

Universal Pre-K (UPK) Model Shortcomings

When it comes to using early education to address Minnesota's worst-in-the-nation achievement gaps, not all early education approaches are equal. There are a number of major problems with the well-intentioned Universal Pre-K (UPK) approach, which is called "Voluntary Pre-K" in Minnesota. Why is the UPK model the wrong investment strategy for closing Minnesota's worst-in-the-nation achievement gaps?

- **TOO UNTARGETED.** At a time when 31,000 low-income children under age 5 can't access high-quality early education programs due to lack of state funding, UPK subsidizes thousands of Minnesota families that can already afford quality programs.
- **TOO LITTLE.** The most vulnerable children – those most vulnerable to falling into achievement gaps – need multiple years of full-day help, but UPK only provides 9 months of part-day help.
- **TOO LATE.** With an achievement gap that opens at about age one for the most at-risk children, waiting several years until children reach age 4 allows achievement gaps to grow worse, making it much more difficult to close those gaps.
- **TOO EXPENSIVE.** While school-based programs are and should be an available option for parents, creating a school-based monopoly, locks taxpayers into an approach that costs much more on a per hour basis than other high-quality options, according to RAND researchers.
- **TOO PART-TIME.** UPK is only available part-day and is closed in the summer months. Parents of at-risk children who work full-time, often because public assistance rules require them to do so, need full-day, full-year options.
- **TOO INFLEXIBLE.** In most cases, UPK only offers a school-based program. It is "one-size-fits-all." But every parent faces unique circumstances; so, they need a full-range of quality options to find care that works for their location, work schedule, culture and other preferences. Sometimes the best option is in a center, home, church or non-profit organization, rather than a school, but UPK excludes those options.

Public school-based programs work for many families, and should be one option available to them. The good news is Early Learning Scholarships can and are used by thousands of families at school-based programs.

Scholarships were designed specifically to overcome shortcomings of other approaches, including to UPK. For that reason, Scholarships are targeted, provide multiple years of assistance, start early in life, offer full-day, full-year choices, and offer a broader range of types of care, giving Scholarships numerous advantages over the UPK model.

If Minnesota is serious about its worst-in-the-nation achievement gaps, it should fund Scholarships for the 31,000 left behind low-income children before it considers investing limited state funding into a UPK model.