

THE MINNESOTA MODEL FOR EARLY LEARNING



Early Learning Scholarships + Parent Aware = Achievement Gap Progress

THE CHALLENGE:

Minnesota's worst-in-the-nation achievement gaps open as early as age one. These alarming gaps pose a grave threat to Minnesota's children, communities and economy.

THE WIN:

To prevent and close achievement gaps, we will empower 35,000 left-behind low-income children statewide with access to high quality early learning programs to prepare them for success in school, the workplace and life.





Fall 2017

Dear Early Education Supporter:

If Minnesota doesn't close its worst-in-the-nation achievement gaps soon, our communities, taxpayers, economy and most vulnerable children will all suffer. This is an urgent problem for all of us, not just for those children.

Beginning in 2006, Minnesota business and civic leaders developed and tested a research-based strategy for using early learning to address these gaps. Their recommended approach—Early Learning Scholarships and the Parent Aware quality improvement framework—has already helped tens of thousands of Minnesota kids.

In this document, we explain the approach sometimes called the “Minnesota Model for Early Learning”—its research foundation, strategy, achievements and future.

To help prevent and close our shameful achievement gaps Minnesota must both continue to reform of our current early care and education system, and Invest in Scholarships for the 35,000 low-income children under age five who are currently being left behind. It's time to finish the job, Minnesota.

Sincerely,

Michael V. Ciresi (Chair)

Founding Partner, Ciresi Conlin

Jan Kruchoski (Treasurer)

Principal, CliftonLarsonAllen L.L.P.

Terri Barriero

Co-founder, Impact Hub MSP

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Robbin Johnson

Former President, Cargill Foundation

Arthur Rolnick

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Executive Director, Soran Foundation

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Chairman and CEO, Ecolab

Tim Penny (Secretary)

President, Southern MN Initiative Foundation

Karen Cadigan

Bloomington Public Schools

Barb Fabre

Consultant

Scott Jones

Jones Family Foundation

Fred Senn

Founding Partner, Fallon Worldwide

THE PROBLEM: Achievement Gaps

Achievement gaps are differences in levels of proficiency measured between groups of children, such as between children of various racial, ethnic and income groups. Achievement gaps are often caused by “opportunity gaps,” or differences in the opportunities available to different groups of children. We can’t close achievement gaps without addressing opportunity gaps.

For many years, Minnesota has had some of the worst achievement gaps in the nation.



More Opportunities
Often Leads to
Most Achievements



Fewer Opportunities
Often Leads to
Fewer Achievements

Achievement Gaps Hurt Everyone. Achievement gaps lead to very serious long-term problems for Minnesota’s children, communities, taxpayers and economy. Too many Minnesota children are currently unprepared for kindergarten, and too often those who start behind don’t catch up in later grades. When those children don’t catch up, they’re more likely to need expensive taxpayer-funded services throughout their lives, such as special education, social services, law enforcement, health care and unemployment supports.

In addition, children who fall into achievement gaps are not equipped to succeed in a global economy that increasingly requires a well-educated workforce. If Minnesota doesn’t have a competitive workforce, that will hurt all Minnesotans, because we all depend on a healthy economy.

Achievement Gaps Must Be Addressed Early. To combat this problem, we have to start early in life. Research shows that about eighty percent of brain development happens by age three, and gaps open as early as age one. Given that research, if we hope to close achievement gaps, we can’t wait until kindergarten or even preschool before we begin investing in early learning help for our most vulnerable children.

THE STRATEGY: Follow the Research

Beginning in 2006, a group of business and civic leaders formed the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF) to develop a strategy for using early education to address achievement gaps before they open.

MELF leaders studied the latest research related to brain development, achievement gaps, economic return-on-investment, kindergarten-readiness best practices and parental needs and preferences. Based on the research, MELF developed four principles to guide its early learning strategy.



- » **Start early in life.** Investment and intervention must begin very early in life and be of sufficient duration to ensure kids with high needs are prepared for kindergarten.
- » **Target resources.** Limited resources must be prioritized for the low-income children whose parents can't afford high-quality programs on their own, and who are most likely to fall into achievement gaps.
- » **Demand quality.** With limited resources, investment must first go to programs using proven best practices for preparing children for kindergarten.
- » **Give parents flexibility.** Parents must be empowered with a portable, streamlined and flexible approach that allows them to find a high-quality program that fits their schedule, location, culture and other preferences.


The research underpinning these guiding principles are summarized in Table 1.



Table 1

Four Research-Based Principles to Guide the Minnesota Model

Research		Research-based Guiding Principle
<p>Too many Minnesota children are unprepared for kindergarten, and too often don't catch up in later grades.</p> <p>Achievement gaps can be measured as early as age one.</p> <p>Up to 90 percent of brain development happens by age five, and up to 80 percent happens by age three.</p> <p>The most vulnerable children often need multiple years of intensive high-quality early care and education to be prepared for kindergarten.</p>		<p>START EARLY IN LIFE.</p>
<p>Low-income parents are least able to afford high-quality early learning programs.</p> <p>Children from low-income families are much more likely to fall into achievement gaps than children from higher income families.</p> <p>Investing in high-quality early learning yields up to \$16 in societal benefits for every \$1 invested, but only when directed to low-income children.</p>		<p>TARGET RESOURCES.</p>

Research		Research-based Guiding Principle
<p>Early learning experts have identified a number of kindergarten-readiness best practices.</p> <p>Investing in early learning for low-income kids earns up to 16-to-1 societal return-on-investment, but only if those programs are effective in supporting kindergarten readiness.</p> <p>Investing in low-quality programs can actually set children back.</p>		<p>DEMAND QUALITY.</p>
<p>Parents need choices to ensure their early learning program fits their location, work schedule, culture, language and other preferences.</p> <p>Programs of various types and sizes, including those based in centers, homes, schools, churches and nonprofit organizations, can adopt kindergarten readiness best practices.</p> <p>Children in traditional publicly financed programs often lose learning continuity, because they get cut off from early learning programs when their parents move, change jobs or when their family's income changes.</p>		<p>KEEP IT FLEXIBLE.</p>

The Minnesota Model

Built on the foundation of the four research-based guiding principles, MELF's model has three primary components:

- 1) **Parent Aware** quality rating and improvement system
- 2) **Early Learning Scholarships** for low-income children
- 3) **Reforming existing state funding streams**

Parent Aware Quality Improvement. The Parent Aware program has two separate and distinct jobs.

- » **Quality Improvement.** First, Parent Aware is a quality improvement initiative. Parent Aware helps providers adopt research-based, kindergarten-readiness best practices. Providers who volunteer to adopt best practices are rewarded with quality improvement coaches and grants; the patronage of public- and private-pay customers; and marketing assistance.
- » **Quality Ratings.** Second, the Parent Aware Ratings help parents find the programs that are using kindergarten-readiness best practices, something that is difficult-to-impossible to do on their own. The Parent Aware Ratings are a simple one- to four-star system focused on kindergarten-readiness best practices, similar to the Consumer Reports or JD Power ratings.

Marketing strategies including television, radio and online ads, as well as a popular online shopping tool (www.parentaware.org), have been used over time to promote Ratings to parents. Rated providers are also given a free marketing kit—yard signs, outdoor banner, stickers, flyers and postcards—so they can promote their use of best practices to customers in their community.

Early Learning Scholarships. Early Learning Scholarships help low-income children access high-quality Parent Aware-rated programs that their families otherwise couldn't afford. Scholarships empower parents to choose from a wide variety of programs based in centers, homes, schools, churches and nonprofit organizations, as long as the program is using kindergarten-readiness best practices, as measured by the Parent Aware Ratings.

To ensure a child has critical learning continuity, Scholarships are portable, meaning that parents can take their Scholarship with them whenever they change homes or jobs within the state. With traditional government programs, children frequently get cut off from their learning when a parent's income, home or job changes. Scholarships also help stabilize children with a one-time eligibility policy, which has the spillover benefit of less paperwork for parents and government officials.

MELF also supported and piloted parent mentoring—sometimes called home visiting. Parent mentoring begins prenatally and supports child health and development. Mentors can also help families find high-quality early education programs when they are ready for that step.

Reform Existing Funding Streams. Minnesota currently spends an estimated \$430 million per year in support of children’s access to early care and education. This spending is conducted through seven separate funding streams. MELF leaders recommended that those funding streams be consolidated and made available for parents to use as Scholarships. However, if state leaders weren’t willing to consolidate, MELF recommended that state leaders at least better coordinate these funding streams to ensure they are as streamlined, effective, efficient, accountable and research-based as possible.

When it comes to the four guiding principles for using early education to close achievement gaps, the original flexible Scholarships approach has significant advantages over other well-intentioned approaches used in Minnesota, such as the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) and an alternative Pathway II Scholarship approach created by the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE). Table 2 summarizes the advantages of each program.

Table 2
Comparing Early Care and Education Programs

Research-based Principles	MELF Piloted Scholarships	Universal pre-K* (Fully implemented)	Alternative Pathway II Scholarships	Child Care Assistance Program
Start early	Somewhat		Somewhat	✓
Target resources	✓		✓	✓
Demand best practices	✓	✓	✓	Somewhat
Keep it flexible	✓			Somewhat

*Note: *MDE calls this program “Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK)” to promote that school districts are not yet required to participate. However, all major VPK champions stress that they want VPK to soon become universal, or available for free to all 4-year olds from all income levels. To ensure readers understand the intent to be universal, this document refers to VPK as “universal pre-K (UPK).”*

Statewide Expansion

Using \$20 million in private funding, MELF piloted Parent Aware and Early Learning Scholarships in several Minnesota communities. After an extensive evaluation (described later in this document) found positive outcomes in the pilot areas, MELF recommended that state leaders implement Scholarships and Parent Aware on a statewide basis.

Thanks to the pioneering leadership of Governor Mark Dayton, state agency leaders, a bipartisan group of state legislators, and a \$45 million federal Race-to-the-Top grant award, the MELF-recommended approach is now helping tens of thousands of children each year in all parts of Minnesota.

- » **Parent Aware Quality Improvement.** Currently, nearly 2,600 early care and education providers have volunteered for Parent Aware. As a result, more than 88,000 children per year are benefitting from rated programs' use of kindergarten-readiness best practices.
- » **Scholarships Changing Lives.** Last year about 10,500 low-income Minnesota children used Early Learning Scholarships to access high-quality Parent Aware-rated programs, and increased state investment will grow that number in the coming year. About 46 percent of Scholarships are being used in the Twin Cities metropolitan region, and 54 percent are being used in Greater Minnesota.
- » **Reforming Existing Investments.** While CCAP unfortunately still doesn't require the use of kindergarten-readiness best practices, Parent Aware programs with high Ratings are now eligible for a CCAP bonus payment.



*Governor
Mark Dayton*



*House Speaker
Kurt Daudt*



*Lucinda Jesson,
former Commissioner
of Human Services*



*Representative
Ron Kresha*



*Peter McLaughlin,
Hennepin County
Commissioner*



*Senator
Carla Nelson*



*Ryan Winkler,
former State
Representative*



*Representative
Jenifer Loon*



*Representative
Paul Thissen*



Senator Eric Pratt



*Terri Bonoff, former
State Senator*



*Jan Callison,
Hennepin County
Commissioner*



*Senator
Richard Cohen*



*Senator
Melisa Franzen*

Governor Dayton was a Scholarship pioneer and the impressive group of bipartisan elected and appointed leaders pictured were honored by Close Gaps by 5 in 2015 for their leadership on this issue.

MELF Model Deviations. It's important to note that the MELF model hasn't been implemented precisely as MELF recommended. MELF leaders have voiced their disappointment about these decisions:

- » **Nearly Half of Scholarship Funding Put into Rigid Model.** Nearly half of state-appropriated Scholarship money has been redirected by MDE into a rigid "Pathway II Scholarship" model. Unlike the original Scholarship model (now called "Pathway I Scholarships") that was proven effective in the pilot, this alternative "Pathway II" approach isn't portable to ensure learning continuity and doesn't empower parents with a wide variety of program choices.
- » **Scholarships Capped.** MDE also put a per-child funding cap on all Scholarships, which makes it very complex, and sometimes impossible, to serve some of the most vulnerable children.
- » **Existing Funding Streams Not Reformed.** Neither of these MELF-recommended reforms of the existing system have been enacted: 1) ensuring CCAP-funded children benefit from best practices, and 2) coordinating existing early care and education funding streams so that they are efficient, effective, accountable and research-based.
- » **Inadequate Help for Low-Income Children.** Finally, funding for Scholarships has been insufficient to help 35,000 low-income Minnesota children who still can't access high-quality early learning programs. While those children remain left behind, limited state funding has been diverted to subsidize wealthier families through a UPK model.

The state's deviations from the MELF-recommended blueprint have limited the efficiency and effectiveness of the Minnesota model in the post-evaluation phase. Correcting these deviations remains the primary "to-do" list for Minnesota's early education champions.





Achievements

No early education program in Minnesota history has been evaluated as extensively as the Minnesota Model. Millions of dollars' worth of rigorous independent evaluations found that the Scholarships and Parent Aware are working.

Pilot Evaluation

At the conclusion of the MELF pilots in 2011, an extensive set of third party evaluations found:

- » **Children Made Gains.** Children in Parent Aware-rated programs made significant gains in key kindergarten-readiness measures, such as phonological awareness, expressive and receptive vocabulary, social competence, pre-math and print knowledge.
 - **Low-Income Children Made Strongest Gains.** When it came to language and literacy measures, low-income children made more significant gains than the sample as a whole.
- » **Scholarships Moved Kids into Quality.** Scholarships were found to be an effective way to move low-income children into quality programs. Pre-pilot, 57 percent of the children were in unlicensed care. After the pilot, 100 percent of Scholarship children were in Parent Aware quality-rated programs.

- » **Scholarships Improved Learning Continuity.** Because of the portability of Scholarships, 93 percent of providers said that the program design of Scholarships helped children stay enrolled in quality programs. For context, 70 percent said that was true of CCAP.
- » **Scholarships Reduced Paperwork.** According to 89 percent of providers, Scholarship paperwork was minimally disruptive to their services. In comparison, 63 percent of providers said this was true of CCAP.
- » **Incentives Led To Best Practices Adoption.** Parent Aware incentives were effective in enticing a wide variety of providers to voluntarily adopt best practices. Over the two-year pilot period, the number of 3- and 4-star rated programs in and near the St. Paul pilot area increased by 55 percent.
- » **Parent Aware Valued By Providers.** Nearly three-quarters of rated providers said that Parent Aware helped them improve their early learning quality. Pre-pilot, many of these providers were very skeptical about whether Parent Aware would be valuable to them.
- » **All Types of Providers Adopted Best Practices.** The evaluation found that all types and sizes of providers achieved strong Parent Aware Ratings, including smaller home-based providers. Pre-pilot, many worried whether Parent Aware could work with some types of programs.



Post-pilot Evaluation

Since the MELF pilot was expanded statewide, independent evaluations funded with both public and private resources have continued to discover more good news about the impact Scholarships and Parent Aware are having. Here are just a few findings:

- » **Children Making Significant K-Readiness Gains.** A rigorous 2016 evaluation conducted by Child Trends found that children in Parent Aware-rated programs are making gains in math skills, language and literacy skills, social competence, persistence and executive function.
 - **Low Income Children Making Strongest Gains.** When it comes to executive function and language and literacy skills, children from low-income families were making stronger gains than children from higher income families. From an achievement gap standpoint, this finding is particularly encouraging.
- » **Children Benefiting from Best Practices.** Every year, about 88,000 Minnesota children of all income levels are benefiting from the kindergarten-readiness best practices used in Parent Aware-rated programs. For years to come, that should have a positive long-term impact on kindergarten readiness.
- » **Quality Is Improving and Easier to Find.** Before Parent Aware, there was no consistent, widespread way for providers to prove to parents that they were using kindergarten-readiness best practices. Now, more than 2,700 programs of all types and sizes are adopting best practices and getting a Rating to help parents find their high-quality services.
- » **All Types of Programs Delivering.** The evaluation found that higher rated programs of all types—centers, homes, Head Start and school-based programs—support children’s progress toward kindergarten readiness.
- » **Parents Demanding Quality.** A 2015 Morris Leatherman survey found that 80 percent of Minnesotans agree that “we should only allow state tax dollars to be spent on early education providers who have proven they are effective in preparing children for kindergarten.” Likewise, a Wilder/Child Trends survey asked low-income parents to name the program qualities that are most important to them. Kindergarten-readiness quality was second on their list, with only the need for full-time services ranked higher. Another indication that parents are demanding early education quality is that Parent Aware’s online shopping tool, ParentAware.org, received nearly a million page views in each of the last two years.

- » **Small Businesses Benefiting.** About 2,700 rated early care and education programs—many run by women and individuals of color—are benefiting from Parent Aware and Scholarships. This number is growing steadily, as programs continue to step forward to take advantage of these benefits. These programs are eligible to receive free quality improvement coaching and grants, \$70 million per year worth of Scholarship business, CCAP bonuses and substantial Parent Aware-related marketing support. This support helps them create and retain jobs throughout Minnesota.
- » **Scholarships Have Multiple Benefits.** Scholarships not only increased low-income children’s access to high-quality programs, but they also increased continuity of care, increased the hours of care for children in high-quality programs and moved children from lower quality into high-quality programs.
- » **Long-term Economic, Fiscal and Community Benefits.** Beyond the dramatic life-changing impacts Scholarships are having on Minnesota’s children, the progress described above benefits all Minnesotans. Closing and preventing achievement gaps will give Minnesota lower government expenses, stronger communities, and the educated workforce we need to prosper in a global economy.



Unfinished Business:

Helping Minnesota's most at-risk kids*

HAVE PUBLIC SUPPORT**

To Access High Quality Programs

57%

LEFT BEHIND

43%

The children who are most likely to fall into achievement gaps, but are unable to access quality early learning programs. They don't have Early Learning Scholarships



*Minnesota children under age 5 whose family income is 185% of poverty level and below.

**Available resources are sufficient to cover this group of children's access to up to full-day, full-year experiences.

No approach is perfect, including the Minnesota Model. For instance, all types of providers need to continue to improve their quality. As research evolves, Parent Aware Ratings standards must continually evolve. Program design also needs to improve, as described on page 13. Most importantly, 35,000 of Minnesota's vulnerable left-behind children need Scholarships as soon as possible.

But if Minnesota can make steady improvement, the Minnesota Model for Early Learning is an extremely promising approach for addressing Minnesota's worst-in-the-nation achievement gaps by age five.



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