Statement of

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Re: Governor's Budget and Early Education

January 24, 2017

"We applaud Governor Dayton for continuing to invest in early education. Perhaps his most enduring legacy in office has been working with a bipartisan group of legislators to bring Early Learning Scholarships statewide, and we look forward to partnering with him to further that legacy.

To close Minnesota's worst-in-the-nation achievement gaps by age five, our investments must be grounded in research-based core principles. Research indicates we should 1) help low-income children first; 2) help low-income children early in life; 3) have a flexible system that meets the needs of parents and children; and 4) require the use of kindergarten-readiness best practices.

Early Learning Scholarships were created in 2008 specifically to achieve those research-based goals. A multi-million-dollar pilot and evaluation found that Scholarships are effective in helping our most vulnerable children access quality programs and make significant progress on kindergarten-readiness measures, such as vocabulary, phonics, social competence, executive function and early math skills.

The Bad News

Early Learning Scholarships. While a constructive policy change is recommended for the Early Learning Scholarship program, unfortunately, the Administration's budget provides $0 in new funding for the Scholarship model. Currently, about 40,000 low-income Minnesota children under age 5 – those most likely to fall into achievement gaps – remain unable to access high quality early education. These wait-listed children must be Minnesota's top priority, and Scholarships are the most proven, research-based tool to help those at-risk children.

Part-Day UPK. Instead, $75 million of the Administration's state spending in early education is used for a part-day universal pre-k program (UPK) for four year olds. This model is well intentioned, but it is not the best strategy for narrowing our achievement gaps. The part-day UPK approach uses limited funding to subsidize wealthier families who can already afford quality, while tens of thousands of younger low-income children remain left behind. It also waits until age four to intervene, which is too late for the most vulnerable children. This is not the best early education tool for closing Minnesota's achievement gaps, and it diverts limited funding from more effective tools.

Because this approach is limited to two to three hours per day and is closed during the summer months, it also doesn't deliver what low-income children and parents need. A fall 2016 Wilder Foundation survey found that 84 percent of a sample of low-income Minnesota parents oppose a model in which "a parent would only be able to use a program that offers care for their child about three hours per day." The same survey found that 92 percent of those parents opposed an approach in which "a parent would only be able to use a program that is closed during the summer months."

The Good News

Home Visiting/Parent Coaching. At the same time, Governor Dayton recommended a wise investment of $31 million in home-based parent coaching (or "home visiting"), targeted to low-income families with infants. This is an outstanding strategy for preventing and closing achievement gaps.

Overall

Overall, the Administration's recommendation for early education is substantially allocated for a part-day universal pre-k model that is not a strong, research-based strategy for closing Minnesota's worst-in-the-nation achievement gaps.   We look forward to working with the Administration and bipartisan legislators to prioritize limited funding for Scholarships and home visiting for Minnesota's most vulnerable children. The Governor's longstanding leadership on early education is greatly appreciated, and we're very hopeful that this legislative session will further build on that legacy."

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Background on Close Gaps by 5 is available at www.closegapsby5.org.