

**Joint Committee on Performance Evaluation and
Expenditure Review (PEER)**
The Mississippi Legislature



Action Brief:

**The Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013: Evaluation of the Operations
and Effectiveness of the Program**
November 17, 2015 (Report #600)

Background:

Meta-analytic research on public preschool programs concludes that quality programs can have a positive impact on important outcomes that benefit society. Examples of these long-term outcomes include improved test scores and high school graduation rates, as well as decreases in K-12 grade repetition, special education, and crime.

The Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013 directed the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) to implement a voluntary prekindergarten program for four-year-olds to help ensure that all children have access to quality early childhood education and development services.

The Legislature contemplated funding the program on a phased-in basis, appropriating \$9 million for fiscal years 2014-2016 for the first phase. Of this amount, MDE distributed approximately \$8.4 million to eleven early learning collaboratives and retained \$450,000 for administrative costs. The collaboratives (including fifty-three providers) served approximately 1,580 students in the 2014-15 school year, the first full year of the program's operation.

Report Conclusions

After the first full year of implementation of the Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013, the average performance of students in non-collaborative publicly funded prekindergarten programs was better than the average performance of students in the collaboratives by a statistically significant amount.

PEER found significant room for improvement in the implementation and effectiveness of the Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013.

Regarding MDE's implementation of the act:

- Although required by state law to do so, MDE has not adopted a minimum rate of readiness as a benchmark for continued program funding. The department is researching the use of student growth as a future determinant for continued funding eligibility, possibly yielding a more lenient standard.
- MDE's annual report does not show the rates of school readiness for each collaborative and each provider, as is required by state law.
- MDE awarded funding to four collaboratives that utilized a prekindergarten curriculum found through rigorous research to have "no discernable effects" on student learning.
- MDE has not assessed students' progress on some content areas of the department's early learning standards.

According to PEER's independent evaluation of program effectiveness, after the first full year of implementation, prekindergarteners in the program's participating collaboratives achieved the end-of-the-year target score on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment less often than children enrolled in other public prekindergartens.

PEER also found an extremely wide range of end-of-school-year assessment pass rates by program provider, by collaborative, and by curriculum.

While the department and the collaboratives should be recognized for their accomplishments in implementing a state funded prekindergarten program aligned to the state's rigorous early childhood education standards, PEER's independent analysis of student assessment data for the 2014-2015 school year shows that there is significant room for improvement in the program's

effectiveness as measured by student achievement.

MDE should conduct the research and analysis necessary to identify those factors most associated with positive student outcomes and ensure that all students enrolled in the collaboratives receive the quality programming necessary for school readiness.

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