

A framework for early education investment in 2016 and beyond....

Recommendations from the Governor's Early Learning Council

Governor Dayton's Executive Order creating the Early Learning Council (ELC) and Minnesota Statute asks that we advise the Governor, Legislature and Children's Cabinet on how to most effectively create a high-quality early childhood system in Minnesota. Our guiding principles clarify further stating: The council will provide direction and advice on early childhood issues including defining a unified network of public and private support services that prepare young children for success in school and life.

ELC recommendations are based on:

- Listening sessions conducted around the state with parents and stakeholders
- Review of current research and evaluation of early learning programs
- Review and oversight of the activities conducted under Minnesota's Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grant intended to build the early childhood system in Minnesota
- Review of programmatic efforts of Minnesota Departments of Education, Human Services and Health
- The combined wisdom and experiences of the members of the Council

The Early Learning Council shares Governor Dayton's strong commitment to continued development of a comprehensive, effective and continuously improving system of care and education for our State's youngest citizens- a system that is significantly stronger today, but still has challenges that must be faced. We believe a number of policy and program innovations are needed to support ongoing system development. In this spirit we offer the following recommendations.

Early Learning Council Recommendations:

We refer you to our guiding principles (attached) that ground our work. We especially want to call out three issues that are extremely important to any build out of the early childhood system in Minnesota:

1. **Context matters** – Minnesota currently has strong collaborative partnerships delivering services in a variety of communities across the state. Implementation of any proposed changes will depend on factors specific to and issues facing these communities. Any proposed changes should build on, and not put at risk, community or philanthropic partnerships. Changes need to be flexible enough to work in all communities.

2. **Diverse stakeholders, collaborative efforts** – The entities that assume responsibility and leadership for proposed changes need to ensure that the diversity of our state is reflected in decision making bodies as well as those responsible for implementation. Also, circumstances vary widely in different locations in Minnesota, which makes geographic diversity another important dimension to consider. Engagement of stakeholders, from across the state, - parents, public and private early childhood providers, funders, policy makers and communities members-is essential as we build this system. This engagement is critical to assure that every step Minnesota takes is one that is both meaningful and progressive toward the goal of every child ready to learn.
3. **Opportunity Gap** – Closing the opportunity gap must be one of our highest priorities. Our work needs to take into account strategies proven to narrow this gap and to support replication and scaling up of these efforts. Based on local or national evaluation results we know that Minnesota has strategies that are working such as providing access, transportation and empowering parents through scholarships, building high quality programs through Parent Aware rating system and investing deeply in areas of high concentrations of poverty known as Transformation Zones. Moving away from the current strategies will destabilize families and risk our continued progress toward making a real difference in narrowing the opportunity gap.

Recommendations regarding the early childhood system needs in Minnesota

1. **Assure quality through common standards and kindergarten readiness assessments for all early learning programs:** We have wonderful opportunities to innovate, and to encourage local variations. At the same time, we must preserve our commitment to serving young children well, and to identifying practices that are most promising and ready for replication and expansion. To achieve these goals, there must be common outcome and quality accountability measures across all mixed delivery programs.

As we continue to build a system of care and early education starting at birth, we need to build upon the standards set in Parent Aware, which are aligned with K-12, and use them across all programs rated by Parent Aware birth to kindergarten.

2. **Establish quality standards for Home Visiting programs and prepare for expansion:** As we build out quality home visiting system for infants and toddlers, we should provide additional funding for home visiting to assure continued and expanded funding for evidence-based and culturally relevant home visiting practices.

3. **Innovation should be encouraged:** There are multiple models for building out a Universal PreK system. The proposed model includes a number of untested elements that should be piloted and evaluated prior to statewide implementation. Innovations that have demonstrated encouraging results and need to be sustained include: Transformation Zones, Minnesota Early Learning Foundation Scholarships, Parent Aware, Invest Early, Seed Communities via Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge, and Reading Corps in Licensed Family Child Care.
4. **Evaluate programs for continuous improvement as well as for results:** Currently, neither Child Care Assistance Programs nor School Readiness programs have systemic quality evaluation, including child outcome data. Parent Aware and Early Learning Scholarships require continued evaluation to examine program quality and child outcomes.
5. **Address workforce issues for programs serving children birth through age 8:** We need to continue to intentionally prepare a diverse and highly skilled workforce of professionals serving young children and their families. Members of the workforce at all levels, in all program types and across sectors need to possess an understanding of child development as well as demonstrate competencies in their area of specialization. Those working with young children need to know developmentally what comes before and what will take place following their work with a child and intentionally align with other programming that touches the life of a child.

Recommendations regarding Universal PreK

1. **Examine impact on the early learning system:** The proposed Universal PreK is one component of a comprehensive early childhood system for children birth to grade three. Therefore the impact on other components of the system needs to be carefully examined. Strong consideration needs to be given to the effect this will have on existing innovations and programs for children as well as the professionals who serve them.
2. **Build on what is working in neighborhoods and communities:** There are many examples of excellent child outcomes through a variety of governance structures. Communities that have developed strong early childhood collaborations and programming have based solutions on their unique assets and needs. Many communities will face challenges in implementing Universal PreK including workforce, space, transportation, quality, distance to programs and family needs. Communities must have the latitude to “right size” their approach to implementing Universal PreK and solve challenges that impact immediate implementation. There is no one size fits all model.

3. **Deliver Universal PreK through a mixed delivery system:** A successful mixed delivery system must allow for the equitable participation of all programs to adequately meet the needs of children and families. Scaling up to a Universal PreK program will require qualified staff and appropriate physical locations to serve children. Many communities already have staff and facilities in place in both school-based and community programs. Equitable participation of all programs types ensures families have choices that meet their schedule, geographic, cultural and language needs.

We are starting to see progress in efforts to address the achievement gap, with examples both in and outside of District-run K-12 educational programs. Any Universal PreK needs to successfully address racial disparities. Solutions need to include teachers who are culturally responsive and linguistically diverse and more teachers who are from the same background as the children they teach.

4. **Prioritize those at greatest risk:** Children at greatest risk for school failure should be prioritized for service. Research indicates that children at risk for school failure require a different level of intensity and duration of programming than their peers. Avoiding the differentiation of intensity or duration runs the risk of exacerbating rather than abating the opportunity gap. Models exist for setting priority services for individuals with the greatest documented or anticipated need.

Recommendations regarding building out Early Learning Scholarships

1. **Increase funding for scholarships:** Continue to build out scholarships for three- and four- year olds, factoring the Universal PreK efforts into the calculations.
2. **Increase flexibility of scholarships:** Provide flexible scholarships for highest risk children birth to age 4 (those in families' at 100% or less of poverty as well as those receiving child protection or who are homeless, in foster care or have parents with mental health issues).

Recommendations regarding building out Parent Aware

1. **Grow and build Parent Aware:** Provide funding sufficient to support the current approach of Parent Aware and to support a rate of increase in participating programs consistent with current growth patterns.
2. **Provide incentives for increasing program quality:** Continue policy of allowing reduced scholarship amounts to one and two star programs as incentives to increase quality.

The Council's best estimate of the funding needed to fully support these recommendations is \$400m. Here's how that breaks down:

1. Scholarships \$196m for the biennium (This assumes the Governor's Head Start and Child Care Assistance Program proposals are funded. This needs to be adjusted if they are not.)
2. Home Visiting: \$194m for the biennium
3. Parent Aware: \$10m for the biennium (This assumes the Governor's Parent Aware proposal is funded. This needs to be adjusted if it is not.)

We thank the Governor and the Legislature for their ongoing support and progress in early education.