

2018 legislative session: Minnesota should double down on early education now

Directed at low-income kids at as early an age as possible, this could help close achievement gaps and give a huge return on investment.

By Art Rolnick | APRIL 13, 2018 — 6:30PM

Much of the news coverage of the legislative session seems to have a pattern: “This political party wants policy X while that party wants policy Y. This party is winning because ...”

Time out! Rather than sportslike play-by-play analysis, what if we focused on this question: “What policy is best for Minnesota’s future?”

If we focus on that question, it’s clear what we must do. Both economic and neuroscience research show that there may be no better return-on-investment for taxpayers than quality early education programs. In 2003, Rob Grunewald and I at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis came to this conclusion, as has James Heckman, a Nobel Prize-winning economist at the University of Chicago.

Our research found up to a \$16 return for every \$1 invested to help low-income children access high-quality early learning programs. That’s because low-income children who are prepared for kindergarten are less likely to generate lifelong taxpayer bills related to things like special education, social services, health care, unemployment, law enforcement and prisons. The economic research is clear — investing a little now saves taxpayers a lot later.

And neuroscience research shows that the highest return-on-investment (ROI) is when early education begins at the beginning. Achievement gaps open as early as age 1; they do not wait until age 4. Indeed, we now know that roughly 80 percent of brain development happens by age 3. Conclusion: We must invest early in life.

How is Minnesota doing? Minnesota currently has some of the worst achievement gaps in the nation. In the 15 years since our research was published in 2003, about 302,000 Minnesota children were born into families with incomes low enough to be eligible for Early Learning Scholarships. We didn’t invest in scholarships for the overwhelming majority of those kids. We didn’t get that ROI. We didn’t prevent and close those achievement gaps early in life.

Now, more than two-thirds of those kids are already past kindergarten, and some are as old as 14. We missed that opportunity. And not only did we fail these kids, we failed our taxpayers, our communities and our economy.

This year, estimates are that another 35,000 low-income Minnesota children under age 5 won’t be able to access high-quality early learning programs without help. Given what we know about how a child’s brain develops during the earliest years, given that we have an effective program that can be readily scaled, how can we not fund more scholarships?

So now — not 15 years from now, not even one year from now — is the time to at least double down on our investment. Our current biennial budget for scholarships is \$140 million. With a \$329 million state budget surplus, we can afford to invest \$140 million more — less than half of the surplus. Now is the time to make closing the achievement gaps a Minnesota priority.

With such an investment, we could provide flexible scholarships to change the life trajectories of an additional 7,200 left-behind children each year. While it would only help about one child in need out of every five, it would bring meaningful progress.

However, a note of caution. When we make that investment, we must use an investment strategy that is efficient and effective. Despite the fact that Gov. Mark Dayton, House Speaker Kurt Daudt and a bipartisan group of legislators worked together to bring



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scholarships statewide, the Minnesota Department of Education now recommends that all new money go to Universal Pre-K (UPK), called Voluntary Pre-K in Minnesota, and that no additional funding go to scholarships for younger, low-income children. That would be a serious mistake.

While well-intentioned, UPK is poorly designed for closing the opportunity gaps at the root of the achievement gap problem. A part-day, part-year program for 4-year-olds only, UPK starts too late in life and provides too few hours of learning to help the most vulnerable kids catch up.

At a time when 35,000 low-income children under age 5 can't access quality early learning programs, UPK allocates very limited funding to many wealthier families who can already afford quality programs.

If Minnesota continues to turn a blind eye to our opportunity gaps and achievement gaps, our children, communities and economy will suffer, and that ultimately means all Minnesotans will suffer. We desperately need well-educated Minnesotans in order to compete in the global economy and maintain our strong communities. The time to build for that future is now.

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