

TEN ADVANTAGES OF EARLY LEARNING SCHOLARSHIPS OVER UNIVERSAL PRE-K

Minnesota's eight-year old Early Learning Scholarship program was specifically designed to address Minnesota's worst-in-the-nation achievement gap, and overcome weaknesses of traditional early education and child care funding streams. Therefore, scholarships have many advantages over the recent well-intentioned Universal Pre-K (UPK) proposals. Here are ten of them:

SCHOLARSHIPS PRIORITIZE LOW-INCOME KIDS. Low-income children are the most likely to fall into the achievement gap. They also are unable to afford high quality early education. For those two reasons, low-income children need to be Minnesota's top priority for limited funding. Scholarships help those low-income children first, while UPK models spend limited tax dollars subsidizing wealthier families who already can afford high quality programs.

SCHOLARSHIPS PROVIDE MULTIPLE YEARS OF HELP. The achievement gap can be measured as early as 9 months of age, yet UPK doesn't start helping children until they are 4 years old, for one-year only. Research shows that one-year of high quality early education is not enough to get all of those at-risk children prepared for kindergarten. We need to get our most vulnerable children into multiple years of stimulating learning environments, well before age 4. The scholarship approach allows for this, but the UPK model does not.

SCHOLARSHIPS OFFER MOST HOURS FOR FULL-TIME WORKERS. Recent UPK proposals call for between 350 and 500 hours of learning time per year, and they often offer no hours during summer months. This is a huge problem for employed parents. Full-time workers need over 2,000 hours of care per year, at least four times more than UPK offers. The enormous cost and hassle associated with arranging supplemental care is very hard on families. Scholarships offer parents options with many more hours than UPK offers. (If the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) would agree to lift the cap on scholarships, scholarships could fully serve full-time workers' needs, as they did from 2008 to 2011, before MDE capped scholarship levels.)

SCHOLARSHIPS OFFER MORE EFFECTIVE FULL-DAY PROGRAMS. Full-day early education programs are not only most feasible for parents working full-time, they can also produce better kindergarten-readiness results than part-day programs, according to University of Minnesota research. Given Minnesota's achievement gaps, those stronger outcomes are also a very significant advantage of the scholarship model.

SCHOLARSHIPS BRING "ALL HANDS ON DECK." Minnesota doesn't have nearly enough school-based programs to serve all the children who need it. Therefore, the schools-only UPK approach would require building a great deal of capacity from scratch. For taxpayers, that's extremely expensive and inefficient. So, rather than being limited only to schools, scholarships tap into all of Minnesota's high quality programs in our schools, centers, homes, churches and non-profit organizations. These are community-based programs that are already using kindergarten-readiness best practices. These are programs that already have the learning infrastructure and experienced early educators in place. To narrow the achievement gap, Minnesota needs to tap into all of that existing early education capacity in our communities. Scholarships do that, while UPK doesn't.

SCHOLARSHIPS GIVE PARENTS FLEXIBILITY. Recent UPK proposals only give families one option, a school-based program. But what if a parent has a high quality program that is much closer to their home, transit stop or workplace than the school program? What if a parent prefers to use a high quality program that their younger child already attends, so they have only one pick-up and drop-off? What if a parent needs a program that has hours that better fit their work schedule? What if a parent wants to use a high quality program that is connected to their culture? Scholarships give parents the flexibility to find a program in a center, school, home, church or non-profit organization that fits their life. UPK's schools-only mandate doesn't offer that flexibility.

SCHOLARSHIPS INCENT QUALITY IMPROVEMENT THAT BENEFITS ALL. When a provider adopts kindergarten-readiness best practices in order to become eligible to serve scholarship families, those practices don't only help the scholarship child. The best practices they adopt also benefit the other children who also attend that program. Schools-only pre-k programs don't stimulate child care quality improvement in this way, but scholarships do.

SCHOLARSHIPS OFFER HIGH VALUE OPTIONS. According to RAND Corporation research, the all-inclusive cost of school-based programs is about \$19 per hour. RAND found that the cost of other types of high quality programs range from \$3.50 to \$14 per hour. That means that the UPK schools-only mandate would lock taxpayers into the highest cost type of early education, even though research shows that Minnesota children in school-based programs are not making more significant kindergarten-readiness gains than children in other types of high quality programs.

SCHOLARSHIPS ARE PORTABLE. Low-income parents often need to change jobs or homes, and consequently move to another school district. With the pilot pre-k approach proposed by MDE this year, children of such parents would lose access to their early education program, because the early education would only be offered in a small number of pilot areas. With Pathway I scholarships, however, children simply take their "portable" scholarship to a new program in a new community, and their learning stays steady and uninterrupted. Early education experts stress that such continuity is critically important for children.

SCHOLARSHIPS HAVE BROAD SUPPORT. We live in a democracy, so it's important to have broad bipartisan public support for large public investments. Leaders from both political parties and the 100-organization MinneMinds coalition all support funding more scholarships. Moreover, a 2015 Morris Leatherman survey found that 66% of Minnesotans say that low-income children should be the top priority for limited early education funding, which is what scholarships do. At the same time, only 15% of Minnesotans said that "all children" should be the priority, which is what UPK does. An overwhelming 77% of surveyed Minnesotans support expanding scholarships.

This document was prepared by Parent Aware for School Readiness (PASR), a nonprofit organization focused on getting more Minnesota children prepared for kindergarten. PASR doesn't operate the Parent Aware Ratings. More information about PASR is available at www.pasrmn.org.