



Association of Metropolitan School Districts

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Position on Early Childhood Education

The Association of Metropolitan School Districts supports expanding access to school-based prekindergarten programs. Funding for prekindergarten programs must be sufficient to ensure essential program components including licensed teachers, support staff, transportation and sufficient classroom space.

AMSD BELIEVES

- Preschool education is a critical educational strategy 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

Minnesota was ahead of the curve in 1992 when it first established the School Readiness Program. In fact, Minnesota's School Readiness Program has been a nation-leading example of how high-quality, school-based early learning programs can close the achievement gap and ensure that all students are

prepared for kindergarten. The 1992 legislation required school districts to use the funds to serve at-risk three and four year olds and prepare them for success in kindergarten. Children in school-based programs are involved in a variety of learning experiences that prepare them to enter kindergarten with the skills, behavior and knowledge needed to be successful. For FY 2022-23, the School Readiness Program was expected to serve more than 12,000 children who are 3 to 5 years old.

The Legislature and Governor have approved significant investments in early learning in recent years including investments in the Early Childhood Family Education Program, School Readiness and Early Learning Scholarships. Funding for School Readiness nearly tripled since FY2015, from \$11.9 million to \$33.6 million. Head Start saw increases from \$20.1 million to \$25.1 million in 2015, and Early Learning Scholarships more than doubled from \$27.6 million in 2015 to \$70.2 million in 2019.

During the 2016 legislative session, a statewide Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK) grant program was enacted. The program is for children who are four years old on Sept. 1 of the school year in which

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they enroll. The program is formula-driven with eligible pupils generating up to 0.6 per pupil under the school funding formula. Funding is available in four categories — Minneapolis and Saint Paul School Districts; metro suburban districts; non-metro districts; and charter schools — and is prioritized based on the number of kindergarten students eligible for free and reduced-priced lunch and the proximity of three and four-star rated Parent Aware programs. The Minnesota Department of Education received 184 complete applications including applications from 27 AMSD districts of which 15 were approved.

A new early learning program, School Readiness Plus, was created during the 2017 legislative session. The program targets four year olds demonstrating one or more risk factors. School Readiness Plus was established with one-time funding for FY 2018 and FY 2019. In addition, the 2017 legislation changed the Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten cap from a limit on the total state aid entitlement to a limit on the number of participants. Beginning in FY 2018, there was a combined cap of 7,160 participants. The cap was scheduled to drop to 3,160 students in FY 2020 but the 2021 legislation continues to fund the 4,000 Voluntary PreKindergarten (VPK) and School Readiness Plus (SRP) seats currently expiring after FY21, for FY22 and FY23 only. It also specifies that VPK students will not be used in declining enrollment revenue calculations for FY24, and specifies that FY23 VPK student data will not be used to drive FY24 compensatory revenue for sites where VPK funding is discontinued after FY 23 due to the reduction in the number of funded seats.

A School Finance Working Group convened by the Minnesota Department of Education in 2019 identified the critical importance of early learning education, noting the “widespread understanding and support for the value of high-quality early learning as a means to closing the opportunity/achievement gap.” The Working Group issued a series of recommendations to improve education financing, including a call to expand funding for early learning opportunities.¹

The districts that received this one-time funding have significantly invested in early learning infrastructure, which will expire without further state action. At a minimum the Legislature must provide the funding needed to maintain the existing Pre-K but it is also critical that funding be made available to expand access to the program for all school districts.

ENDNOTES

¹ https://education.mn.gov/mdeprod/idcplg?IdcService=GET_FILE&dDocName=PROD034265&RevisionSelectionMethod=latestReleased&Rendition=primary