment at several stages of student progress;
- pass rates on the Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP) tests in math and English language arts from third grade to sixth grade, and science at fifth grade;² and,
- disciplinary incidents, suspensions, and chronic absences.

Hanover's primary findings regarding short-term and long-term impacts were:

- Students who participated in a district-run prekindergarten program (whether in a collaborative or not) performed better academically in earlier grades compared to students who did not participate in a district-run pre-K program.
- Collaborative students had higher pass rates and proficiency rates on state tests in English Language Arts and Math in Grades 3 and 4 compared to non-collaborative students and students who did not participate in a district-run prekindergarten program.
- Students who participated in a district-run prekindergarten (whether in a collaborative or not) were less likely to have behavioral outcomes in later grades.
- Collaborative students were less likely to have behavioral outcomes than non-collaborative students.

All reported results should be interpreted with caution due to issues with the dataset provided.

It is important to note that Hanover's evaluation should be interpreted with caution:

- The fact that collaborative Head Start students are not included in the data as having attended prekindergarten but are subsequently counted as non-prekindergarten students if they reenter the public school system, renders a decisive analysis impossible.
- Hanover's analysis does not distinguish between those differences in students' performance that are reasonably attributable to ordinary random variation and those that are a result of participation in the collaborative. Hanover's analysis might demonstrate that collaborative students have a higher mean score on the Kindergarten Readiness

² The MAAP also measures student achievement in grades 7 and 8; however, students who participated in an early learning collaborative have not yet reached those grade levels.

Assessment before kindergarten, but it does not demonstrate that the difference between groups is greater than ordinary random variation. One cannot, from Hanover’s analysis alone, conclude that any group is performing better or worse than any other.

- Hanover’s analysis does not attempt to present or test any causal hypothesis. The fact that children who attended a collaborative outperformed children who did not attend a collaborative does not necessarily mean that collaborative attendance is responsible for this difference in performance.
- As previously discussed, PEER could not replicate Hanover’s findings using the same dataset provided to Hanover and operational definitions provided by MDE. In some cases, the differences between PEER’s findings and Hanover’s findings were relatively small. However, there were some cases where the differences between findings were relatively large, particularly with regard to behavioral outcomes.

In attempting to reproduce Hanover’s findings, PEER expected that the goal was to draw meaningful distinctions between the performance of collaborative attendees and other children (i.e., non-prekindergarten attendees and non-collaborative attendees). Therefore, PEER:

- isolated 29 comparisons involving students who attended a prekindergarten collaborative;
- reproduced those comparisons from the dataset and operational definitions provided by MDE; and,
- performed the statistical tests on the results.

PEER determined that, of 29 comparisons involving students who attended a prekindergarten collaborative, those students performed significantly better than the comparison group in 10, significantly worse than the comparison group in two (i.e., third- and sixth-grade math), and indistinguishably in the remaining 17.

See Appendix B on page 32 for a breakdown of the difference between groups by outcome measure and comparison group.

The following provides a summary of PEER’s findings:

<i>Collaborative Students Performed Better on:</i>	<i>Collaborative Students Performed Worse on:</i>	<i>Collaborative Students Performed Similarly on:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prekindergarten post-tests; • Kindergarten pre-tests; • Kindergarten post-tests (compared to students who had no record of attending prekindergarten); • Disciplinary incidents; • Suspensions; and, • Chronic absences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Third- and fifth-grade math achievement tests (compared to students who had no record of attending prekindergarten). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kindergarten post-tests (compared to students who attended a non-collaborative program); • English Language Arts achievement tests in grades third through sixth; • Math achievement tests in third through sixth grade (compared to students who attended a non-collaborative program); and, • Fifth-grade Science achievement tests.

Evidence Base of the Mississippi Prekindergarten Curricula

This chapter provides a discussion of curricula used in Mississippi's prekindergarten program, including:

- curricula used by collaboratives for the 2022-2023 school year;
- MDE's compliance with evidence-based requirements; and,
- evidence of long-term effects of interventions similar to Mississippi's prekindergarten program.

Curricula Used in Mississippi's Prekindergarten Program for the 2022-2023 School Year

MDE requires any collaboratives entering the program during or after the 2022-2023 school year to use the new Mississippi Beginnings: PreK curriculum, while allowing collaboratives existing prior to the 2022-2023 school year to choose to switch to the new curriculum or continue using Opening the World of Learning (OWL), MDE's previously preferred curriculum.

MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 (3) (d) specifies that funding shall be awarded to early childhood collaboratives whose proposed programs meet the program criteria. The criteria shall include the use of a curriculum aligned with the comprehensive early learning standards and shall be based on strong evidence, moderate evidence if no strong evidence curriculum is available, or promising evidence if no strong or moderate evidence curriculum is available.

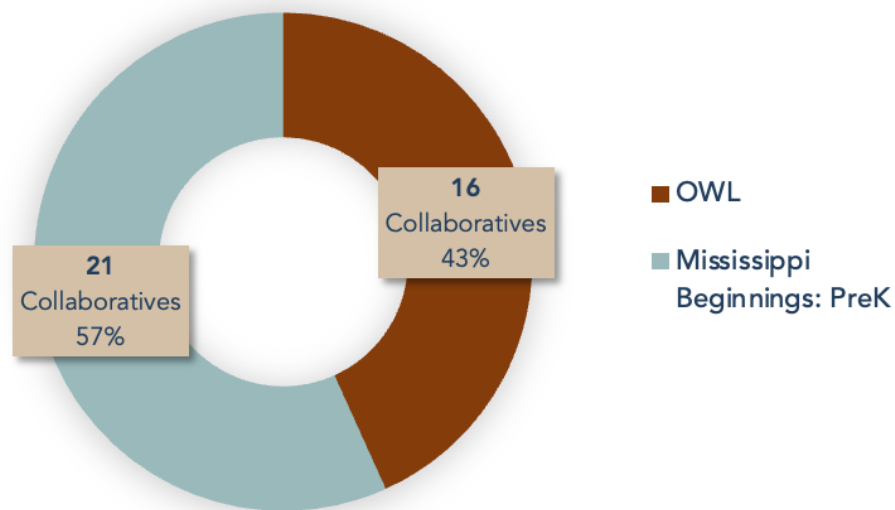
As shown in Exhibit 8 on page 25, during the 2022-2023 school year, the 37 collaboratives used two³ different curricula:

- Mississippi Beginnings: PreK (21 collaboratives); and,
- Opening the World of Learning (OWL) (16 collaboratives).

Exhibit 8 on page 25, provides a count of the curricula used by collaboratives during the 2022-2023 school year.

³ According to MDE some collaboratives also use Building Blocks as a supplemental mathematics curriculum along with OWL and Mississippi Beginnings: PreK.

Exhibit 8: Curricula Used by Collaboratives for the 2022-2023 School Year



Six collaboratives during the 2022-2023 school year were allowed to plan (e.g., hire staff, procure supplies) to serve children beginning in the 2023-2024 school year. These collaboratives will use Mississippi Beginnings: PreK.

SOURCE: PEER analysis of data provided by MDE.

During the 2022-2023 school year, MDE required new collaboratives (Cohorts IV and V) to utilize the Mississippi Beginnings: PreK curriculum, while existing collaboratives (Cohorts I, II, and III) had the option to continue with OWL or change to Mississippi Beginnings: PreK. As shown in Exhibit 8, 57% of collaboratives used the Mississippi Beginnings: PreK curriculum during the 2022-2023 school year. According to MDE, all collaboratives will need to switch to the Mississippi Beginnings: PreK curriculum. However, MDE has not yet set a date for that change to occur. Two collaboratives, one from Cohort I and one from Cohort II, have made the transition from OWL to Mississippi Beginnings: PreK.

MDE's Compliance with Evidence-based Requirements

Based on the amended statutory definition of "evidence-based curriculum," both Mississippi Beginnings: PreK and OWL meet the evidence-based standard. However, the evidence base for Mississippi Beginnings: PreK is larger and more substantial than that for OWL.

During its 2021 Regular Session, the Legislature amended MISS. CODE ANN. Section 37-21-51 to modify the definition of "evidence-based" curricula that collaboratives can use for their prekindergarten programs. As of July 1, 2021, in order to meet program criteria and receive state funding, collaboratives are required to select an age-appropriate curriculum that demonstrates a statistically significant effect on improving student outcomes or other relevant outcomes based on:

- strong evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented experimental study;
- moderate evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented quasi-experimental study (if no strong evidence curriculum is available); or,
- promising evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented correlational study with statistical controls for selection bias (if no strong or moderate evidence curriculum is available).

Prior to July 1, 2021, MDE and state law defined evidence-based curricula for the collaboratives as an intervention program that has had multiple site randomized controlled trials across heterogeneous populations demonstrating that the program is effective for the population and that does not have an equivalent or more substantiated body of rigorous evaluation demonstrating its ineffectiveness.

In addition, the curriculum must be aligned with Mississippi’s Early Learning and Development Standards, which outline goals for children from birth through four years old. MDE asserts that the requirement that an early learning curriculum be aligned with the Comprehensive Early Learning Standards disqualifies most other curricula.

PEER determined the following regarding the curricula used by collaboratives:

- OWL appears to have at least moderate evidence according to the previously stated definition. However, it is important to note that OWL has had at least one study showing no effects on student learning. Because of the results of this study, OWL would not qualify as evidence-based using federal guidelines for evidence-based programs.⁴
- Mississippi Beginnings: PreK (which is based on a curriculum, Focus on Early Learning, used in Boston) appears to have at least moderate evidence of effectiveness. There are more studies behind Mississippi Beginnings: PreK than there are of OWL, and there are no studies contradicting the research evidence showing positive outcomes of this curriculum. Additionally, MDE is using a fidelity instrument that is effectively identical to the one used to help establish the curriculum’s evidence base (except for pictures and references more applicable to Mississippi students). Thus, MDE has conducted its due diligence in ensuring that this new curriculum is similar to the original version, which in turn is more likely to replicate the positive outcomes of previous research. As such, the evidence base appears to be larger and more substantial than that for OWL.

MDE intends to begin requiring that all collaboratives use Mississippi Beginnings: PreK. However, an official date for this transition has not been determined.

According to MDE, the Early Learning Standards for four-year-olds were developed to align with research-based best practices and National Standards for Early Childhood Education.

In addition, according to MDE, the Mississippi Beginnings: PreK curriculum is aligned with the Early Learning and Development Standards. This means that the curriculum ensures that every activity corresponds with broadly accepted early learning components that detail what four-year-olds should

⁴ Federal guidelines (34 CFR 77.1 [c]) for evidence-based programming in education require that a study not have countervailing evidence from another study of similar rigor. OWL has at least one quasi-experimental study showing null results relative to the control group; as such, it would be downgraded to promising evidence if this criterion were adopted.

know and be able to do before exiting a prekindergarten program. These standards are also aligned with upper grade levels.

Evidence of Long-term Effects of Interventions Similar to Mississippi's Prekindergarten Program

Research suggests that measuring a range of behavioral, non-achievement effects (e.g., disciplinary incidents), in addition to early achievement effects, could be beneficial in evaluating the effectiveness of Mississippi's prekindergarten program.

The curricula that the Mississippi Beginnings: PreK program is based on has several studies showing its effectiveness. One of the more recent studies for the curricula⁵ uses data from seven years of prekindergarten attendees to estimate the causal effects of that attendance on a large set of outcomes, including a positive effect on:



However, the study shows no effect on state achievement test scores. It is important to note that while all conclusions from the study should be interpreted with caution, the study, along with data from Mississippi's prekindergarten program, would suggest potential for similar results for children participating in the collaboratives. While Mississippi's collaborative participants are not yet old enough to take the SAT, apply for college, or graduate from high school, PEER's analysis of MDE data suggests that collaborative prekindergarten participants have not performed significantly differently from other students on state tests at any grade level thus far, but have experienced fewer disciplinary incidents.

Another study of the curricula,⁶ focuses on the difference in skill convergence (i.e., the tendency for the test score gains achieved in kindergarten to fade over time), such that prekindergarten and non-prekindergarten attendees' test scores converge to some degree in kindergarten and early elementary school. The study suggests that gains in skills such as knowing the alphabet or how to spell one's name (i.e., constrained skills), may be greater immediately after prekindergarten but more likely to fade out than gains in skills such as vocabulary and reading comprehension (i.e., unconstrained skills). PEER's analysis of MDE's data shows that collaborative participants performed better than other students on the Kindergarten Readiness assessments given before kindergarten, but not on achievement assessments given after kindergarten.

⁵ Gray-Lobe, G., Pathak, P. A., & Walters, C. R. (2023). The long-term effects of universal preschool in Boston. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 138(1), 363-411.

⁶ McCormick, M., Weiland, C., Hsueh, J., Pralica, M., Weissman, A. K., Moffett, L., ... & Sachs, J. (2021). "Is skill type the key to the preK fadeout puzzle? Differential associations between enrollment in preK and constrained and unconstrained skills across kindergarten." *Child Development*, 92(4), e599-e620.

Recommendations

1. To better measure the outcomes of the state's prekindergarten program, the Legislature should amend MISS. CODE Section 37-21-51 (3) (g) (1972) to define the specific achievement and non-achievement effects that MDE should include in future evaluations of program effectiveness.

Effects should include, at a minimum:

- a. kindergarten readiness;
 - b. English Language arts proficiency in grades 3 through 8;
 - c. math proficiency in grades 3 through 8;
 - d. science proficiency in grades 5 and 8;
 - e. disciplinary incidents;
 - f. chronic absenteeism;
 - g. on-time graduation rate;
 - h. college enrollment;
 - i. grade retention; and,
 - j. special education services/exits.
2. MDE should require its research staff responsible for conducting the prekindergarten program effectiveness evaluations (whether internal or contracted staff were used) to:
 - a. provide MDE reproducible data and documentation for its program evaluation, including documentation of data collection and analyses, operational definitions of variables, and reproducible code; and,
 - b. conduct statistical tests necessary to determine whether differences between students are significant or merely a matter of chance and include all test results in MDE's three-year program evaluation report.
 3. Using a phased-in approach, MDE should begin requiring collaboratives to use the Mississippi Beginnings: PreK curriculum due to its stronger evidence base than the OWL curriculum. The goal should be to transition all collaboratives to the new curriculum by the 2027-2028 school year.

Appendix A: FY 2020 to FY 2023 Funding, Number of Sites, Classrooms, and Students Served by Cohort and Collaborative

Collaborative	Funding by Fiscal Year				Total Funding	Number of (in FY 2023):	
	2020	2021	2022	2023		Sites (Classrooms)	Students
Cohort I							
Clarke County Early Learning Partnership	\$197,800	\$230,000	\$230,000	\$230,000	\$887,800	2 (5)	92
Coahoma County Pre-K Collaborative Initiative	\$344,000	\$400,000	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$1,744,000	6 (8)	148
Corinth-Alcorn-Prentiss Early Learning Collaborative	\$519,225	\$603,750	\$603,750	\$703,750	\$2,430,475	6 (13)	243
Lamar County Early Learning Collaborative	\$301,000	\$350,000	\$550,000	\$800,000	\$2,001,000	9 (16)	287
McComb Community Collaborative for Early Learning Success	\$177,593	\$480,000	\$480,000	\$480,000	\$1,617,593	2 (6)	105
Monroe County Early Learning Collaborative	\$527,979	\$625,000	\$625,000	\$625,000	\$2,402,979	8 (13)	221
Petal Early Learning Collaborative	\$172,000	\$200,000	\$200,000	\$350,000	\$922,000	2 (4)	80
Picayune Early Learning Collaborative	\$43,000	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$180,000	\$323,000	2 (2)	40
Sunflower County Early Learning Collaborative	\$256,981	\$367,500	\$367,500	\$417,500	\$1,409,481	4 (7)	124
Tallahatchie Early Learning Alliance	\$113,233	\$297,500	\$297,500	\$297,500	\$1,005,733	3 (6)	84
Cohort I Total	\$2,652,812	\$3,603,750	\$3,903,750	\$4,583,750	\$14,744,062	44 (80)	1,424
Cohort II							
Greenwood-Leflore County Early Learning Collaborative	\$296,700	\$345,000	\$345,000	\$345,000	\$1,331,700	4 (8)	144

Funding by Fiscal Year

Number of (in FY 2023):

Collaborative	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total Funding	Sites (Classrooms)	Students
Grenada Early Learning Collaborative	\$296,700	\$345,000	\$395,000	\$487,500	\$1,524,200	2 (10)	169
Starkville-Oktibbeha Early Learning Collaborative	\$296,700	\$345,000	\$425,000	\$625,000	\$1,691,700	4 (14)	262
Cohort II Total	\$890,100	\$1,035,000	\$1,165,000	\$1,457,500	\$4,547,600	10 (32)	575

Cohort III							
Cleveland School District	\$193,500	\$225,000	\$312,500	\$587,500	\$1,318,500	5 (11)	163
George County School District	\$341,850	\$397,500	\$397,500	\$397,500	\$1,534,350	6 (9)	158
Hattiesburg Public School District	\$707,350	\$822,500	\$822,500	\$822,500	\$3,174,850	11 (16)	261
Marion County School District	\$387,000	\$450,000	\$450,000	\$450,000	\$1,737,000	7 (9)	144
Oxford School District (now known as the Lafayette Early Learning Collaborative)	\$683,700	\$795,000	\$920,000	\$1,220,000	\$3,618,700	4 (20)	378
Cohort III Total	\$2,313,400	\$2,690,000	\$2,902,500	\$3,477,500	\$11,383,400	33 (65)	1,104

Cohort IV							
Brookhaven Early Learning Collaborative	N/A	N/A	\$350,000	\$350,000	\$700,000	3 (7)	134
Holmes County Early Learning Collaborative	N/A	N/A	\$400,000	\$500,000	\$900,000	7 (8)	139
Jackson Early Learning Collaborative	N/A	N/A	\$3,065,000	\$3,065,000	\$6,130,000	21 (54)	810
Kosciusko Early Learning Collaborative	N/A	N/A	\$350,000	\$350,000	\$700,000	2 (6)	105
Leland Early Learning Collaborative	N/A	N/A	\$200,000	\$200,000	\$400,000	1 (3)	40
Long Beach Early Learning Collaborative	N/A	N/A	\$250,000	\$250,000	\$500,000	3 (5)	52
Noxubee County Early Learning Collaborative	N/A	N/A	\$250,000	\$250,000	\$500,000	2 (5)	94

Funding by Fiscal Year

Number of (in FY 2023):

Collaborative	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total Funding	Sites (Classrooms)	Students
Pontotoc Early Learning Collaborative	N/A	N/A	\$550,000	\$550,000	\$1,100,000	6 (9)	163
Rankin County Early Learning Collaborative	N/A	N/A	\$650,000	\$800,000	\$1,450,000	9 (13)	260
Scott Early Learning Collaborative	N/A	N/A	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$1,000,000	6 (10)	194
Senatobia Early Learning Collaborative	N/A	N/A	\$410,000	\$410,000	\$820,000	2 (6)	87
South Panola Early Learning Collaborative	N/A	N/A	\$250,000	\$675,000	\$925,000	3 (5)	82
Cohort IV Total	N/A	N/A	\$7,225,000	\$7,900,000	\$15,125,000	65 (131)	2,160
Cohort V							
Biloxi Early Learning Collaborative	N/A	N/A	N/A	\$700,000	\$700,000	N/A	N/A
Hollandale Early Learning Collaborative	N/A	N/A	N/A	\$150,000	\$150,000	N/A	N/A
Holly Springs Early Learning Collaborative	N/A	N/A	N/A	\$250,000	\$250,000	N/A	N/A
Jefferson County Early Learning Collaborative	N/A	N/A	N/A	\$250,000	\$250,000	N/A	N/A
Lee County Early Learning Collaborative	N/A	N/A	N/A	\$350,000	\$350,000	N/A	N/A
Lowndes County Early Learning Collaborative	N/A	N/A	N/A	\$550,000	\$550,000	N/A	N/A
Pass Christian Early Learning Collaborative	N/A	N/A	N/A	\$300,000	\$300,000	3 (5)	66
Cohort V Total	N/A	N/A	N/A	\$2,550,000	\$2,550,000	3 (5)	66
Total for all Cohorts	\$5,856,312	\$7,328,750	\$15,196,250	\$19,968,750	\$48,350,062	155 (313)	5,329

SOURCE: PEER analysis of data provided by MDE.

Appendix B: PEER's Methodology

PEER performed pairwise statistical tests on what PEER staff judged to be the most relevant comparisons in the Hanover report, correcting for multiple hypotheses. These statistical tests are purely to aid in differentiating effects within the bounds of random variation from those unlikely to occur under the null hypothesis; they do not present or test any causal hypothesis.

Kindergarten Readiness Assessment scores, MAAP test scores, and behavioral outcomes were compared using the Mann-Whitney U test; all rates, such as passage and chronic absence, were compared using Fisher's exact test. The Mann-Whitney U test does not compare means, but whole distributions; it was employed in this context out of concern that the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment scores do not have interval properties. PEER still reported means listed in the table in Exhibit B-1 on page 33, to enable comparison with Hanover's report.

PEER did not perform subgroup analyses (e.g., analyses at the level of the individual collaborative) because they seemed tangential to the main mission of measuring the effectiveness of the collaborative program and because they would multiply the number of hypotheses tested by nearly a hundred times. Multiple hypothesis correction for such a large number of hypotheses would necessarily raise the bar for statistical significance to a level at which legitimate effects might be missed. For the same reason, PEER measured passing rates on MAAP tests but not proficiency rates.

Multiple hypothesis correction is necessary because the risk of a false positive increases the more hypotheses are tested. Without multiple hypothesis correction, the likelihood of a false positive at the .05 level in 29 tests is 77%; increasing the number of hypotheses beyond that point increases the risk of error as well. The Holm method of controlling the family-wise error rate was employed.

After Holm correction, the risk of at least one false positive (i.e., false assertion of statistical significance) is no greater than 5%. This criterion of significance is traditional, but by no means the only one available. The likelihood of a false positive would decrease to less than 1 in 1,000,000 if PEER increased the stringency of its criterion of statistical significance; in such a case, the difference between collaborative students and students that did not attend pre-kindergarten on the MAAP test for fifth-grade math would no longer be significant, but all other differences would remain. Decreasing the stringency of PEER's criterion of statistical significance so that there is at most a 10% chance of a false positive would add no additional significant results.

Exhibit B-1 on page 33 examines the statistical tests by outcome measure and comparison group. In the chart, the "Measure" column notes which outcome measure is being tested. The "Value for Collaborative Students" column notes the outcome of the collaborative students, while the "Value for Comparison Group" notes the outcome for students in the "Comparison Group" category.

Cells highlighted in **green** represent an outcome in which collaborative students scored significantly higher than the comparison group for that measure (e.g., collaborative students scored higher on PreK post-tests than PreK students who did not attend a collaborative). Cells highlighted in **red** represent an outcome in which collaborative students scored significantly lower than the comparison group for that measure (e.g., collaborative students scored lower on MATH 3 assessments than students who did not attend PreK). Cells that are not highlighted do not show any significant result, either positive or negative.

Exhibit B-1: Statistical Tests by Outcome Measure and Comparison Group

Measure	Value for Collaborative Students	Comparison Group	Value for Comparison Group
Kindergarten Readiness Assessment			
PreK Post-test	557.16	PreK (non-collaborative)	550.96
Kindergarten Pre-test	538.87	No PreK	491.98
Kindergarten Pre-test	538.87	PreK (non-collaborative)	533.20
Kindergarten Post-test	705.90	No PreK	699.48
Kindergarten Post-test	705.90	PreK (non-collaborative)	703.50
MAAP			
ELA 3	0.71	PreK (non-collaborative)	0.70
ELA 3	0.71	No PreK	0.71
ELA 4	0.66	PreK (non-collaborative)	0.64
ELA 4	0.66	No PreK	0.66
ELA 5	0.78	PreK (non-collaborative)	0.78
ELA 5	0.78	No PreK	0.78
ELA 6	0.76	PreK (non-collaborative)	0.75
ELA 6	0.76	No PreK	0.71
MATH 3	0.66	PreK (non-collaborative)	0.67
MATH 3	0.66	No PreK	0.71
MATH 4	0.62	PreK (non-collaborative)	0.60
MATH 4	0.62	No PreK	0.65
MATH 5	0.65	PreK (non-collaborative)	0.69
MATH 5	0.65	No PreK	0.69
MATH 6	0.75	PreK (non-collaborative)	0.78
MATH 6	0.75	No PreK	0.73
SCIENCE 5	0.79	PreK (non-collaborative)	0.79
SCIENCE 5	0.79	No PreK	0.80
Behavior			
Disciplinary incidents	0.05	PreK (non-collaborative)	0.08
Disciplinary incidents	0.05	No PreK	0.11
Suspensions	0.04	PreK (non-collaborative)	0.06
Suspensions	0.04	No PreK	0.09
Chronic absence	0.42	PreK (non-collaborative)	0.48
Chronic absence	0.42	No PreK	0.62

SOURCE: PEER analysis of MDE data.

Agency Response



Office of Early Childhood Education
Jill Dent, Ph.D., Executive Director

November 3, 2023

Joint Legislative Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review
501 North West Street
Suite 301-A
Jackson, Mississippi 39201

Re: MDE Response to 2023 Report on the Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013: A Comparative Analysis of Outcomes for the Program

Dear Mr. Booth:

MDE received PEER's 2023 Report on the Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013: A Comparative Analysis of Outcomes for the Program. Based on the Report and PEER's recommendations the MDE plans to make modifications to strengthen the implementation and evaluation the program.

MDE will focus on academic and non-academic indicators of growth of the children in the program. Academic indicators are important to measure the children's acquisition of skills and understanding of the early learning standards by the end of the pre-kindergarten year. The non-academic indicators are vital as children are learning how to regulate their behavior and self-control, remember information, and acquire mental flexibility. These skills are critically important in assuring that and assisting children in becoming ready for kindergarten. In addition, these skills will provide children with the tools to function successfully in a classroom as it relates to appropriate behaviors and positive peer engagement.

MSIS 2.0 will go live for all school districts in the 2024 -2025 school year. The new system will allow the Office of Early Childhood to track all children in the Early Learning Collaboratives. This tracking component has been unavailable in previous years; therefore, MDE could not effectively track the academic and non-academic development of the children who benefited from participation in the Early Learning Collaboratives. With this newly enhanced system, more of the data will be consistently gathered and easily retrievable. Currently, the program office is using several different data systems to track student progress. This method has been inconsistent statewide and has not always yielded useable, longitudinal data fruitful for data analysis.

For future reporting requirements, MDE will collect data, provide relevant documentation, and deliver analysis to support the results of the study. MDE's Office of Early Childhood now has a data and reporting coordinator on staff who is a social science researcher. This coordinator is proficient in developing effective data collection tools and implementing appropriate data collection protocols. She will also ensure that these protocols are consistently followed.

MDE is planning a phased in approach of new programs that will utilize Mississippi Beginnings: Pre-K in Early Learning Collaborative programs over the next three years. As new programs are added, they will utilize Mississippi Beginnings: Pre-K. Many existing programs have expressed interest in switching to the new curriculum, which will occur in the upcoming years, and the remainder of the Early Learning Collaboratives will begin using Mississippi Beginnings: Pre-K by the 2027 – 2028 school year.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jill Dent".

Central High School Building
359 North West Street
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Jackson, MS 39205-0771

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SOURCE: MDE.

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James F. (Ted) Booth, Executive Director

Reapportionment

Ben Collins

Administration

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Quality Assurance and Reporting

Tracy Bobo

Hannah Jane Costilow

Performance Evaluation

Lonnie Edgar, Deputy Director

Jennifer Sebren, Deputy Director

Drew Allen

Emily Cloys

Kim Cummins

Matthew Dry

Matthew Holmes

Drew Johnson

Billy Loper

Debra Monroe

Taylor Mullins

Meri Clare Ringer

Sarah Williamson

Julie Winkeljohn

Ray Wright