

EARMARKING EARLY ED DISEMPOWERS PARENTS, DOESN'T FIX UPK PROBLEMS

The Minnesota Legislature is considering proposals that would mandate that any new funding for a universal pre-k model (UPK) -- called Voluntary Pre-K in Minnesota -- be roughly divided into two categories: 1) 60% would be earmarked for early education programs based in schools; and 2) 40% would be earmarked for quality programs based in other settings, such as centers, nonprofits, homes or churches where possible.

Earmarking is in part a reaction to the fact that under UPK only 3 percent of Minnesota school districts have thus far used *any* of their UPK funding for non-school based programs. This is a huge problem, because surveys show an overwhelming majority of Minnesota parents want a “mixed delivery” system that gives them the ability to select programs that fit their lives. For instance, parents who work full-time, need full-day, full-year options, which school-based early education programs almost never offer.

This well-intentioned earmarking approach has several major flaws.

EARMARKING LEAVES MOST UPK PROBLEMS UNFIXED. While earmarking somewhat addresses the issue of UPK excluding thousands of quality programs and eliminating parental options, UPK has other serious problems that are not addressed by earmarking.

- **Too Little.** Achievement gaps begin as early as age one. Therefore, the most vulnerable children need multiple years of up to full-day help in order to catch up. UPK offers only part-day, part-year help for nine months. That’s not enough for the children most likely to fall into Minnesota’s achievement gaps.
- **Too Late.** Given that up to 80% of brain development happens by age three, and that achievement gaps open as early as age one, delaying help until age 4 allows achievement gaps to grow much worse, making them much more difficult to close.
- **Too Untargeted.** At a time when 31,000 low-income children under age 5 still can’t access high-quality early education programs, UPK prioritizes limited funding to subsidize thousands of wealthier Minnesota families that can already afford quality programs. That is a poor strategy for closing the early education opportunity gaps at the root of Minnesota’s worst-in-the-nation achievement gaps.

The earmark approach doesn’t fix these three major UPK flaws, while the proven Early Learning Scholarship model does.

EARMARKING DISEMPOWERS PARENTS. Early Learning Scholarships (Pathway I type) give parents the power to choose from a variety of quality programs that fit their preferences, i.e. location, work schedule, and culture. Earmarking takes that selection power away from parents and gives it to politicians and institutions that set the earmarks. With Early Learning Scholarships, parents make the choice, not politicians or institutions, and that leads to a system that is more responsive to family needs.