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## **BIPARTISAN BILL PROPOSES NEW EARLY EDUCATION ACCESS FUND Fund Would Coordinate and Reform State Early Education Efforts**

**Saint Paul, MN (March 1, 2017).** Today, a bipartisan group of Minnesota state legislators proposed a plan to better coordinate and reform Minnesota's early education efforts.

The proposal would create an Early Education Access Fund to coordinate existing and future public investments in early education for Minnesota children under age five. The forthcoming bill will also include a series of reforms to insist on the use of kindergarten-readiness best practices, better track funding, and hold existing investments more accountable for kindergarten readiness outcomes.

"We must address Minnesota's achievement gaps, and early education is increasingly recognized as an important tool for doing so," said Rep. Loon (R-Eden Prairie). "That growing recognition must also come with intentional efforts to build a system that makes the best use of public resources. This bill is an important step in that direction."

The Early Education Access Fund will coordinate six Minnesota early care and education programs to improve their effectiveness, efficiency and accountability. The six existing funding streams are: Pathway I and II Early Learning Scholarships, the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), Head Start, School Readiness and Voluntary Pre-kindergarten. The fund will ultimately coordinate \$400 million per year in state and federal investment.

"Over the last 5 years our annual state investment in early education has increased by \$140 million," said Sen. Nelson (R-Rochester). "We need to stretch that investment by targeting resources to help more children be prepared and ready for kindergarten."

The fund would be administered by a new Director of Early Education and Development. The independent director would have responsibility for ensuring effective and efficient fund management, and with coordinating systems and services that span multiple state agencies. In addition to the existing programs, the fund director would also coordinate any future state, federal and private investment in support of early education access.

Beginning immediately, fund resources could only be used at early care and education programs that are able to prove their use of kindergarten readiness best practices as defined by the Parent Aware Ratings. Children's readiness at kindergarten entry will be assessed via Minnesota's newly developed Kindergarten Entry Profile. And to ensure strong local control, the proposal establishes regional hubs to help parents get the type of early education assistance their children need.

“To address equity in our early childhood education system, we have to insist on the use of kindergarten-readiness best practices and engage parents of all backgrounds,” said Senator Melisa Franzen (DFL-Edina). “This bill moves us in that direction.”

Separate from this Early Education Access Fund legislation, the nonprofit early education advocacy organization Close Gaps by 5 is pushing for an additional \$105 million per year to fund flexible scholarships for unserved low-income 3- and 4-year-olds (7,000 children, \$63M/year) and their younger siblings (1,200 children, \$14M/year), as well as high risk 0- to 2-year-olds experiencing homelessness, foster care, or the child protection system (2,300 children, \$28M/year). It recommends funding these children -- who are most vulnerable to falling into Minnesota’s worst-in-the-nation achievement gaps -- before subsidizing wealthier families.

“Coordinating and reforming existing investments is an important step, and that’s why I support the new fund structure,” said Rep. Thissen (DFL-Minneapolis). “But we also need additional resources to help children who still can’t access high quality early education.”

Close Gaps by 5 is led by Minnesota business and civic leaders committed to using early education to close Minnesota’s worst-in-the-nation achievement gaps that pose such a huge threat to Minnesota’s children, communities and economy. The organization supports policy initiatives that further its evidence-based core values: 1) prioritizing limited funding to help Minnesota’s 40,000 un-served low-income children access high quality early education programs; 2) helping those children as early in life as possible; 3) giving parents of those children flexibility so they can find a high quality program that fits their unique needs; and 4) demanding the use of kindergarten-readiness best practices.

The Close Gaps by 5 Board is led by Ciresi Conlin Founding Partner Mike Ciresi and Ecolab CEO Doug Baker, Dr. Art Rolnick is among its members. Additional organizational background is available at [www.CloseGapsBy5.org](http://www.CloseGapsBy5.org).

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