Association of Metropolitan School Districts

Early Childhood Education

AMSD Position

State policymakers should expand access to school-based prekindergarten (PreK) programs.

Funding for PreK programs must be sufficient to ensure essential program components including licensed teachers, support staff, transportation, and sufficient classroom space.

- Preschool education is critical to ensure all children are ready for kindergarten.
- School-based early learning programs provide the highest likelihood of success in preparing children to enter kindergarten with the skills, behavior and knowledge needed to progress and flourish.
- School districts must have the flexibility to design the programs that best meet the needs of their students and families.
- Funding should continue to be available to support the school readiness program to allow school districts to meet the needs of at-risk three year olds.

Background

During the 2016 legislative session, a statewide Voluntary PreKindergarten (VPK) grant program was enacted. The program was created for children who are four years old on Sept. 1 of the school year in which they enroll. The program is formula-driven with eligible pupils generating up to 0.6 per pupil under the school funding formula.

Beginning in FY17, about $25 million per year was appropriated through the regular school aid formulas to school districts for VPK, which divides the state into regions wherein each school site is prioritized based on its percent of free and reduced lunch eligible kindergarten students. The statewide appropriation is split among the five regions based on each region's proportionate share of kindergarten pupils, and the initial VPK program served about 3,160 students per year. On average, the funding (state aid and local levy) for each VPK student amounts to roughly $10,000.[1]

In 2017, the State also enacted the School Readiness Plus (SRP) program, which is similar to VPK in many of the services it provides. VPK and SRP were both established with one-time funding for FY18 and FY19, with SRP serving an additional 4,000 students per year. The 2023 Education Bill provided permanent funding for the expiring SRP and VPK seats, along with funding for an additional 5,200 seats for a total of 12,360 permanent seats.

A school district or group of school districts may also establish a school readiness program to enable children to enter school with the necessary skills and behavior to succeed. Annual statewide funding for School Readiness has been at $33.6 million since FY20.

Children aged four years old and younger may qualify for an Early Learning Scholarship. The maximum annual maximum scholarship amounts are established by the commissioner and based on the provider's Parent Aware ranking, age of the scholarship recipient, county-level costs, and type of early learning program. The program has two pathways — Pathway I and Pathway II. Pathway I scholarships are awarded directly to families of eligible children while Pathway II scholarships are awarded to qualifying four-star rated programs on behalf of qualifying children.

As of July 1, 2024, the Department of Children, Youth, and Families provide state-level administration of the school readiness program and the early learning scholarship program.

Resources

[1] Minnesota School Finance: A Guide for Legislators, By Tim Strom, Legislative Analyst

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