



40,000 LOW-INCOME MINNESOTA CHILDREN CAN'T ACCESS QUALITY EARLY EDUCATION

Left Behind Children Are Most Likely To Fall Into Achievement Gaps That Threaten Minnesota's Future

Saint Paul, Minn. (November 17, 2016) -- A new analysis released today by the nonprofit organization Close Gaps By 5 finds that 40,000 low-income Minnesota children ages zero to five years are currently unable to access high quality early education programs. Research shows that these are the children who are most likely to fall into Minnesota's worst-in-the-nation achievement gaps.

"If Minnesota is truly serious about closing our alarming achievement gaps, these 40,000 children must be the top priority," said Art Rolnick, PhD, an economist from the University of Minnesota Humphrey School of Public Affairs, and formerly with the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. "With the most at-risk kids, we need to start early to prevent achievement gaps from opening."

Achievement gaps are disparities in educational outcomes between categories of children, such as groups identified by race, ethnicity or family income. Research shows that achievement gaps open as early as age one, indicating that early learning interventions must begin at a very early age. For all Minnesotans, achievement gaps have economic consequences, because Minnesota needs an educated workforce to compete in the global economy. It also has consequences for Minnesota taxpayers, because children unable to access a high quality early education more likely to struggle later in life and to require taxpayer-funded expenditures.

While serving as senior vice president and director of research at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, Rolnick co-authored research with Rob Grunewald about the taxpayer return-on-investment associated with early education. Their research shows that the highest returns – up to \$16 in benefits for every \$1 invested – are realized when investments are targeted to help the most at-risk children access the type of high quality programs that prepare them for kindergarten.

"A lot of people who cite our research miss the fact that the investment must be targeted to low-income children," said Rolnick. "We have found those high taxpayer returns for investing in low-income children who are being left behind, not for higher income children who are already accessing quality,"

The nonprofit organization Close Gaps By 5 is encouraging the Legislature to prioritize limited state funding for the 40,000 left behind low-income children. Specifically, the group recommends that the next state investment in early learning fund, 1) Early Learning Scholarships for all left behind low-income 3- and 4-year olds (\$63 million/year) and 2) Early Learning Scholarships for left behind, low-income 0-2 year olds who are homeless, abused, in foster care, or who have an older sibling with a Scholarship (\$42 million/year). It also supports funding for parent mentoring, often called home visiting.

Scholarships were piloted using private funding from 2007 to 2011, and were first expanded with state funding in 2011 due to the support of a Republican-controlled Legislature and DFL Governor Mark Dayton. With Scholarships, low-income parents are able to choose from early education programs based in schools, non-profit organizations, centers, or homes that are using kindergarten-readiness best practices, as measured by the Parent Aware Ratings. Parents can choose programs that fit their

location, culture and work schedule, including full-day, full-year options. Currently, about 57 percent of Scholarships have been awarded to low-income children in Greater Minnesota, while 43 percent have been awarded in the Twin Cities metropolitan area.

“Any early education approach that is targeted, flexible, high quality and starts early can work, and Scholarships meet those criteria,” said Tim Penny, former Member of Congress and current President of the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation.

In addition to helping low-income children access high quality early education, Close Gaps By 5 also supports investing \$10 million per year in a program called the Parent Aware Ratings. Parent Aware helps early educators adopt kindergarten-readiness best practices and helps parents find those high quality programs. Research released earlier this year found that children in Parent Aware-rated programs are making significant progress on kindergarten-readiness measures, such as phonics, social competence, perseverance, executive function, and early math skills. Low-income children are making the biggest gains of all.

“Research shows that high returns-on-investment for early education only happen when we invest in high quality programs,” said Doug Baker, CEO of Ecolab Incorporated. “So, investing in Parent Aware ensures that taxpayer investments are maximized, and our most vulnerable children actually get the type of help they need.”

The Close Gaps By 5 analysis is based on information from Wilder Research, the Minnesota Department of Human Services, the Minnesota Department of Education, and a number of other sources. Further detail related to the analysis is available upon request.

Close Gaps By 5 is a Minnesota-based non-profit organization dedicated to using high quality early education programs to close and prevent achievement gaps, and to making Minnesota’s early education system more equitable. Mr. Baker is a Co-Chair of the organization’s Board of Directors, Congressman Penny and Dr. Rolnick also serve on the Board. Additional background is available at CloseGapsBy5.org.

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