GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-19-375, a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives

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CHILD CARE AND EARLY EDUCATION

Most States Offer Preschool Programs and Rely on Multiple Funding Sources

Why GAO Did This Study

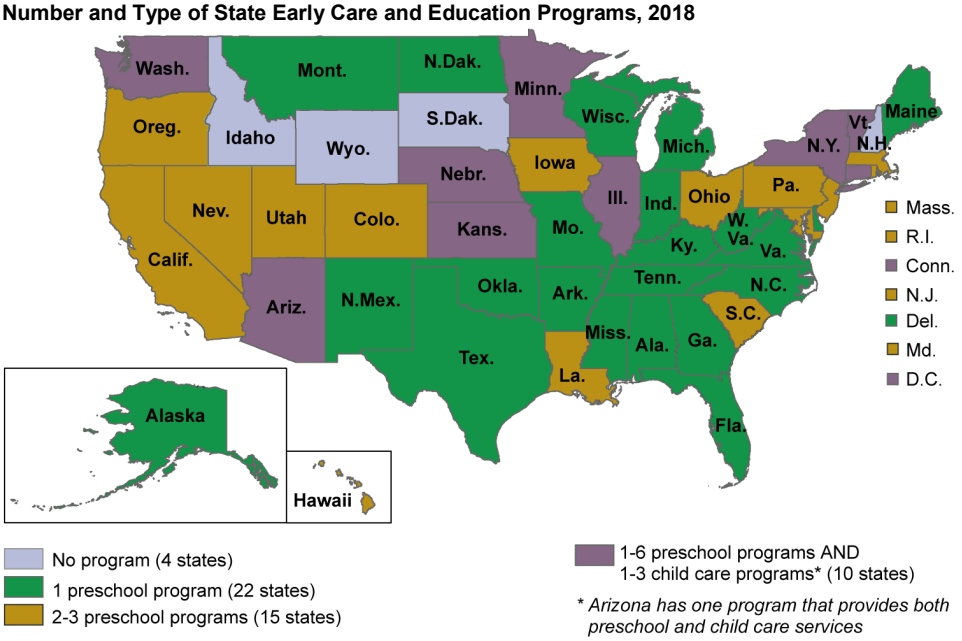
Each year, millions of children age 5 and under receive publicly funded early care and education services. Federal appropriations for Head Start and the Child Care and Development Fund were $9.8 and $8.1 billion respectively in fiscal year 2018. However, comprehensive information on ECE programs created and funded by states is not available. GAO was asked to identify and describe all state ECE programs.

This report examines (1) the number and characteristics of state ECE programs and the extent to which they share characteristics or overlap with federal or other state programs; and (2) how states fund their ECE programs, including any related benefits and challenges reported by states. GAO sent two surveys to program officials in 50 states and the District of Columbia. The first survey identified state programs providing early learning or child care services to children from birth to age 5, and the second gathered more information about the programs identified, including their characteristics and funding sources. GAO analyzed the survey data to determine which characteristics state programs shared with Head Start, the Child Care and Development Fund, and other state programs, as well as the benefits and challenges of using multiple funding sources.

What GAO Found

GAO's national survey of state program officials identified 86 state early care and education (ECE) programs: 73 preschool programs serving 3- to 5-year-olds and 13 child care programs serving 0- to 2-year-olds. According to GAO's survey, most programs focused on helping at-risk children become ready for school and improving the quality of their care. In 18 states, survey responses showed that at least two ECE programs shared characteristics, offering similar services (e.g., teacher training) or prioritizing enrolling similar groups of children (e.g., low-income children). Additionally, most state ECE programs offered at least one of the same services or prioritized at least one of the same groups as the federal Head Start program or programs funded by the Child Care and Development Fund. For example, program officials reported that some state ECE programs mirror Head Start so that they can enroll additional children or offer more hours of care per day.

Number and Type of State Early Care and Education Programs, 2018



Sources: GAO survey of state program officials. MapInfo (map). | GAO-19-375

Officials from most state ECE programs GAO surveyed reported using multiple sources to fund their programs. Of the 86 surveyed state ECE programs, 55 reported using at least one funding source in addition to state funds in 2018, and 31 reported using at least two additional sources beyond state funds. Integrating state funds with federal and local funds may broaden the effect and reach of services provided to children and families. Program officials reported a variety of benefits of using multiple funding sources, such as an increased ability to serve more families from targeted populations, as well as challenges such as reconciling different eligibility and reporting requirements.

View GAO-19-375. For more information, contact Kathryn Larin at (202) 512-7215 or larink@gao.gov.