

A GREAT START FOR EVERY CHILD

Dear Members of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee:

We are a diverse group of organizations joining together to enthusiastically champion the Great Start for All Minnesota Children Act of 2023 (S.F. 2229, as amended).

The legislation is based on the recommendations of the Great Start Task Force, which was formed in 2021 by the Minnesota Legislature and tasked with developing consensus recommendations for creating an early care and learning system that would be: 1) affordable for parents; 2) provide access to high quality experiences for children; and 3) ensure that Minnesota's early childhood educators are equitably compensated.

We believe that S.F. 2229 as amended would achieve those goals and support the following transformative changes in the proposal.

Immediate Investment to Expand Family Supports. The legislation calls for immediate investments in the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) and Early Learning Scholarships to enable those programs to support families up to 85% of State Median Income (about \$100,000/year for a family of four), among other changes that will allow the streams to work better for children and families.

Immediately Invest to Improve Early Educator Compensation. The legislation would continue direct-to-provider payments that began during the pandemic. These payments are a critically important way to immediately bolster the compensation of early educators. The proposal also calls for an immediate increase in reimbursement rates for providers serving children using CCAP or Scholarships and funding for the REETAIN program, which aims to keep quality educators in the field.

Streamline CCAP and Scholarship Funding Streams into Great Start Scholarships. The legislation moves to action on one of the keystone recommendations of the task force, the establishment of a new family benefits system. The language sets a two-year timeframe for transitioning to a new merged CCAP and Scholarship program, which would be called, "Great Start Scholarships." This new system would bring together the strengths of the existing CCAP and Scholarship programs to better support children and families and ease administrative burdens for providers.

Ensure No Family Pays More Than 7% of Income, Factors Provider Cost into Reimbursements. The new Great Start Scholarships would use a sliding scale system to ensure that no Minnesota family pays more than 7% of their income for child care expenses and would move the state toward a reimbursement structure that factors in the cost of providing quality services for the first time.

Invest in Critically Needed Systems Infrastructure. Finally, the proposal provides for urgently needed infrastructure investments to support the implementation of new system outlined in the bill. Those investments allow for: a wage scale and rate determination model; investments in an information technology; and investments to move all providers into the Parent Aware Quality Rating and Improvement System, among others.

We enthusiastically support this consensus approach. It would alleviate the current early care and learning crisis that poses such a huge threat to Minnesota's communities, economy, families, and children, and put us on a path to make Minnesota the best state in the nation for children. Minnesota needs to enact this visionary legislation as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

