



March 19, 2025

Re: SF1049, Funding provision for early learning scholarships

Dear Chair Wiklund and Members of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee,

A strong early foundation is key to student success, with extensive research showing that educational opportunities before age 5 are critical in a child's development. We know that access to high-quality early learning is linked to improved kindergarten readiness—including literacy, numeracy¹—as well as lower rates of special education referral,² higher graduation rates,³ and more.⁴ As a state, investing in high-quality programming during the early years should be a top priority, and an area where we ensure no student falls through the cracks due to income. By investing early, we can break cycles of poverty and reduce the disparities in our K-12 system.

In 2023, the legislature made major strides by investing in early learning scholarships. This has helped thousands of children access high-quality programming—and at a critical juncture. Coming out of the pandemic, far too many students are entering kindergarten without the foundations to succeed in the classroom, and making early learning scholarships a top priority is helping re-set the table for student success.

While the 2023 investment was groundbreaking, the program still has a waiting list of families seeking access to scholarships. In an ideal world, we would be here advocating to further expand the program given everything we know about the strong return on investment. What we must not do is slide back. SF1049 ensures just that—maintaining the program for the coming biennium and putting a stake in the ground on this priority. The upfront cost pays off in other areas. Strong literacy foundations means less need for academic intervention later on. Better early support means lower rates of special education—a growing K-12 cost driver.

Our youngest Minnesotans—particularly those who have traditionally underserved—do not have time to wait. Even in a challenging budget year, we should make this investment a top priority because we know it will pay long-term dividends in our K-12 system and beyond.

Sincerely,
Andrea Roethke
Managing Director, Strategy & Operations

¹ National Institute of Child Health and Development, "The NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development." 2006. https://www.nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/documents/seccyd_06.pdf

² Young, G., Philpott, D. F., Butler, E., Maich, K., & Penney, S. C. (2019). Exploring the Impact of Quality Early Child Education on Special Education: Can We Prevent Placement in Special Education?. *Exceptionality Education International*, 29(3), 6-21.

<https://research.library.mun.ca/14156/1/Exploring%20the%20Impact%20of%20ECE%20on%20SEN.pdf>

³ Barnett, W. S. (1995). Long-term effects of early childhood programs on cognitive and school outcomes. *The future of children*, 25-50

⁴ J.L. Garcia, J.J. Heckman, D. E. Leaf, & M.J. Prados, "The Life-Cycle Benefits of an Influential Early Childhood Program." *National Bureau of Economic Research*, December 2016. https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w22993/w22993.pdf