



Minnesota Needs High-Quality Early Childhood Education

*Schools
First!* 



Executive Summary

Narrowing the Achievement Gap: It Starts Before Kindergarten

Efforts to narrow the achievement gap have renewed focus on school readiness. Much of the gap can be traced to differences early in life, so the achievement gap begins as an opportunity gap.

In Minnesota, fewer than half of the roughly 65,000 children entering kindergarten each year have developed the skills, knowledge and behaviors they need to start their school career. A higher percentage of children not ready to learn come from families with parents who didn't finish high school, speak a language other than English at home, or have low household income. On the first day of school, they're already behind.

Ample research confirms several points on school readiness:

- Early intervention – at least a year before children start kindergarten – works better than remediation in later years.
- High-quality early childhood education, also known as pre-kindergarten, is the most effective way to strengthen development of 3- and 4-year-olds, especially those at risk.
- High-quality early childhood education qualifies as an exceptional investment for public dollars.
- Pre-kindergarten programs with a high return on investment share certain characteristics.

Because it makes good sense for so many reasons, pre-kindergarten has gained the support of parents and countless groups involved with education, business, social services, young children and early learning.

Failing to Prepare Minnesota's Children

During the most important developmental years, we entrust young children to an early-childhood cottage industry. Of this well-intentioned hodgepodge of preschools and child care providers, most are home-based businesses that care for kids while parents work and few have any formal training requirements in early childhood education.

Currently the federal and state government place low priority on young children. Minnesota's failure to plan a system of early childhood education only contributes to the opportunity gap:

Limited access. Minnesota has a shortage of preschools and accredited child care centers. Many Minnesota families can't afford what is available. To make matters worse, many of them can't qualify for Head Start, the federal- and state-funded school readiness program for children from low-income families.

Inconsistent quality. The attributes of high-quality early childhood education are largely absent in Minnesota. Minnesota is one of just nine states that do not require pre-kindergarten teachers to have a bachelor's degree. Fewer than one in five child care centers is accredited. In Greater Minnesota almost none are accredited. Inconsistent funding also threatens the quality of Head Start.

Inadequate funding. The United States ranks among the worst providers of quality service for children in the industrialized world. The state of Minnesota spends little on early childhood and often cuts those funds when forced to make budget decisions.

Low-budget staffing. Nationwide, preschool employees rank among the lowest in pay and training and highest in turnover rates, comparable to parking lot attendants, dishwashers and dry-cleaning workers.

No coordination. The decades-old model of early childhood care and education emphasizes the work needs of parents with little regard for the developmental needs of preschool children. The policies and practices of independent operations have no connection to each other or to the public schools.

Historically, Minnesota has provided free, early childhood special education to preschool age children with health and/or developmental disabilities. However, Minnesota's current system is not responsive to the entire population of preschool children. Minnesota can help to reduce the opportunity gap, and subsequently the achievement gap, by making a commitment to high-quality pre-kindergarten education. Education Minnesota proposes the following actions:

- **Make high-quality pre-kindergarten available at no cost for all 3- and 4-year-olds at risk.**
- **Move toward locating pre-kindergarten programs in the public school system.**
- **Gradually expand to provide affordable pre-kindergarten as an option for all children.**
- **Require all local programs to meet state standards to receive state funding.**
- **Require the staff of pre-kindergarten programs to meet licensing standards.**
- **Provide adequate, dedicated public funding for pre-kindergarten.**

The achievement gap can be addressed. Minnesota needs to join the school-readiness movement and make pre-kindergarten a part of growing up in Minnesota.

Introduction: The Achievement Gap Grows From an Opportunity Gap

In July 2006 the Minnesota Governor's Summit on School Readiness issued a sweeping indictment of how the state serves its youngest citizens. It concluded that no program in Minnesota contains all the key elements of high-quality early childhood education necessary for at-risk families; coordination of services is difficult for both programs and families; and at-risk children need more support and services than are available from current programs.

This lack of a comprehensive program shows up each fall as a new crop of Minnesota kindergarten students arrive for their first day of school. More than half of them are not school-ready. While some can print their names, recite the alphabet, count to 10 or higher, and even read a few words, others don't know the letters or numbers, have never held a pencil or crayon, and don't understand that a book starts inside the front cover and progresses one page at a time. Some children are good at taking turns, asking questions and cooperating. Others have never spent time with other children, have never had to share, have never accepted an offer of help.

The Definition of "Ready for Kindergarten" Has Evolved

Kindergarten originally was designed to ease children's transition into school. It gave youngsters a chance to meet and socialize with children in a part-day program. Many states – including Minnesota – still do not mandate kindergarten. However, a national trend toward all-day, everyday kindergarten underscores the increasing academic demands on 5-year-olds. Kindergarten now approaches the equivalent of the first grade attended by today's parents.

The Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards state that, by the end of the school year, kindergarteners should do this and more:

- See, hear, say and write the basic sounds of the English language.
- Match consonant and short vowel sounds to appropriate letters, say the common sounds of most letters, and begin to write consonant-vowel-consonant words.
- Use knowledge of basic phonics to spell.
- Print his or her first and last names.
- Count to 31 and backwards from 10.
- Compare the number of objects in two or more sets.

Minnesota's 2003 Developmental Assessment at Kindergarten Entrance documented differences in five domains: physical development, personal and social development, the arts, language and literacy, and mathematical thinking. The statewide assessment of 3,002 children found Minnesota children's skills were weakest in the stepping stones to math and reading.

Minnesota School Readiness in 2003

Developmental Assessment at Kindergarten Entrance

Domain	Readiness Level		
	Not Yet	In Process	Proficient
Physical Development	2%	41%	57%
Personal & Social Development	9%	44%	47%
The Arts	6%	48%	47%
Language & Literacy	12%	46%	43%
Mathematical Thinking	11%	50%	40%

Source: Minnesota Department of Education

Within each category, ratings declined on more complex or demanding indicators. For example, 38 percent were beginning to develop knowledge about letters; 37 percent approached tasks with flexibility and inventiveness; 32 percent used simple strategies to solve mathematical problems; 30 percent demonstrated phonological awareness; and 29 percent made use of letter-like shapes, symbols and letters to convey meaning.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) makes it a national priority to narrow the achievement gap between America's advantaged and disadvantaged children. NCLB requires that schools achieve academic proficiency for students by the 2013-14 school year.

However, the gap persists nationwide and in Minnesota. The state's 63,500 eighth-graders improved their overall performance in reading and math on the 2005 Basic Skills Tests as achievement gaps narrowed in reading and remained constant in math.¹

Minnesota's Achievement Gap in 8th Grade

Compared to the average score for white students, how did minority students score on the 2005 Basic Skills Test?

	Difference in Percentage Points	
	Reading	Math
Asian	-14	-17
American Indians	-23	-34
Hispanics	-26	-35
African-Americans	-34	-46

Source: Minnesota Department of Education

At-Risk Children Start From Behind

NCLB identifies seven groups of disadvantaged and minority children: English Language Learners, special education, low income, African Americans, American Indians, Hispanics and Asians. All start out lagging far behind in literacy, number skills and social skills. Between 1994 and 2003, non-English-speaking students in Minnesota schools more than tripled from 21,277 to 73,620.² Twelve percent of Minnesota children under age 5 live in poverty.³

Minnesota's 2004 Kindergarten Readiness Study, which targeted 20 school districts with 3,423 new kindergartners in 49 schools, identified one more disadvantaged group: children

Fixing NCLB

Under No Child Left Behind, every state must develop statewide academic standards for all students, statewide testing on those standards and a comprehensive reporting system to measure and report progress. Test results are reported for a school's entire student population and for several subgroups.

Educators support the ultimate goal of the No Child Left Behind Act but see flaws in the "one size fits all" approach. When NCLB faces reauthorization in 2007, the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association will propose several improvements, including:

- *Modify the unattainable goal of academic proficiency for 100 percent of students. Minnesota's legislative auditor predicts that 85 percent of Minnesota schools will be labeled "failing" by 2014 as a result of unattainable requirements.*
- *Gauge progress for individual students or the same group of students. The current fixed targets ignore improvement beyond the standards and attempt to track progress by comparing different sets of students.*
- *Limit the number of subgroups. Schools now fail when any one of 37 subgroups does not make adequate yearly progress.*
- *Provide full federal funding for all NCLB mandates. For example, Minnesota will receive an estimated \$111.5 million in federal funds for the \$190.2 million cost of Title I services for low-income students.*

whose parents have less than a high school diploma. In all five domains of development, the percentage of children not yet school-ready was highest for children of parents with the least education. They were eight times more likely to be unable to perform a skill in mathematical thinking and five times more likely to be unable to perform a skill in language and literacy than the children of parents with at least a four-year degree.

Minnesota School Readiness in 2004

Developmental Assessment at Kindergarten Entrance

	Not Yet Showing Skill, Knowledge or Behavior				
	<i>Physical Development</i>	<i>Personal & Social</i>	<i>Arts</i>	<i>Language & Literacy</i>	<i>Mathematical Thinking</i>
White	3%	7%	5%	9%	7%
Parent < High School	4%	19%	15%	31%	34%
Income < \$35,000	5%	15%	10%	21%	19%
Spanish at Home	2%	11%	11%	29%	28%
Children of Color	4%	13%	10%	21%	20%

Source: Minnesota Department of Education

Researchers now conclude that the achievement gap is a process of falling farther and farther behind, a process that begins long before the first day of kindergarten. Minnesota’s kindergartners provide living proof that the achievement gap grows from an opportunity gap – differences in experience, nourishment and nurturing have a profound effect on a developing mind.^d By age 4, children from high socioeconomic families have been exposed to 30 million more words than children from low socioeconomic families.⁵

Risk factors for school failure in young children include too little exposure to stimulating language, reading, storytelling and other activities that provide a foundation for literacy; limited-English proficiency; hearing and vision disabilities; speech and language impairments; and learning or other disabilities.⁶ More than 50 percent of U.S. children have one or more risk factors for school failure, and 15 percent have three or more risk factors.⁷ In addition to lower scores, children with risk factors often have trouble following directions, working independently or in groups, communicating, and establishing secure relationships with adults.

“Even with extraordinary kindergarten teachers, gaps of this magnitude are not likely to go away in one year,” writes Keith E. Stanovich, professor of human development and applied psychology at the University of Toronto. “Gaps become cumulative, building to insurmountable gaps in reading achievement and content knowledge after just a few years of schooling.”

The Call for Early Childhood Education

The issue of school readiness ranks among the top priorities for a broad spectrum of organizations, including the National Education Association, American Federation of Teachers, National Governor’s Association, United Way, National Conference of State Legislatures, The Business Roundtable, University of Minnesota, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, Minnesota School Readiness Business Advisory Council, McKnight Foundation, Minneapolis Foundation, Minnesota Initiative Funds, Ready4K, Minnesota Businesses for Early Learning and others. Virtually all have arrived at the same conclusion: The best treatment is to prevent the gap from ever developing, and the best treatment option is effective pre-kindergarten.

“If we are serious about closing the achievement gap, we cannot wait for children to enter the doors of kindergarten,” writes Susan Neuman, former assistant secretary for elementary and secondary education in the U.S. Department of Education. “Serious reforms must immediately and systematically address the enormous differences in school readiness between children from diverse backgrounds if we are to have any chance of having all children reach proficiency in 2014.”

Education Minnesota, the state’s largest education organization, advocates high-quality pre-kindergarten because it prepares children for the demands of modern kindergarten. Research indicates that pre-kindergarten paves the way for learning and a lifetime of success. It is designed to reach children early, at ages 3 and 4. While children at risk have the most to gain from pre-kindergarten, all children can benefit because it builds the developmental foundation for the learning that occurs in kindergarten.

High-Quality Programs Stimulate Developing Brains

Growing support for high-quality pre-kindergarten in the past decade coincides with growing understanding of how young brains develop. We now know that humans learn more from birth to age 5 than in any other five-year period. Efforts to support growth in cognition, language, motor skills, adaptive skills and social-emotional functioning during these critical years can promote success, prevent major learning problems, shrink the achievement gap and produce more productive citizens.⁸

Pre-kindergarten provides developmentally appropriate learning opportunities in structured settings. It offers instruction in academic skills, encourages self-directed learning and fosters relationships between children and their teachers.

Numerous studies have documented that high-quality programs designed to strengthen children’s weaknesses also improve their cognitive development and academic skills and have a lasting effect on their school careers.⁹ The High/Scope Preschool Study has tracked poor, African American children who attended the Perry Preschool, a high-quality program in Ypsilanti, Mich., from 1962 to 1967 against a similar group that did not attend. By the time the children became young adults, they had provided proof of multiple benefits. The study found more of the same when the students reached age 40, confirming that the benefits have life-long effects.¹⁰

A Return on Investment of Tax Dollars

Support for pre-kindergarten has been building since a 1995 study declared high-quality early childhood education the “single best investment for improving achievement.”¹¹ Businesses favor the wise use of tax dollars and the development of a better-educated work force. Arthur Rolnick, senior vice president and director of research with the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, says investing in early childhood is a state’s most important tool for economic development because a strong, educated work force attracts business and jobs.

Businesses also appreciate that affordable, full-day, full year pre-kindergarten provides a reliable source of child care, which improves productivity and helps improve finances for low-income families. Disruptions in child care often turn into disruptions at work, causing lost work time and employee turnover.

Studies by educators and business organizations continue to quantify the return on investment and to identify the factors that make one program a better investment than another. While the High/Scope Preschool Study found that every dollar invested in the

Pre-kindergarten Benefits

The High/Scope Preschool Study documented that the benefits of a pre-kindergarten program extend throughout a child’s school career and into adulthood:

Preparing children for kindergarten:

- Better higher-order thinking and attention skills
- Better reading, writing and mathematical abilities
- Better social skills
- Better ability to handle the demands of formal schooling
- Dealing with deficits in children who need more help
- Fewer special education placements
- Fewer behavioral problems
- Less grade retention
- Higher graduation rates
- Preparing children to succeed in life
- Less societal disengagement later in life
- More economic productivity later in life
- Less dependency on welfare later in life
- Higher sense of social stability later in life

10 Essential Elements of High-Quality Pre-kindergarten

1. Target children at risk
2. Begin early to make a larger impact with sustained effects
3. Adequate length of program year and duration in years
4. Instruction that makes good use of time to address learning needs
5. Class sizes under 20 and child-to-staff ratios less than 10 to 1
6. Highly trained professionals and ongoing professional development
7. Comprehensive services that respond to child's needs with education and family services
8. Compensatory services to accelerate literacy and language development
9. Coordination of transitions to kindergarten and early grades
10. Strong accountability system with formal assessments of children's progress and careful monitoring of program quality

Source: Arthur J. Reynolds, University of Minnesota, and Susan Neuman, University of Michigan

program during the early 1960s produced \$8 in benefits to the program participants and society, the inflation-adjusted internal rate of return produced 16 percent annual interest, with about 80 percent of that going to the general public.¹²

“Few public investments will yield a greater return than those dollars we invest in the care, nurturing and education of our youngest citizens,” Arthur J. Reynolds, professor with the Institute of Child Development at University of Minnesota, told the Minnesota Governor’s Summit on School Readiness in July 2006. He estimated the lifetime economic benefits of pre-kindergarten at \$140,000 per student. Savings come from reduced costs for remedial and special education, unemployment, justice-system costs and health expenditures. Plus the former students showed increased average income compared to those students who had not participated in a high quality preschool program.

Current Status: Failing to Prepare Minnesota’s Children

Minnesota’s failure to plan a system of pre-kindergarten means many children come to school unprepared for that first day. Even as the voices supporting pre-kindergarten grow louder, state and federal government continue to give low priority to early learning. They have failed to plan for improvements in school readiness, failed to fund pre-kindergarten programs that over time more than pay for themselves, and failed to provide opportunities that prepare children for a lifetime of success.

In describing America’s approach to early learning, the Committee for Economic Development painted an accurate portrait of Minnesota: “Because the United States still views financing education and the care of young children as primarily a family responsibility, early learning opportunities are unavailable to many children...Public policies for education and child care are poorly integrated, however, and lack a comprehensive vision that encompasses both the goals of school readiness and support of working parents...Many nations far surpass us in making early learning opportunities available to all...Progress has been slow on meeting the needs of young children because the nation has been unwilling to make public investments necessary to give all children the strong start they need as they enter school.”

During the most important developmental years, we entrust young children to an early childhood cottage industry. Some programs provide child care for working parents. Some offer learning opportunities for young children. Over time, they evolved into a non-system of dual-purpose small businesses, the bulk of them home-based. The state of Minnesota, business organizations, education foundations and other groups have examined this flawed system and identified several issues that contribute to the opportunity gap for Minnesota’s 3- and 4-year-olds:

Limited access. Minnesota has a shortage of pre-kindergarten programs. In 2005, the state ranked 45th with 18.2 percent of 4-year-olds in any public program. Out of 38 states that offer pre-kindergarten, Minnesota ranked 36th with 1.9 percent of 4-year-olds in state-funded pre-kindergarten other than Head Start.¹³ Head Start is available in all Minnesota counties, but funding limits participation to 53 percent of the eligible children. The income of most Minnesota families is too high for Head Start and too low for the 563 privately operated preschools, which are also in short supply. Other early-childhood-education government programs do not qualify as pre-kindergarten.¹⁴

Similar circumstances affect the choices Minnesota families make on child care. Nearly 80 percent of Minnesota children ages 3 to 5 are in child care. Twenty-one percent are in home-based child care with family, friends and neighbors, and 69 percent are in center-

based child care. About 10 percent of Minnesota preschoolers spend time in both licensed and unlicensed settings.¹⁵

Minnesota has 854 licensed child care centers but only 19 percent are accredited, meaning the center meets the quality standards of a national organization.¹⁶ Almost none of the accredited centers are in Greater Minnesota. Fewer than 1 percent of the 12,200 licensed family child care homes are accredited. Unaccredited centers and unaccredited home-based providers have no obligation to provide early learning. Neither do the estimated 150,000 relatives, friends or neighbors who care for Minnesota kids.

Affordability of child care influences choices and represents a daunting barrier to work. In 2004, Minnesota families with preschool-age children spent an average of \$4,900 on child care. While 10 percent of gross income for child care is commonly considered affordable, child care consumed 28 percent of earnings in families with income less than \$20,000 and 15 percent in families with household income between \$20,000 and \$44,999.

Government programs paid the cost for 30 percent of Minnesota families to use licensed child care in 2004. This funding for low-income families has been both insufficient and vulnerable to budget cuts. Among families with annual income below \$20,000, nearly half – 47 percent – pay for child care.

Full-time Child Care Rates

The average annual rates for preschool-age children in Minnesota:

	<i>Licensed Home-Based Child Care</i>	<i>Licensed Child Care Center</i>
Metro	\$6,656	\$9,724
Greater Minnesota	\$5,512	\$6,708

Inconsistent quality. The attributes of high-quality pre-kindergarten are largely absent in Minnesota. Seventy-one percent of child care centers in 2005 met only minimal standards on the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale. Only 25 percent of child care centers received a rating of good. But even among those centers, 60 percent are not accredited; 52 percent have no formal curriculum; and 60 percent of teachers lack a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education.

Fewer than one in five Minnesota child care centers is accredited, and few are in Greater Minnesota. Fewer than 1 percent of family child care settings are accredited.¹⁷

Accredited child care centers, which tend to be the most expensive type of center, proved their effectiveness in a 2005 school readiness study. A development assessment of 226 children in 22 accredited centers found that more than 80 percent of the children were “fully proficient,” or ready for school – approaching double the percentage in the 2003 statewide study. Few children were in the “not yet proficient” category for their performance on any indicators. The centers also appeared to help minimize the effect of risk factors. The study found no difference among children based on income, race or education level of their parents.¹⁸

Head Start, the only state-funded preschool program in Minnesota, has a strong foundation with its health and social services plus parent involvement. But the program has suffered from funding cuts, and its intellectual development component could be stronger.

A Teacher’s Story

The achievement gap is “perhaps the greatest social injustice confronting us today,” said Kimberly Oliver, the National Teacher of the Year, in remarks made at the National Education Association’s 2006 Representative Assembly.

As a kindergarten teacher in Silver Spring, Maryland, she deals with the opportunity gap walking into her classroom every fall.

One student, Kathryn, came to school joyful, excited and confident but lacking many of the skills necessary to be successful. She didn’t know how to sing the ABC song. She couldn’t find her chair because she could not recognize her own name in print. She had difficulty holding the crayon when asked to draw a picture of their family, and lacked the verbal skills in English to share a story about her loved ones with the class.

“After about a week it was very disheartening because I saw the confidence in her fade,” Oliver said, “and after awhile if I asked her to do something she would just push it away and say, ‘No, you do it, Ms. Oliver.’ ... At 5 years old, on the very first day of kindergarten, Kathryn was already being ‘left behind.’

“It is so important that we embrace universal pre-K programs for all students. Imagine what a difference it would have made in Kathryn’s first week of school.”

The Minnesota Department of Education regulates preschools, but state early learning standards are voluntary and not monitored by the state.¹⁹

The Itasca Project, a group of community leaders focused on issues that affect economic and quality of life, found three quality-related problems in Minnesota early childhood programs:

- No objective measurement of program effectiveness.
- Few systematic linkages between participation and outcomes, such as school readiness.
- Failure to embed quality in funding reviews.

Meanwhile, as many as 80 percent of early childhood programs do not reflect the latest knowledge about child development. As Jack P. Shonkoff, M.D., said in introducing a paper on the science of early childhood development, "... at a time when important scientific advances could and should be used to care for and protect our children, such knowledge is frequently dismissed or ignored. And our children are paying the price."²⁰

Inadequate funding. The United States ranks among the worst providers of quality service for children in the industrialized world.²¹ The state of Minnesota treats early childhood care and education like discretionary spending by paying a small portion of the total and repeatedly cutting back. Families (and private contributions) paid \$1.2 billion – 80 percent of Minnesota’s \$1.5 billion in total early childhood spending in 2004.²²

State funding reflects a low priority on young children. In 2004, Minnesota spent \$145 million on early childhood programs, the federal government contributed \$169 million, and local government (counties and school districts) spent \$23 million. Total government spending divided roughly in half between programs that help prepare children for kindergarten and programs that offer child care financial assistance.

Federal and State Funding for Early Childhood Education in FY 2004

Developmental Assessment at Kindergarten Entrance

<i>Program</i>	<i>\$Million</i>	<i>Children</i>	<i>Participation</i>	<i>Per Child</i>
Head Start	\$98	17,000	53%	\$5,800
ECFE	\$39	138,000	41%	\$280
School Readiness	\$10	29,000	29%	\$330
Early Screening	\$2	57,000	-	\$40
Early Childhood Special Ed. & Interagency Early Intervention	\$14	16,000	-	\$880

Low-budget staffing. Minnesota is one of just nine states that do not require any early childhood teachers to have a bachelor’s degree. Instead, Minnesota requires that each class have one teacher with specialized training in early childhood education with a Child Development Associate or Competency-Based Training credential, associate’s or bachelor’s degree. In Minnesota, 76 percent of teachers in child care centers and only 14 percent of family child care providers meet this lower standard.

Nationwide, 40 percent of preschool employees have only a high school diploma. They generally rank among the lowest in pay and training and highest in turnover rates of any

occupation, ranking comparable to parking lot attendants, dishwashers and dry-cleaning workers.²³

No coordination. Minnesota has thousands of early child care providers—home-based settings, franchise child care centers, church-based programs or any number of other options. Some are regulated by the Minnesota Department of Human Services, some by the Minnesota Department of Education, and some have no oversight.

This decades-old, highly fragmented model emphasizes the work needs of parents with little regard for the developmental needs of preschool children. Although research indicates that children need both multiple services and an extended transition from early childhood programs to elementary school, the policies and practices of these independent operations have no connection to each other or to the public schools.

Recommendations

Based on our experience with young children and public education, our expertise in learning and teaching, and our knowledge of education programs and research, Education Minnesota recommends the following actions to narrow the opportunity gap and ensure that a growing percentage of Minnesota children will start school ready to learn:

Make high-quality pre-kindergarten available at no cost for all 3- and 4-year-olds at risk. These children need the most help and can benefit the most from pre-kindergarten. Research indicates that starting earlier, at age 3, makes a larger impact. In addition to income, other factors that statistically increase risk should be used to identify qualifying children. The program should incorporate the 10 elements of high-quality pre-kindergarten. These include comprehensive services for health, nutrition and parent involvement. The program also should incorporate best practices and insights from existing high-quality programs in other states and industrialized countries.

Fifteen states provided pre-kindergarten for at least 15 percent of 4-year-olds in 2004-05. Minnesota is not one of those states.²⁴ Illinois will spend \$320 million next year on pre-kindergarten for 75,000 children – 26 percent of the state’s 4-year-olds – and has approved a plan for universal access. Wisconsin spent more than \$90 million on pre-kindergarten for 29 percent of all 4-year-olds. In Oklahoma, more than 90 percent of 4-year-olds attend publicly supported preschools.²⁵ A ballot initiative in California would establish a statewide, voluntary preschool program for all 4-year-olds.

Move toward locating pre-kindergarten programs in the public school system. The Itasca Project recommends building a coordinated infrastructure for services and decision-making. That infrastructure already exists in the public school system. Most of the resources needed for pre-kindergarten are already there. Public schools would be able to link pre-kindergarten activities to the K-12 system and to provide the seamless transition that most children need. In addition, public school educators are licensed by the state and have training, professional development and compensation systems in place. Research shows that an established public school program can generate substantial return on investment from a pre-kindergarten program.²⁶

Gradually expand to provide affordable pre-kindergarten as an option for all children. Because all children can benefit from pre-kindergarten, it should be available to all, regardless of ability to pay. Charging a sliding fee based on the family’s ability to pay would help to offset cost.

Require all local programs to meet state standards to receive state funding. Minnesota

developed Early Childhood Indicators of Progress in 2000 and updated them in 2005 to reflect the latest research and to align them with the Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards. The new Minnesota Early Learning Standards reflect the full range of child development: social and emotional development; approaches to learning; language and literacy development; creativity and the arts; cognitive development (mathematical and logical thinking, scientific thinking and problem solving, and social systems); and physical and motor development. Local programs should meet state standards on curriculum, content and subject areas, using developmentally appropriate activities and easing the transition to the K-12 curriculum.

Require the staff of pre-kindergarten programs to meet licensing standards. Children learn more from teachers with preparation, training and experience in teaching – in particular, teaching children of this age.²⁷ Future pre-kindergarten teachers must have a four-year degree from a teacher preparation program with a focus on child development and early childhood approaches. Current preschool teachers and paraprofessionals could be given a window of time to complete professional development and to meet higher licensing standards. Pre-kindergarten teachers and paraprofessionals would receive a salary reflective of their skills, which would reduce turnover.

Provide adequate, dedicated public funding for pre-kindergarten education. Pre-kindergarten needs a permanent and stable funding system. This requires coordination of federal, state and local funding currently going to a variety of early childhood programs.

The federal government should make pre-kindergarten available for all 3- and 4-year-old children from disadvantaged families. This would include fully funding Head Start to cover all eligible children and strengthening the program to meet high-quality standards. Minnesota should fund pre-kindergarten for other 3- and 4-year-olds whose household incomes exceed the Head Start income levels. The state also should develop a sliding-scale fee system that makes pre-kindergarten affordable for all families.

Conclusion

We know that the achievement gap rises from an opportunity gap that begins in early childhood. We know that high-quality pre-kindergarten education is the most effective way to narrow the opportunity gap. We know that the benefits of pre-kindergarten extend beyond a child's school career. We know that high-quality early childhood education pays for itself many times over through savings in social costs and higher income later in life for the student.

Minnesotans support pre-kindergarten. In a state telephone survey conducted in June 2006, 73 percent of likely voters said Minnesota should make a greater investment in early childhood education, and 62 percent said they would be willing to pay slightly higher taxes to expand and/or improve early childhood education.²⁸

The only remaining issue is the action gap. We know the value of pre-kindergarten and its ability to change young lives, and now Minnesota must act on that knowledge to develop a plan for pre-kindergarten and provide the necessary resources.

“The governor and the Legislature must provide the funding to close the opportunity gap if we really want to close the achievement gap,” says Education Minnesota President Judy Schaubach.

The Legislature made a strong first step in creating the Minnesota Early Learning

Foundation to increase public and private investments in early education. But many others must follow. To ensure that all Minnesota children are ready for kindergarten, the state must accept responsibility for the development of younger children. And we must look at funding as an investment in a precious resource and the long-term competitiveness of Minnesota's economy. We certainly can't afford to let another year of delay become a state-approved opportunity gap for another 65,000 Minnesota children.

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- ¹³ The State of Preschool, 2005 State Preschool Yearbook, National Institute for Early Education Research, www.nieer.org.
- ¹⁴ Early Childhood Family Education provides developmental activities for all children from birth to kindergarten and education on child development for their parents. School Readiness typically involves one hour a week of developmental activities for parents and children age 3 to kindergarten, with priority to those developmentally disadvantaged or at risk for failure. Early Screening identifies potential health and developmental problems in all children age 3 to 5. Early Childhood Special Education maximizes the potential of children ages 3 to 7 with identified educational disabilities. Part C / Interagency Early Intervention offers comprehensive services for children with disabilities from birth to age 3 and their families.
- ¹⁵ Chase, R. and Arnold, J., Wilder Research, 2005. Child Care Use in Minnesota: 2004 Statewide Household Child Care. www.wilderresearch.org.
- ¹⁶ In Minnesota, child care centers can be accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the Council on Accreditation, the National Early Childhood Program Accreditation, the National School-Age Care Association or the National Head Start Association Program of Excellence. Montessori programs can be accredited by the American Montessori Society, the Association of Montessori International-USA or the National Center for Montessori Education. A family child care provider can be accredited by the National Association for Family Child Care or the Competency Based Training and Assessment Program but also must have an early-childhood-development credential, such as a Child Development Associate credential (CDA), a child development associate degree, a diploma in child development from a Minnesota state technical college or a bachelor's degree in early childhood education from an accredited college or university.
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