



1 Expand access for children, birth to kindergarten entry, from families with low incomes to high-quality early care and education programs by advocating funding for flexible, parent-directed scholarships

Priority Summary: Young children from low-income families lack access to the same opportunities and experiences as their more well-off peers. Yet we know they need quality early learning the most. Early learning scholarships allow eligible families to find and choose the quality early learning program that meets their needs.

- The most recent study of early learning scholarships shows they are helping the most in need families send their children to high-quality programs of all types.¹
- Scholarships are an equitable way to support children. Rather than “something for everyone,” scholarships provide resources to those who most need them.
- Scholarships are reaching children from diverse families and are serving a higher percentage of children of color compared to the same age children statewide. They are a very effective tool for reaching the children who need it the most, and thus are an effective way to address racial opportunity gaps.²
- 18% of families receiving scholarships are from households whose primary language is one other than English.³
- Currently, only about 21% of low-income children who would use an early learning scholarship receive one.⁴
- Early learning scholarships are a crucial tool for closing the opportunity gaps facing Minnesota. Research shows gaps forming between children from low-income families and their more well-off peers as young as 18 months old.⁴ Matching low-income families with affordable quality early learning programs is the best way to prevent these persistent gaps.
- An evaluation shows that early learning scholarships work. The report finds that all children attending Parent Aware rated programs had growth through the pre-kindergarten year. Children attending the highest rated programs with scholarships showed improvement on six of nine kindergarten readiness measures.⁵
- Children are attending the program their parents wanted when they applied. Nearly all (95%) of the parents indicated their children are attending the program of their choice.⁶
- Scholarships could be improved by raising the cap so that they cover the full cost of year-round, all-day care in high-quality programs.
- Scholarships help families. They also support a mixed-delivery ecosystem of early care and education programs. Well-funded scholarships help support wages for child care professionals. They also incentivize providers to participate in Parent Aware and serve low-income children.

¹Minnesota Department of Education. *Early Learning Scholarships Program Evaluation Report*. 2015. <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/about/rule/leg/rpt/2016/>

²Minnesota Department of Education. *Early Learning Scholarships Program Evaluation Report*. 2016. <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/about/rule/leg/rpt/2016/>

³Minnesota Department of Education. *Early Learning Scholarships 2017-Scholarship Use in Minnesota*. 2018. <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/dse/early/sch/index.htm>

⁴In FY2017 15,079 children ages 0-5 received scholarships. An estimated 79,116 income-eligible children ages 0-5 would use a scholarship if given the opportunity, assuming 80% participation for 3-4 year olds and 60% of 0-2 year olds.

⁵Fernald, A., Marchman, V. A. and Weisleder, A. *SES differences in language processing skill and vocabulary are evident at 18 months*. 2013.

⁶Tout, K., Cleveland, J., Li, W., Starr, R., Soli, M. & Bultinck, E. *The Parent Aware Evaluation: Initial Validation*. 2016. <http://bit.ly/PAeval16>

⁶Minnesota Department of Education. *Early Learning Scholarships Program Evaluation Report- Appendix B*. 2015. <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/about/rule/leg/rpt/2016/>



2 Increase the number of financially sustainable Parent Aware-rated programs and allow programs to maintain or improve their Parent Aware ratings

Priority Summary: Parent Aware is Minnesota’s quality ratings system for early learning programs. It promotes research-based best school readiness practices among participating programs through training and coaching. Parents use the ratings information to determine which early childhood program will be best meet the needs of their child and family.

- High-quality child care is important because children who receive high-quality care are more likely to succeed later on in school and life.⁷
- Parent Aware is a crucial component to matching up the most at-risk children with the highest quality early learning programs, a match that can change the trajectory of a child’s life.
- Accessing high quality early learning programs helps narrow the opportunity gap, giving children from all backgrounds a fair shot at success. By increasing the reach of Parent Aware, we can increase the number of children in high-quality programs.
- There is evidence that Parent Aware is working. It is helping to prepare children, including low-income children, for Kindergarten.⁸
 - Children in Parent Aware-rated programs made gains on skills that are critical for their school readiness: math skills, language and literacy skills, social competence, persistence, and executive function.
 - Gains in language and literacy and executive function were greater for children from low-income families than for children from higher-income families.
- Parent Aware is promising as a factor in retaining provider, based on an analysis regarding Parent Aware participation and the rate of closure of family child care providers from January 2015-January 2017. The results of that analysis showed that non-Parent Aware participating providers had a closure rate of almost three times the closure rate of Parent Aware participating providers in Minneapolis and St Paul (24% vs 9%).
- The resources on the Parent Aware website and through the phone referral line help families find the high-quality child care setting that best fits their schedule and preferences.

⁷Grunewald, Rob and Rolnick, Arthur. *Early Childhood Development: Economic Development with a High Public Return*. 2003. <http://bit.ly/fedearlyed>

⁸Tout, K., Cleveland, J., Li, W., Starr, R., Soli, M. & Bultinck, E. *The Parent Aware Evaluation: Initial Validation*. 2016. <http://bit.ly/PAeval16>



3 Improve Minnesota’s Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) to assure more children from families with low incomes can access high quality care

Priority Summary: The Child Care Assistance Program is an essential tool for thousands of Minnesota families and a crucial support for reducing the cycle of poverty. It provides financial assistance to families who meet income eligibility requirements and participate in work or school. This program allows parents to work while their children get the start they need in life.

- CCAP started as a program allowing parents to work, but now it has become so much more. It’s a crucial opportunity to match up children from low-income families with high quality early learning programs, fully preparing them to succeed in school.
- Implementing changes to the CCAP program that allow it to better support working parents and kindergarten readiness will not only make it a more effective two generational tool for fighting poverty, but also saves the state money in the long run.
- 60.5% of children under age 5 who receive CCAP are children of color.⁹
- 84% of children who are income eligible for CCAP are not receiving it because of a lack of funding.¹⁰
- The state recently passed many provisions to comply with the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant, which was reauthorized in 2014. These included family-friendly practices to and updated health and safety requirements. However, there are still more federal compliance policies to pass including
 - Requiring expedited applications for families experiencing homelessness
 - Increasing provider reimbursement rates
- Ensuring continuity in service between counties CCAP would be even more effective if it were tied to quality. Minnesota should join other states that require programs to participate in Parent Aware in order to receive CCAP. This could be phased in over several years to ensure that all children receiving CCAP attend quality programs.

⁹Children’s Defense Fund-Minnesota. *Minnesota Kids Count 2017: Using Data to Turn Values into Child-Focused Policy*. 2017. <http://bit.ly/MNkcdb17>

¹⁰Children’s Defense Fund-Minnesota. *Minnesota Kids Count 2017: Using Data to Turn Values into Child-Focused Policy*. 2017. <http://bit.ly/MNkcdb17>



4 Support the sustainable career pathways of early learning professionals

Priority Summary: For many families in Minnesota, it is difficult to find child care. Greater Minnesota in particular has experienced a great loss in child care options. Providers are leaving the field for many reasons. Some providers find jobs with better wages, some find new rules and regulations difficult, and some retire. Providing high-quality child care is important both for parents who need to work and for children who need a good start in life. We need to support the important work of child care professionals. This includes improving relevant and required training, assistance to start and maintain their business, and competitive compensation that encourages quality, committed professionals to enter and remain in the profession.

- Minnesota has lost close to 30% of our licensed family providers since 2005. There has been an increase in the number of child care centers, but every region of the state still has a gap between the number of children needing care and total number of spaces available.¹¹
- In Greater Minnesota, licensed family child care is generally more prevalent and practical than child care centers.
- We know that many people are leaving the field because of low pay. Child care workers in Minnesota earn, on average, \$10.81 per hour.¹² More than 85% of child care workers would be considered low-wage workers, making less than \$20,000 annually.¹³
- Teaching kids is actually a lot like more like rocket science than babysitting. Teachers need to understand brain development, social and emotional growth, language development, cultural relevance and more. For children who are learning two languages, the skills of the teachers are even more important. The best way for teachers to gain this knowledge and competency is through higher education and student teaching, under the supervision of master teachers and practitioners.
- The higher education system for educating early childhood teachers needs to be accessible, coordinated, efficient and effective. Coursework needs to address racial bias as well as prepare all teachers to work with an increasingly racially and linguistically diverse Minnesota.

¹¹Werner, M. *A Quiet Crisis: Minnesota's Child Care Shortage*. 2016. <https://www.ruralmn.org/a-quiet-crisis-minnesotas-child-care-shortage/>

¹²Whitebook, M., McLean, C., and Austin, L., *Early Childhood Workforce Index 2016*. <http://csce.berkeley.edu/early-childhood-workforce-index/>

¹³Rohrer, Amanda. *Low Income Workers in Minnesota*. 2014. <http://bit.ly/liwMN14>



5 Improve tracking and data collection of children’s program participation and outcomes

We support recommendations outlined in the 2018 Office of the Legislative Auditor (OLA) report on the state’s Early Childhood systems. In the report, the OLA recommends four important and relevant improvements to how state systems work with and share data:

1. Early Childhood systems including MDE, MDH, and DHS should implement a universal identification number for children participating in early childhood programs.
2. Require kindergarten readiness assessments for children entering kindergarten and complete a comprehensive evaluation of the impacts of early childhood programs.
3. Improve program coordination by broadening the authority for early childhood systems to share individual-level data from early childhood programs.
4. Collect attendance rates and dates of participation for children in early childhood programs as well as data on the number of children who are not screened.

The four recommendations align well with Think Small’s work towards its goal of every child in Minnesota being ready for kindergarten.

Notes:
