



EMPOWERING EDUCATORS.
CHAMPIONING EARLY LEARNERS.

Think Small's Position on Universal Child Care

Think Small envisions a future in which *economic and achievement gaps are closed and every child is ready for kindergarten, ultimately realizing their full potential*. We know the attainment of this future depends on every family in Minnesota having access to affordable, quality early care and education that meets their needs. Expanding access is necessary for strengthening families, supporting the workforce, and promoting long-term economic well-being. A well-funded, quality early care and education system is a benefit to all Minnesotans, regardless of whether they have young children. Through this system Minnesota can promote economic and developmental well-being in the present, while laying a foundation for a more skilled and higher-earning workforce in the future.

We recognize current momentum toward universal child care reflects the urgent need to address affordability issues for families across income levels. We welcome collaboration in visioning ways to expand access and stabilize Minnesota's early care and education system, while preserving prioritization, quality, flexibility, and family choice.

Great Start Task Force Recommendations as a Foundation

Minnesota's Great Start for All Children Task Force recommendations serve as a strong starting point for movement towards a more universal system of child care. Centered around a widely shared goal, that all families have access to quality, affordable early care and education, the recommendations establish an affordability benchmark, call for sustainable public funding that reflects the true cost of providing care, and prioritize better wages for early educators within a mixed-delivery system of quality programs that preserves family choice. Think Small believes the Great Start Recommendations provide a blueprint for how to move towards a more universal approach in a way that is politically feasible.

A Complementary Approach: Universal + Targeted

While universal approaches primarily address affordability and access, Think Small's mission centers on ensuring quality in the system and prioritizing low- and middle-income children, as well as those facing other barriers, in receiving early learning experiences.

These two goals are not in conflict: **they are complementary.**

- **Universal strategies** can build a stronger, more stable system that benefits all families and can build political will across a broader group of collaborators and key actors.
- **Targeted strategies** ensure children who could benefit most from quality early care and education opportunities are served first and with all the resources they require.

We believe approaches to changing Minnesota's policy framework should intentionally **integrate both strategies**, rather than viewing them as competing alternatives.

Why Prioritization Still Matters

Research consistently shows children experiencing the greatest barriers to early learning benefit the most from high-quality early education. Additionally, middle-income children often fall in a valley, where their families make too much to qualify for other programs aimed at lower incomes and make too little to afford high-quality ECE experiences on their own. However, these children also stand ready to benefit from quality early learning experiences. Prioritization ensures:

- Limited public dollars are used where they have the greatest impact.
- Access is increased where groups have historically been left unserved.
- Achievement gaps are addressed early, before they widen.
- Existing disparities are not unintentionally reinforced by the system.

Programs like Early Learning Scholarships have been designed to reflect this principle. **Maintaining that focus is essential even as access is expanded.**

Guiding Principles for Policy Change

Think Small recommends any movement toward universal child care incorporate the following principles:

1. Protect and Strengthen Targeted Investments

Universal systems should not displace or dilute programs like Early Learning Scholarships that prioritize children with the highest levels of need. In a universal system, the children facing the most barriers should have access to quality early care and education first. Minnesota should:

- Fully fund and retain programs that improve access for those children most likely to benefit from public investment.
- Set clear benchmarks for when and how eligibility to other income groups expands.
- Simplify application processes so all families can know all their options.

2. Ensure Quality Across the System

Access without quality does not produce the outcomes children need. A universal system must:

- Establish a baseline standard of quality that supports young children's developmental needs while also prioritizing the well-being and fair compensation of early educators.
- Recognize multiple pathways of quality assurance that have been identified by the Minnesota Board of Early Care and Education to maintain strong quality in the system over time.
- Prioritize the importance of interactions between children and early educators by requiring annual observations to document use of best practices and highlight areas for improvement.

- Support providers serving diverse learners and populations.
- Invest in workforce development and training.

3. Preserve Family Choice in the System

In programs like Early Learning Scholarships, funding follows the child to licensed child care centers or homes, Head Start, or a school-based program. This allows families to choose the care option that best serves their needs and to influence available offerings by directing resources. The current conversation around universal child care funds slots, not children, which limits family choice.

- Implementation of a universal system must seek to create ways to intentionally preserve family choice and flexibility in the system.
- Use of technology to track available slots within the system would help families find options that meet their needs.
- Options must be available with alternative schedules to meet the varied needs of working families.

4. Create a Minnesota Board of Early Care and Education

Movement towards a universal approach will create many changes for those most impacted by the system: educators, families, and their young children. A Minnesota Board of Early Care and Education, with representation from educators and families, as well as community members and other experts from the field, will ensure creation of this system does not inadvertently create more barriers or pain points. A universal approach must be led by those whom it will serve. The Board of Early Care and Education would work in partnership with state agencies to:

- Provide representation from the field in key discussions.
- Alert Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) to emerging issues in the field.
- Work in collaboration with DCYF to identify quality assurance pathways.

5. Align Funding to Reflect Diverse Needs

Children and families require different levels of support. A universal approach should:

- Provide higher levels of investment for those requiring more intensive support.
- Layer funding streams to ensure comprehensive services (e.g., developmental supports, family engagement).
- Include children who are neurodivergent in additional funds as those children and families are often without options in the current system.

6. *Partner Across the Field*

Think Small is committed to working alongside organizations advocating for universal child care to:

- Identify shared goals,
- Develop policy solutions that reflect a complementary approach that preserves prioritization, quality, flexibility, and choice while also addressing affordability and access, and
- Ensure the system works for all families, educators, and communities.

The Path Forward

Think Small believes Minnesota has an opportunity to lead by creating an early care and education system that is both **intentional and inclusive**:

- Intentional in ensuring low- and middle- income children, and those facing other barriers, are **served first**.
- Inclusive in ensuring **all families can access** quality early care and education.

By aligning universal access efforts with targeted strategies, we can build a system that delivers both immediate relief for families and long-term gains for children and communities.

In Summary

Think Small supports exploring a complementary approach to early care and education that seeks to expand affordability and access for all Minnesota families, while emphasizing that universal and targeted approaches must work together to achieve equitable outcomes. Policy must continue to prioritize children facing the greatest barriers through targeted investments within a universal system. Think Small advocates for protecting targeted investments like Early Learning Scholarships, ensuring shared governance with the field, maintaining quality, flexibility, and family choice, and aligning funding to diverse needs. By integrating universal access with intentional prioritization and quality safeguards, Minnesota can create a system that meets immediate family needs while closing gaps, promoting a strong economy now and in the future, and preparing every child for lifelong success.