

NEWS RELEASE | **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE** | August 4, 2021

North Dakota celebrates the launch of the new Early Childhood Division at *Let's Chalk 0 to 5 Event - Early Childhood Matters*

Announces investments in school readiness and quality early childhood experiences

BISMARCK, N.D. – Lt. Gov. Brent Sanford, lawmakers, Team ND members, and early childhood service providers and advocates gathered at North Dakota's Capitol in Bismarck today to raise awareness about why early childhood matters and to announce the launch of the North Dakota Department of Human Services' Early Childhood Division. Speakers also announced several new developments supporting quality early childhood experiences for children ages zero to five.

"We have an opportunity to make a positive, lifelong impact by investing in programs and services that support quality early childhood experiences," said Lt. Gov. Brent Sanford who welcomed participants and expressed gratitude to Rep. Robin Weisz, Sen. Judy Lee, and other lawmakers for supporting the realignment of North Dakota's early childhood services and to DHS Executive Director Chris Jones for his leadership in championing the need for quality early childhood experiences and a more cohesive approach.

Sanford said a key purpose of the division is building greater access to quality early childhood experiences to help children reach their potential, which he described as the greatest investment we can make in our state's future.

He also addressed the state's workforce needs, which are impacted by access to quality care. In North Dakota, more than 44,000 households include children ages zero to five. Of those households, nearly 75% have all parents in the workforce, Sanford said.

"By increasing access to affordable, quality early childhood care, we can remove a key workforce barrier that parents and our communities face today," he said.

The Early Childhood Division was created in July 2021 to align and focus programs and resources on a key department priority: early childhood experiences.

"Ninety-five percent of brain development occurs before age five, so supporting quality early experiences is extremely important," Jones said. "That's why I am excited about the formation of the early childhood team, and to be able to share updates about how we are already working to positively impact the lives of children and families."

He said the new early childhood team will help support parents and early childhood caregivers in two key ways. The division will ensure that more North Dakota children enter kindergarten ready to learn and that more early childhood care providers participate in the quality rating improvement system.

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Grants supporting school readiness

To support school readiness, North Dakota has awarded [Best in Class grants](#) totaling \$2.7 million to 26 early childhood programs across the state serving children in 32 classrooms.

Jones described the Best in Class grants as targeted research-supported investments that were awarded to programs committed to delivering the highest quality experiences to the children and families they serve. Participating programs will be monitored, evaluated and supported.

Grants supporting quality

This fall, the department will offer grant funding supporting early childhood program quality efforts, he said. Child care providers will be able to apply in September for a range of grants designed to help stabilize and strengthen the quality and long-term sustainability of child care in North Dakota.

Grant funding will be available to provide additional support for infant and toddler care, care offered during non-traditional hours, and health and safety-related facility improvements. Funding will also be available to offer recruitment and retention incentives to child care workers as well as incentives related to training and professional development.

North Dakota received more than \$100 million in federal funding as part of the Congressional COVID-19 response and recovery packages, dedicated specifically to early childhood and the child care sector.

Early Childhood Division

The new DHS Early Childhood Division includes child care licensing, provider training and technical assistance, the workforce registry and quality rating and improvement systems, family support and engagement, the Best in Class grant program, administration of the Child Care Development Fund, and coordination of several data systems related to early childhood.

The division was created by moving programs previously housed in other DHS divisions, taking on management of several related contracts and data systems, and transitioning the Office of Early Learning from the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction into DHS to form the new team as authorized in House Bill 1416.

More information about the division and programs are available online at www.nd.gov/dhs/services/earlychildhood.

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