

Best Early Ed Tool For Closing Achievement Gaps?

How can Minnesota use early education to close its worst-in-the-nation achievement gaps? It's best to begin this work by asking this key question: "What does the research say?"

Beginning in 2006, Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (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.** 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 only go to programs using proven best practices for preparing children for kindergarten.
- **Keep it flexible.** 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.

MELF then designed Early Learning Scholarships specifically to address these issues. As a result, Scholarships are better designed to address the root causes of achievement gaps than other well-intentioned early care and education policy tools being used in Minnesota.

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)."*

Over the last decade, extensive independent evaluations have shown that Scholarships are working. The problems: 1) Scholarships can be better designed to meet the needs of children and 2) 35,000 low-income children under age five still can't access high-quality early education, due to lack of Scholarship funding.