

COSTLY UNIVERSAL PRE-K PLAN WOULD LEAVE 70,000 YOUNGER LOW-INCOME MN KIDS WITHOUT EARLY ED FUNDING

*For \$100 Million/Year Less Than UPK, Legislature Could Fund
Scholarships For All 3- and 4-Year-olds from Low-Income Families*

Saint Paul, Minn. (March 18, 2015) -- A new analysis released today shows that if Universal Pre-K for four year olds passes the Minnesota Legislature and is enacted by the Governor, more than 70,000 low-income Minnesota children age zero to three years would still be left unable to access high-quality early education programs.

One component of early education plans put forth by members of the Minnesota Senate and the Minnesota Department of Education is Universal Pre-K (UPK) for all four year olds, even for children from wealthier families. However, early education research shows that children from low-income families particularly benefit from participating in high-quality early education programs well before they reach age four. The importance of stimulating learning environments for these very young children living in poverty is particularly relevant in Minnesota, which has some of the widest K-12 education achievement gaps in the nation.

“If we’re serious about narrowing those achievement gaps, we need to start much earlier than four and focus on kids from low-income families,” said Art Rolnick, PhD, of the University of Minnesota Humphrey School of Public Affairs. “We can’t leave those 70,000 low-income kids behind and hope to narrow the achievement gap.”

While serving as 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. Among other findings, research shows that the highest returns are realized when investments are targeted to the most at-risk children.

With UPK, 70,000 Younger Low-Income Kids Left Behind

The non-profit organization Parent Aware for School Readiness (PASR) released an analysis today that finds that if UPK were enacted, an estimated 70,882 low-income Minnesota children between the ages of zero and three would still have no state funding to help them access a high-quality early education program. If the Minnesota Department of Education’s other proposals related to helping low-income children access high-quality early education programs were also enacted, an estimated 69,403 low-income children between the ages of zero and three would still be left behind.

State government research shows that children from higher income Minnesota families are twice as likely as those from low-income families to be prepared for kindergarten.

“A flexible Universal Pre-K approach would be good for Minnesota, but only after we get all low-income children under five into high-quality early education,” said Rolnick. “Low-income children need to be at the front of the funding line, because they are the most at risk for falling into the achievement gap. There is no better investment in our economy.”

Scholarships for All Low-income 3- and 4-Year-Olds \$100 Million Cheaper Than UPK

PASR recommends the Legislature invest \$150 million per year – \$100 million per year less than UPK – to provide Early Learning Scholarships to all low-income 3- and 4-year-olds and their younger siblings. With scholarships, which have been used in Minnesota since 2008, low-income parents are able to choose from high-quality early education programs based in schools, non-profit organizations, centers,

or homes. Scholarships can only be used at programs using kindergarten-readiness best practices, as measured by the Parent Aware Ratings.

“If the Legislature wants to invest \$250 million per year on early education to reduce the achievement gap, the better strategy would be to invest \$150 million in scholarships and the remainder to dramatically increase the availability of home visiting for low-income parents of children from the prenatal stage through age two,” said Rolnick. “If after helping all low-income kids the Legislature still feels it has more resources to invest in early education, then a flexible Universal Pre-k approach absolutely makes sense. But low-income kids under five must be the top priority.”

The analysis is based on data from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, the Minnesota Department of Education, and a number of other sources. A list of assumptions incorporated in the analysis is available upon request.

Parent Aware for School Readiness (PASR) is a Minnesota-based non-profit organization dedicated to improving kindergarten readiness. Dr. Rolnick serves on the PASR Board of Directors. Additional background is available at www.pasrmn.org.

-- END --

Contact:
Ericca Maas
612-367-6395
maas@pasrmn.org