Early On® System Costs: Understanding Early Intervention in Michigan

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The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) Office of Great Start[1] was awarded a Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) renewal grant in 2020. As part of this grant, MDE contracted with the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) to study the costs of statewide provision of early intervention (EI) services. Early intervention services can improve child developmental outcomes, and may result in cost savings from children avoiding special education services later in life (Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center, 2023). Michigan's early intervention program, called *Early On*®, provides services to infants and toddlers from birth to age 3 with disabilities and/or developmental delays. *Early On* services are provided through Michigan's intermediate school districts (ISDs) and supported by state infrastructure and technical assistance.

This four-part cost study[2] included a policy and literature review to identify best practices in EI; the creation of a shared definition of high-quality EI services; determination of resources and costs associated with providing high-quality EI across the state; and technical assistance sessions on funding sources and preliminary results. To create a shared definition of high-quality EI and determine resources associated with providing high-quality EI, the AIR team engaged with more than 50 expert practitioners and family members involved in EI through a series of regional expert panel meetings (see Exhibit 1 and Appendix A).

To complement the information gathered from panelists, AIR met with MDE and Clinton County Regional Educational Service Area (CCRESA) staff to discuss resources needed to provide statewide *Early On* infrastructure and support. Members of the Michigan Interagency Coordinating Council (MICC) provided input on system goals and defining high-quality EI. AIR also administered a survey to panelists in June 2023 to collect key information on resources.

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[1] As of December 1, 2023, this office is part of the new Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential (MiLEAP). As the majority of the work described in this report was with the Office of Great Start under MDE, this report refers to MDE rather than MiLEAP.

[2] A cost study differs from a cost estimation model, as a cost study reflects point-in-time data about program costs, whereas a cost estimation model produces a tool to explore how program cost varies based on certain program characteristics (Capito, Fallin Kenyon, & Workman, 2022).

Exhibit 1. Multiple data sources were used to gather information on resources.

Information on high-quality EI practices and associated resources came from eight expert panel meetings in each of four regions shown below, an expert panel survey, and listening sessions with MDE and ISD staff:

- Northern
- Western
- Eastern
- Southeastern
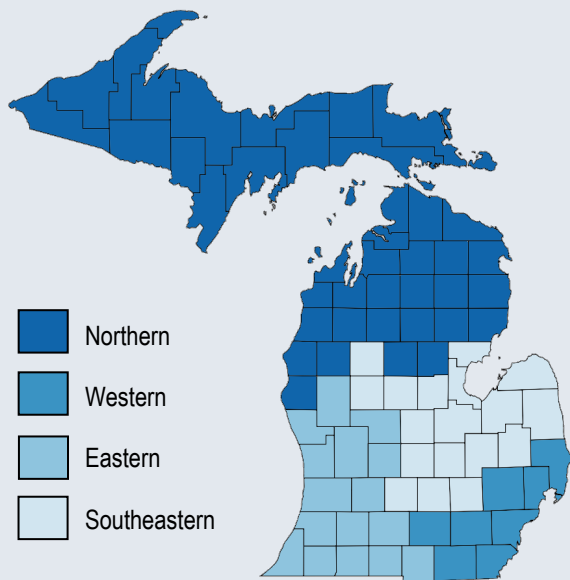
More than 50 expert practitioners and family members were involved in panel meetings, including:

- Early On *service providers and administrators (e.g., speech language pathologists, occupational therapists, service coordinators)*

- *Local Interagency Coordinating Council members*

Additional input on system goals and state supports was gathered from:

- *Michigan Department of Education Office of Great Start staff*

- *Staff from the state technical assistance provider, the Clinton County Regional Educational Service Agency (CCRESA)*

- *Members of the Michigan Interagency Coordinating Council (MICC)*

Note: Expert practitioner meetings occurred in November–December 2022 and April–May 2023. Each of the eight meetings was 1.5 hours long. The four regions are those of the Michigan Association of Administrators of Special Education (MAASE). Panelists who attended four or more meetings received $250 gift cards in appreciation of their time. ISD is intermediate school district.
Source: Authors and Michigan Association of Administrators of Special Education (MAASE).

What is the goal of an ideal high-quality early intervention system in Michigan?

Based on input from participating providers, family members, and the Michigan Interagency Coordinating Council, AIR developed a goal statement to guide discussions on defining what an ideal high-quality *Early On* system would look like.

> A high-quality early intervention system that empowers families, supports providers, and creates informed communities working together to promote equitable access to early intervention services and help each child thrive.
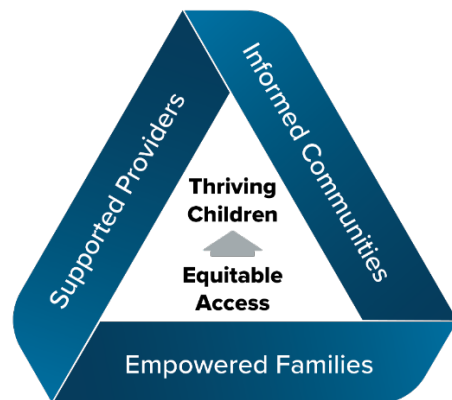
Source: Authors.

How did the team collect resource information and estimate costs?

After providing input used to create the goal statement, expert panelists helped define an ideal high-quality system (see complete description in *System Design Document*). This ideal high-quality system fulfills the goal statement while still being efficient and able to be implemented within the current system structure. Many high-quality practices described in the *System Design Document* are already being implemented, and an ideal system would ensure that these high-quality practices are implemented across the state.

Next, expert panelists, MDE staff, and CCRESA staff provided information on the resources needed to implement the ideal high-quality EI system, answering the question, "What resources are needed to support this high-quality system and fulfill the goal statement?" AIR documented these resources—including staff time, travel, and equipment—for each region and for statewide supports. To help organize this resource discussion, the AIR team divided the EI system into six components, each with multiple subcomponents, mirroring the components used to describe the ideal system (see Exhibit 2). Data on resources were collected through the expert panel meetings, statewide support meetings, and expert panel survey. In addition, AIR held two listening sessions with MDE and ISD staff to review and discuss methods used for pricing resources (including salary and driving distance calculations) and reflect on preliminary findings.

Exhibit 2. All EI system components were included in the resource discussions.

Outreach and referral	Eligibility determination	IFSP and family assessment	Service coordination and provision	Transition
• State outreach • ISD outreach • Referral intake	• Scheduling • Conducting evaluation • Determining eligibility	• Drafting IFSP • 6-month IFSP review • Annual IFSP review • Child and family assessment	• Service coordination • Service provision	• Transitioning from Part C to Part B services • Exiting part C to no IDEA services • Exiting to other services

State supports

- Governance and interagency partnerships
- State policy and funding
- Data system
- State referral system and outreach
- Personnel development and workforce recruitment and retention
- Services for families

Note: IFSP is Individualized Family Service Plan. IDEA is Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.
Source: Authors.

How did the team translate resource information into costs?

The team used the ingredients approach (Levin et al., 2018) to calculate the true cost of the ideal high-quality EI system across Michigan. This systematic approach includes information about the personnel (e.g., service providers, service coordinators) and nonpersonnel resources used to implement an EI system, and calculates the associated costs. Nonpersonnel costs include travel costs (such as mileage, hotel, and meal reimbursements), materials and equipment, and facilities costs. AIR used information on resources gathered from the expert panel meetings, state support meetings, and the expert panel survey to understand the quantity (e.g., number of staff hours, number of assessment materials) and quality (e.g., staff qualifications, assessment material specifications) of each personnel and nonpersonnel resource used in providing EI services or statewide EI system support.[3] Then, the team estimated the cost of each of these resources using publicly available wage information, an administrative assistant wage rate for volunteers,[4] and extant pricing data for nonpersonnel resources (e.g., federal and state per diem rates, data from national online retailers, publicly available cost resources[5]).

> **True Cost**
>
> The dollar value of all resources used to provide high-quality early intervention services, regardless of funding source.
>
> True cost is not just what is listed in a grant or a program budget; true cost is what it actually costs to provide those services—the value of all resources used to implement a program, including donations, volunteer time, and resources that last for multiple years.
>
> Understanding the true cost of a high-quality EI system can inform decisions around resources for *Early On* providers and statewide supports.

How did the team estimate prices, including salaries?

Personnel costs are a large driver of the overall cost of the *Early On* system, and thus determining the appropriate salaries is particularly important. For *Early On* coordinators and service providers—the most common roles in the system—the AIR team developed a regional salary estimate based on publicly available salary schedules in each ISD's bargaining agreement.[6] In consultation with MDE, AIR selected at least one ISD with a major urban area and one rural ISD from each region,[7] and then calculated a weighted average of those ISDs' salaries (weighting by the number of service providers).[8] For other roles, such as administrative assistant, human resources specialist, or financial analyst, AIR

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[3] To collect data on service provision, AIR selected four of the personas created by CCRESA aligned with different levels of eligibility and service needs. Next, AIR asked panelists to describe resources needed for each of those personas. The AIR team then used survey data from panelists to calculate the percentage of service time needed for each persona that aligned with different segments of the population served. The personas project (see https://eotta.ccresa.org/Resources.php?id=4095&Resources=2) is supported by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act through a grant from MDE to the CCRESA Office of Innovative Projects. For more information about the Michigan Personas Project, contact Kari Holmberg at holmberg_k@ccresa.org.

[4] Volunteer time included in the system was not extensive, but was included as a cost in cases where, if volunteers were not participating, an ISD staff member would be needed, such as in outreach activities, as well as for family member time spent in state and local interagency coordinating council meetings. Caregiver time at EI visits was not included as volunteer time.

[5] For facilities costs, the team estimated the cost of office space using resources from Wang et al. (2020).

[6] The research team used the 2022–23 school year salaries of personnel in salary steps 10–13 with a master's degree, a master's degree +15 additional credits, and a master's degree +30 credits based on input from MDE, panelists, and listening session participants. Some ISDs reported a small number of service providers with differing degree levels; salaries corresponding to other degree levels are not included in the estimates provided.

[7] ISDs selected were as follows: Region 1 (Northern): Northwest Education Services (Traverse City area), Eastern Upper Peninsula, Menominee, and Marquette-Alger; Region 2 (Eastern): Ingham, Sanilac; Region 3 (Western): Barry, Kent; Region 4 (Southeastern): Lenawee, Oakland.

[8] Information on number of service providers came from each ISD's 54D grant application to the state.

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Regional Variation

The four regions of Michigan encompass a wide variety of settings with diverse populations, including cities, suburban communities, and rural areas. The AIR team encountered significant variation both within regions and across regions. To account for these differences in aspects such as team compositions, population served, distance traveled, and travel time, the study team took three approaches:

- Calculation of average, minimum, and maximum cost
- Weighting different responses from ISDs based on the number of children served
- Using regional rather than statewide estimates wherever possible, for things like distance traveled, salaries, and percentage of families preferring translation/interpretation services

created regional role-specific salary estimates from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.[9] To create comparable state-level cost estimates across regions, the AIR team adjusted salaries using population-weighted regional adjustment factors based on the American Community Survey Comparable Wage Index for Teachers (Cornman et al., 2018).

To calculate mileage costs and time spent traveling by car, the AIR team used mileage estimates given by panelists when available. If not available, the team calculated the average, minimum, and maximum mileage within each region by using the same ISDs selected for salaries and calculating mileage and time from the ISD office to towns close to and far from the ISD office.

For other prices, such as equipment, the team used prices available online combined with information from panelists. For example, to cost out the assessment and evaluation tools used by service providers in determining eligibility, the team found prices for each of approximately 20 different tools (and the associated per-child evaluation forms) reported to be used by panelists, and clarified frequency of purchase with listening session participants.

How did the team estimate total, average, regional, and per-child costs?

Overall costs for each system component were estimated separately within each region to allow for regional variation, using regional averages of the number of children involved in each system component (i.e., referrals, evaluations, initial IFSP creation, service provision, and transition/exit).[10] Then, the team summed costs across system components and divided the costs associated with statewide support evenly across the four regions to calculate the minimum, maximum, and average cost for an average ISD in the region. Next, these minimum, maximum, and average costs were multiplied against the number of ISDs in the region to arrive at the total regional cost. Summing up the four total regional costs gave the total cost for

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[9] Salary estimates were available for specific geographic localities within Michigan. The AIR team separated out these estimates by the four regions in this study to produce regional estimates.

[10] Data on referrals, evaluations, and initial IFSP creation for each ISD were provided by MDE; the most recent data available were from 2021 for most ISDs, which may be an undercount, as ISDs reported referrals were lower during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data on service provision and transition/exit counts came from February 2023 online data (*Early On* Data, 2023).

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the system. Finally, the team divided these estimated costs by the approximate number of children who received EI services for a full year (the snapshot active child count[11]) in each region and in the state to arrive at the per-child cost for high-quality EI in each region and in the state.

The Cost of High-Quality Early Intervention in Michigan

The true cost of implementing an ideal high-quality *Early On* system in Michigan is described below.

The statewide annual average per-child cost of providing a full year of high-quality early intervention is $17,949. This cost varies by region, and is driven by personnel costs.

This per-child cost represents providing high-quality early intervention services to a child for 1 full year for an average ISD, and includes the costs of outreach and referral, referral intake, eligibility determination, IFSP creation, service coordination,[12] service provision,[13] transition,[14] and state supports divided by the 12,783 children reported as being enrolled in services by *Early On* in Michigan (*Early On* Data, 2023). This per-child cost of receiving services includes supporting outreach, referral, evaluation, and IFSP creation for a larger number of children, as the number of children involved in those components is higher than the number who eventually receive high-quality early intervention services.

The costs of providing high-quality EI are driven by personnel costs. Considering the average cost across the state, personnel costs represent 89% of all costs, while only 7% of costs are for travel expenses and 4% are for equipment.[15]

Across the four regions, the annual average per-child cost for a full year of high-quality EI services for an average ISD varies from $15,914 in the Eastern region to $23,399 in the Southeastern region (see Exhibit 3).[16]

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[11] February 2023 Snapshot (Indicator 6) data, showing the percentage of children ages birth to 3 who were active (i.e., in the system and receiving services) on the count date, were used to calculate the count of children served for a full year. The total number of children ever receiving services in a year is higher, as children enter and exit the system throughout the year and may receive services less than a full year.

[12] Service coordination includes recruitment, professional development, and supervision for service providers; managing funding sources and reimbursement processes; and collecting and reporting child data.

[13] Service provision includes providing EI services to children through weekly, biweekly, or monthly visits with the child and caregiver in a natural environment (such as a home or child care setting). This includes associated travel costs.

[14] Transition includes transitioning from early intervention services at age 3 to other services, such as early childhood programs.

[15] The percentage of costs represented by personnel varies from region to region, from 74% to 91%.

[16] The cost at individual ISDs likely varies extensively and was not included as part of the scope of this study.

Exhibit 3. The average annual per-child cost of a full year of high-quality early intervention services varies by region.
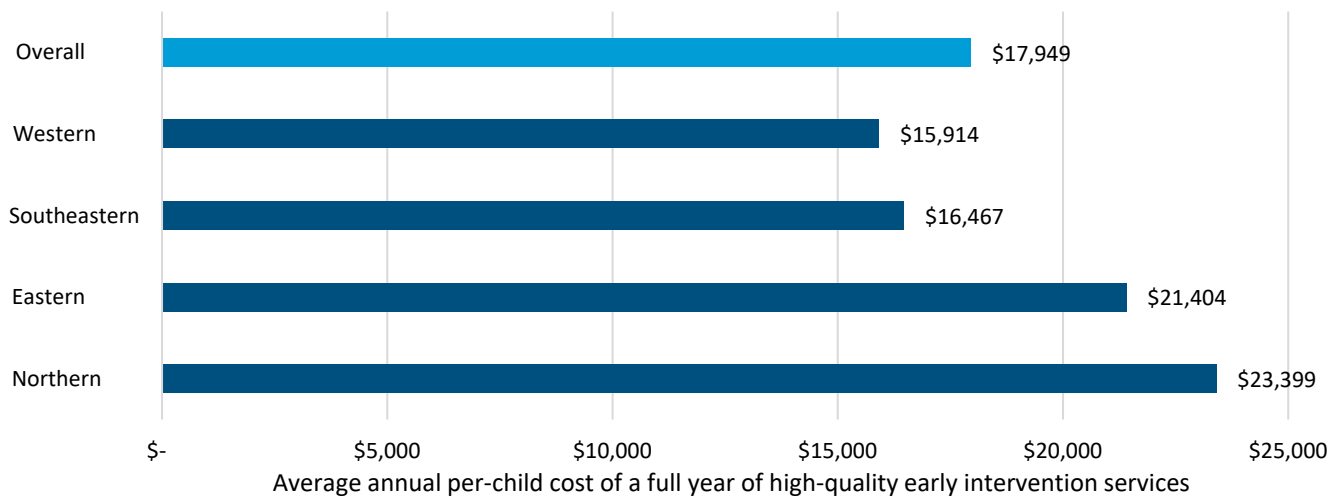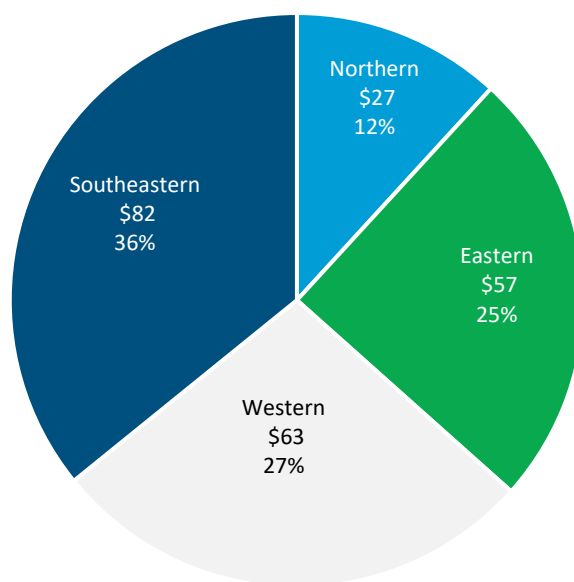

Source: Authors.

These costs vary across regions due to differences in the resources needed to implement the ideal high-quality system. These resources are dependent on multiple factors, including the number of children and the geographic size of the ISD. The number of children can influence regional variation because there can be economies of scale in serving more children—there are certain resources that cost the same regardless of how many children are being served (such as a computer), so it is a lower per-child cost for ISDs with more children.

- The Western region includes Grand Rapids, a metropolitan area with over 1 million people, and many smaller cities, including Kalamazoo and Muskegon, along with rural areas. This region has the second-highest number of children served (3,416) and average travel costs.

- The Southeastern region is a more urban region that includes the Detroit metropolitan area. This region has lower travel costs and the highest number of children served (4,961).

- The Eastern region includes metropolitan areas such as Flint and Lansing and rural areas, with the third-highest number of children served (2,345) and average travel costs.

- The Northern region is a more rural region, encompassing the northern Lower Peninsula and the Upper Peninsula. This region has higher travel costs, larger ISDs, and fewer children served (918) to spread out the cost of the ideal high-quality system.

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The overall annual cost of the ideal high-quality *Early On* system statewide is approximately $230 million.

The overall annual statewide cost of $229,443,320 includes all components of the system and represents the cost of all ISDs and the state system in implementing an ideal high-quality EI system at the current service levels.[17] The Southeastern Region represents the largest share of the total annual cost, followed by Western, Eastern, and Northern (see Exhibit 4). This is driven in part by the numbers of children in each region, which follow the same ordering— Southeastern Region has the highest numbers, while Northern Region has the lowest.

Exhibit 4. The Southeastern region has the largest share of the overall annual cost of a high-quality early intervention system.

Note: Amounts in millions.
Source: Authors.

The average annual ISD cost and per-child cost of a full year of high-quality early intervention services varies by region.

The average annual ISD cost varies from $1.5 million (Northern region) to $10.2 million (Southeastern region). Within each region, the minimum and maximum average annual ISD costs show the wide variation in costs for an average ISD within a given region (see Exhibit 5). This variation represents differences within the region in terms of staff roles, staff time, distance traveled, and other factors.

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[17] The cost to other participants in the system, such as parents/guardians or child care providers, is not included in the system.

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Exhibit 5. The minimum and maximum annual costs of high-quality early intervention services show variation within regions.

Region	Annual ISD cost			Annual per-child cost			Number of children
	Minimum	Average	Maximum	Minimum	Average	Maximum	Total
Northern	$1,096,333	$1,593,914	$2,077,114	$16,095	$23,399	$30,493	1158
Eastern	$3,092,953	$3,791,441	$4,521,327	$17,461	$21,404	$25,525	2657
Western	$3,132,241	$3,953,553	$4,766,783	$12,608	$15,914	$19,187	3975
Southeastern	$7,088,073	$10,272,344	$13,459,282	$11,357	$16,459	$21,565	4993

Note: Number of children refers to the snapshot (Indicator 6) child count sum for the region (*Early On* Data, 2023).
Source: Authors.

For all regions, service provision represents the largest share of costs, and that share varies across regions.

Overall, the service provision component is 67% of the total annual cost of the ideal high-quality system, followed by outreach (8%), eligibility determination (8%), service coordination (7%), referral intake (4%), and IFSP and family assessment (4%). The other system components (transition and state supports) make up less than 3% of the total annual cost (see Exhibit 6). This is likely driven by the large amounts of staff time involved in service provision: the number of hours per month required to provide high-quality early intervention services to each child ranged from 3.4 to 18.3, not including travel time.

Exhibit 6. Service provision is the largest share of total annual costs of providing high-quality early intervention services.

Component (in order of process)	Share of total
Referral outreach	8%
Referral intake	4%
Eligibility determination	8%
IFSP and family assessment	4%
Service coordination	7%
Service provision	67%
Transition	1%
State supports	1%

Source: Authors.

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Among the four regions, the shares of these costs vary. Service provision is the largest share of cost in each region, but that share varies from 52% in the Northern region to 74% in the Western region (see Exhibit 7). In the Northern region, service coordination and eligibility determination make up a larger share of the total compared to other regions, perhaps due to higher travel costs in the region (increasing the cost of activities like eligibility determination that require travel) and fewer children served (decreasing the cost of service provision).

Exhibit 7. Service provision as a percentage of total annual cost varies among regions.

Source: Authors.

Many ISD staff members suggested that additional resources were needed in key areas of the system to enhance quality.

ISD participants in the expert panels and listening sessions mentioned areas where additional resources could be particularly useful. The AIR team did not include these in the cost of the system. These include:

- More parent/guardian involvement in outreach activities. Some ISD staff commented that parents and guardians make the best ambassadors for the program.

- Financial incentives to offer staff to conduct outreach activities during evening/weekend events where working families are more likely to be present.

- Additional time for professional development for *Early On* staff.

- More travel resources to attend professional development and training sessions in person. With COVID, many sessions are available online, but in-person sessions are being offered again and may be preferred by some staff.

- Additional time during and after the child transitions from Part C services to other programs, including Part B services, to continue supporting the family and child and ease their transition to a new situation.

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Other resources that were not included in costing the system include some aspects of shared infrastructure and systems, such as the Catamaran reporting system (shared with Part B); collecting, managing, and reporting data through the Center for Educational Performance and Information (shared across MDE); MDE websites; or staff time in developing personnel standards (part of another state agency). Time to update documentation and guidance relating to state policy or regulation shifts was also not included, as this is an infrequent cost incurred when policies/regulations change.

Summary and Policy Implications

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Providing adequate funding for *Early On* is key to ensuring each child in Michigan has access to a high-quality EI system. This cost study aims to help policymakers, MDE staff, and ISD staff make decisions about resources and funding for *Early On* by providing data on what a high-quality *Early On* system would cost. This study found that annual average regional per-child costs range from $15,914 to $23,399, with an average annual state-level per-child cost of a year of high-quality early intervention services costing $17,949. *Early On* is funded through a number of different funding streams, including federal, state, and local sources. Given local differences in funding, the current per-child funding allocation is unknown, and thus not able to be compared with the numbers found in this study.

During meetings with ISD staff, MDE staff, and family members, the AIR team heard a number of recommendations that could help increase the quality level of the current system. These include the following recommendations:

- **Support staff and build a stronger recruitment pipeline**. Many ISDs commented that staff are consistently working beyond a typical workweek. Without clear guidance from the state on appropriate caseloads, the existing staff continue to take on more tasks and children, while burning out and/or leaving the profession. Providing guidance on appropriate caseloads could ameliorate this. Overall, many ISDs commented on challenges in recruiting staff. Expanding the funding available for supporting pre-service providers and conducting outreach to colleges and universities could help these challenges. In addition, creating a mechanism for ISD staff to share ideas and lessons learned both with each other and with MDE could help ensure that best practices are implemented across the state and build connections between ISD staff.

- **Increase outreach to families.** Outreach to families is one area that many participants noted they would like to increase. Currently, about 4% of children ages birth to 3 are identified for *Early On* services in the state (*Early On* Data, 2023) compared to about 14% of children in public school

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(Michigan Department of Education, 2023). This gap indicates that many more children could likely qualify for and benefit from *Early On* services. Conducting outreach to find families not being served would result in more children in the EI system, which would mean a need for correspondingly more staff members to provide services. Ensuring that funding is provided on a responsive per-child basis could help incentivize additional outreach. Additionally, many ISD staff mentioned that having customizable marketing materials provided by the state could help ISDs save resources by not needing to design their own marketing materials.

- **Provide more state services to ISDs in areas of common need.** Some functions that are currently left to ISDs may be areas to gain in efficiency if the state provided options for those functions. This includes interpretation services, which ISDs are currently responsible for contracting on their own. MDE could continue to provide translated documents for outreach and other functions and consider expanding language availability. Providing virtual interpretation from a state-contracted organization could also reduce issues with availability of interpreters for more rural ISDs and reduce ISD staff time in needing to contract with separate services. Additionally, each ISD is currently responsible for purchasing and maintaining its own data system for monitoring children. A state-provided database could help streamline reporting.

- **Consider ways to align eligibility across the system.** Michigan has two eligibility tiers for Part C services: Part C only and Michigan Mandatory Special Education (MMSE) eligibility. The AIR team heard that some ISDs (particularly rural or smaller ISDs) have difficulty streamlining their evaluation process due to different requirements for staff for each of these eligibility determinations. MMSE requires higher qualification levels for staff than Part C only, and ISDs with fewer staff are less able to send MMSE-qualified staff to each evaluation. MDE could consider developing a way to certify staff for MMSE eligibility determination to help streamline the process.

- **Take steps to smooth transitions and transfers for families and children.** MDE may wish to consider when system divisions may not be ideal for children and provide guidance around how ISDs should handle these situations. For example, children close to the 3-year-old cutoff at referral are often referred instead to the Part B system, which can lead to longer wait times for services. Another concern with transition is the lack of available programs for children. Michigan is planning to expand state-funded preschool for 4-year-old children, and options are still needed for 3-year-olds in order to ease transitions from early intervention. Additionally, families moving between ISDs can find it difficult to transfer between service areas; providing some flexibility for continuing service outside of the service area could help families as they complete the transfer.

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The state of Michigan may consider using cost estimation tools in tandem with this cost study to further explore early intervention system costs under different assumptions and scenarios.[18] Additionally, analyzing existing allocations and expenditures for *Early On* and reviewing them against these results and implications can help policymakers better understand areas where the system may need additional resources to ensure high-quality services.

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[18] In addition to this *Early On* cost study, the state is involved in other efforts to estimate resources needed for the prenatal to five system.

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Appendix A. Acknowledgment of Participating Family Members and ISD Staff

AIR would like to thank the family members and ISD staff members who participated in the expert panel meetings. The invaluable information these participants provided formed the basis of the cost estimates in this report. ISD staff who participated were employed by or affiliated with 40 different ISDs (listed below).

ISDs Represented in Panel Meetings by Participating Staff
Northern Region
C.O.O.R. Intermediate School District
Charlevoix–Emmet Intermediate School District
Copper Country Intermediate School District
Delta–Schoolcraft Intermediate School District
Eastern Upper Peninsula Intermediate School District
Gogebic–Ontonagon Intermediate School District
Iosco Regional Educational Service Agency
Manistee Intermediate School District
Marquette–Alger Regional Educational Service Agency
Menominee Intermediate School District
Northwest Educational Services
Wexford–Missaukee Intermediate School District
Western Region
Bay–Arenac Intermediate School District
Clinton County Regional Educational Service Agency
Eaton Intermediate School District
Genesee Intermediate School District
Gratiot–Isabella Regional Education Service District
Ingham Intermediate School District
Livingston Educational Service Agency
Mecosta–Osceola Intermediate School District
Saginaw Intermediate School District
Shiawassee Regional Educational Service District

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ISDs Represented in Panel Meetings by Participating Staff

Eastern Region

Barry Intermediate School District

Berrien Regional Educational Service Agency

Calhoun Intermediate School District

Hillsdale Intermediate School District

Ionia Intermediate School District

Kalamazoo Regional Educational Service Agency

Kent Intermediate School District

Montcalm Area Intermediate School District

Muskegon Area Intermediate School District

Ottawa Area Intermediate School District

Van Buren Intermediate School District

Southeastern Region

Jackson Intermediate School District

Lenawee Intermediate School District

Macomb Intermediate School District

Oakland Schools

Saint Clair County Regional Educational Service Agency

Washtenaw Intermediate School District

Wayne County Regional Educational Service Agency