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May 12, 2016

Dear Conferees:

As the Executive Director of Parent Aware for School Readiness (PASR), an independent non-profit organization focused on ensuring Minnesota's low-income children are ready for kindergarten, I thank you for your continued willingness to invest in early education.

I am writing to urge you as a H.F.2749 Conferee to support supplemental budget that funds 1) the Parent Aware early education quality rating and improvement system and 2) Early Learning Scholarships for the low-income children who are most at-risk of falling into the achievement gap.

Funding

Making early education a top priority is sensible because research indicates that every \$1 we invest in helping *low-income* children access *high quality* early education yields up to \$16 in societal benefits. These benefits primarily come in the form of reduced government expenditures on things such as remedial education, human services, income supports, health care, law enforcement and prisons.

For the state to reach the 16-to-1 returns on its investment, we must invest in both the Parent Aware quality rating system and Early Learning Scholarships. These high returns only come when the investment is made in high quality programs that help low-income children. Parent Aware quality improvement coaching is needed to reach those high quality program levels and Early Learning Scholarships are needed because they focus on low-income children. Spending on wealthier families who can already afford quality early care and education or on low quality programs does not produce such high returns.

We recognize this is a supplemental budget year, but there are urgent needs in early education that would be wise to address now with the budget surplus:

- **Parent Aware.** The federal grant that has been funding Parent Aware expires this year and cannot be renewed. The state must take on a greater share of funding Minnesota's quality rating system or it will become stagnant and we will start to lose ground on the gains we've made over the past four years.
- **Early Learning Scholarships.** 89% of eligible low-income children currently can't get a scholarship because of insufficient funding, and these children are the most likely to fall into the achievement gap. According to a 2015 survey, 77% of Minnesotans want to expand the availability of scholarships for low-income children.

Universal Pre-K

We oppose the phase-in Universal Pre-K (UPK) approach recommended in the Senate bill for three major reasons:

- **It starts far too late for the most at-risk children.** Research finds that the achievement gap begins before age one, so age four is too late to get our most vulnerable children into stimulating learning environments. Waiting until age four will result in kids continuing to be years behind when they enter the K-12 system. Early Learning Scholarships offer children multiple years of help.
- **It provides far too few hours of learning time.** The proposal provides only 2 to 3 hours of learning per day, only during the traditional school year. For parents working full-time, finding care for the remainder of the day or year would be expensive and complicated. Full-day, full-year care -- an option available with scholarships -- provides the best opportunity for much needed learning continuity.
- **It is part of an un-targeted model that doesn't prioritize low-income kids.** While the recommended first phase of this UPK investment is targeted to lower income children, the ultimate aim of this approach is to subsidize wealthier families who can already afford high quality early education before younger low-income children are helped. Setting off in the direction of a universal model should not be considered until low-income 0- to 5-year-old children have all of their early learning needs met.

Policy

We support several of the House-recommended scholarship improvements:

- **We strongly support the provision expanding scholarship eligibility to include 0- to 2-year-old children who are in foster care, in the child protection system, or whose families are homeless.** These high-risk children can especially benefit from *multiple* years in a high quality early learning environment, so starting younger is extremely important.
- **We strongly support the provision requiring Pathway II Scholarships to be portable.** Allowing families to take their scholarships with them when they need to change programs, for example due to a parent move or job change, ensures that children maintain critically important learning continuity. Enacting this provision would address one of several major flaws with the Pathway II approach.
- **We support the proposal to give a temporary provisional rating to multi-site programs whose leadership has already achieved a strong rating at another site.** This strikes us as a fair interim way to streamline the approval process for providers with multi-site operations.
- **We accept delaying the implementation of the requirement that scholarships only go to 3- and 4-star providers.** Eventually, it is very important to ensure that scholarship children can access the highest rated early education programs. However, because many areas of Minnesota, Greater Minnesota in particular, have not benefited from Parent Aware coaching and supports for very long, it is fair to allow additional time so more programs have an opportunity to adopt kindergarten-readiness best practices, and consequently benefit from scholarships.

We have attached materials addressing several of these issues from a) 293 Minnesota child care and early education providers, b) former military and law enforcement officials, c) the broad 100-organization MinneMinds coalition, and d) the Minnesota chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). Also please know that most of the positions described in this letter are, according to an October 2015 Morris Leatherman survey, supported by an overwhelming majority of Minnesotans.

Thank you for your consideration of these issues. We look forward to working with you to improve early education in order to narrow Minnesota's persistent achievement gaps.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Ericca Maas".

Ericca Maas
Executive Director
Parent Aware for School Readiness