



**Statement of Ericca Maas  
Executive Director, Close Gaps by 5  
Re: Governor's Budget and Early Education  
February 22, 2019**

“We applaud Governor Walz’s commitment to invest in early learning, but urge the Legislature to work to improve the Governor’s proposal to better serve Minnesota’s most vulnerable children by investing in Early Learning Scholarships. With an approach that targets Minnesota’s most vulnerable low-income children, starts early in life, and guarantees that children benefit from kindergarten-readiness best practices, Early Learning Scholarships are designed to address Minnesota’s nation leading achievement gaps. The Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) and Universal Pre-K (UPK), called Voluntary Pre-K in Minnesota, programs the Governor recommends do not meet all three of these critical tests.

The Governor recommends 2020-2021 biennial increases of \$44 million for CCAP, \$58 million to make UPK funding permanent, and \$0 million for Early Learning Scholarships.

With some of the worst achievement gaps in the nation, Minnesota has a crisis on its hands. With limited funding, we must prioritize investments for the 35,000 low-income children under age five who currently can’t access quality early learning programs. These are the children who are most likely to fall into achievement gaps that are measurable as early as nine months of age. These children need kindergarten-readiness best practices early in life, because research shows that children in low-quality programs can actually be set back.

Close Gaps by 5 supports comprehensive investments in high-quality early education, and we recognize policymakers will have to make some tough budget choices in the coming months. We look forward to partnering with the Governor and bipartisan members of the Legislature to prioritize investments in high-quality early learning programs for Minnesota’s 35,000 left-behind, low-income children. With limited state funding, those children must be Minnesota’s number one priority.”

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Note: The following one-page [Issue Brief](#) explains in more detail how Scholarships are a more effective and efficient way to prevent and close achievement gaps than universal pre-k and CCAP.

### 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 problem: 35,000 low-income children under age five still can't access high-quality early education, due to lack of Scholarship funding.