

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.

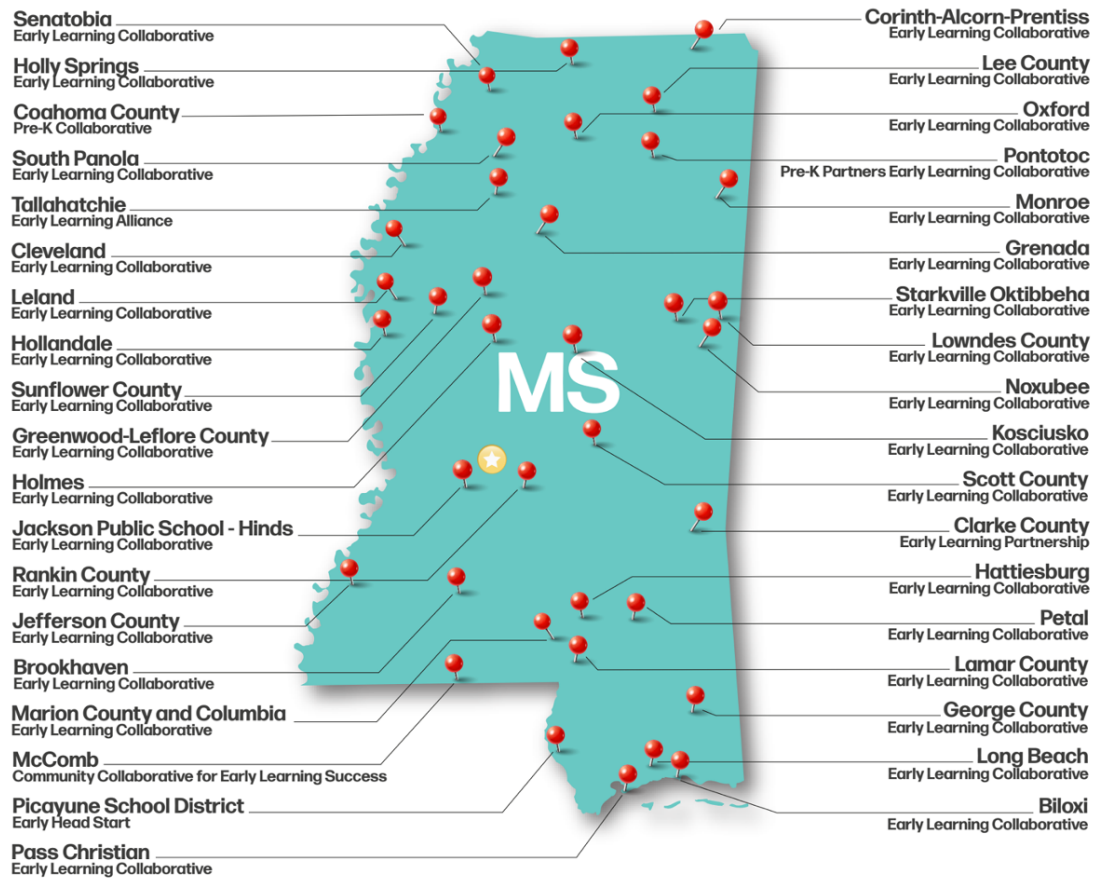
Increased Legislative Support for the Program

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.

2023 Report on the Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013:
 A Comparative Analysis of Program Outcomes
 October 24, 2023