



**For Immediate Release**

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**SENATE LEADERS PROPOSING INVESTMENT IN EARLY LEARNING SCHOLARSHIPS  
Investment Attacks Roots of Minnesota's Worst-in-the-Nation Achievement Gap Problem**

St. Paul, MN. – Early education advocates praised Minnesota Senate leaders for proposing to invest \$22 million for Early Learning Scholarships to empower low-income 3- and 4-year-olds, and the highest risk children under age 3 to access quality early learning programs. The proposal (S.F. 3313) is being discussed today at a hearing of the Senate E-12 Finance Committee and a capitol news conference.

Minnesota has some of the worst achievement gaps of any state, and research shows those gaps can be measured as early as age one. One of the root causes of the achievement gap problem are early learning “opportunity gaps.” About 35,000 low-income Minnesota children under age five can’t access the quality early learning programs they need to get prepared for school and all that follows. If enacted, the Senate leaders’ proposal would fund Scholarships for an estimated 3,000 of those children.

The Senate proposal (S.F. 3313) is being led by Sen. Carla Nelson (R-Rochester), along with co-sponsoring Senators Chuck Wiger (DFL-Maplewood), and Gary Dahms (R-Redwood Falls).

“Senator Nelson uses the right investment strategy, because Scholarships get at the root of Minnesota’s achievement gap problem,” said Michael Ciresi, a long-time Scholarship champion. “This is an important down-payment on eventually ensuring Minnesota kids have universal access to quality early learning.”

Scholarships are targeted to low-income children and can be used at early learning programs based in schools, centers, churches, homes or non-profits, as long as the program is using evidence-based kindergarten-readiness best practices, as measured by the Parent Aware Ratings. Importantly, Scholarships make full-time options available for parents who have full-time jobs, and children don’t lose access to their learning program when their parent’s job or address changes.

Independent third-party research conducted by Child Trends indicates that Minnesota children in Parent Aware-rated programs are making significant progress on kindergarten-readiness measures, such as vocabulary, executive function, social skills, phonics and early math skills. It also finds that low-income children are making the larger gains than children overall, which has important implications for addressing gaps.

For many years, Scholarships have enjoyed bipartisan support. Starting in 2011, former Governor Mark Dayton’s administration implemented Scholarships statewide. Last year, both the Republican-controlled Senate and the DFL-controlled House included funding for Scholarships in their budgets, but the investment wasn’t included in final House-Senate compromise.

In the House this year, Representatives Melissa Hortman (DFL-Brooklyn Park), Ryan Winkler (DFL-St. Louis Park), Dave Pinto (DFL-St. Paul), and Kotyza-Witthuhn (DFL-Eden Prairie) are among the leaders sponsoring H.F. 1, which includes \$190 million for Early Learning Scholarships for low-income

children ages birth through three. If enacted, H.F. 1 would fund Scholarships for about 25,000 of those children. Both the House and Senate proposals call for prioritizing Scholarships for children who are homeless, in foster care, or have been abused.

On February 13, DFL Governor Tim Walz praised the House DFL proposal in an interview with Forum News Service. He said: "This is an area that Minnesotans agree upon. It's smart; it's near and dear to my heart--world-class quality education. I think that's a great use of MN resources, on our children."

"Minnesotans have been looking for this kind of bipartisan cooperation on a major issue for a long time, so this is extremely encouraging to see," said Tim Penny, former DFL Member of Congress and Independence Party candidate for Governor, and current President and CEO of the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation.

"Not all early learning approaches have bipartisan support, but Scholarships give us a bipartisan path forward for helping vulnerable children," said Ken Powell, former CEO of General Mills, one of many business leaders who back Scholarships, in part because achievement gaps threaten employers' ability to have the educated workforce they need to compete in the global economy.

In addition to closing achievement gaps, the expansion of Scholarships also will ease a critical child care shortage in Minnesota. Statewide, there are only about two quality child care slots for every ten children under age five. This injection of significant new resources into the child care sector will help more quality child care providers retain and expand their programs.

"This will help ease Minnesota's child care shortage that makes it so difficult for parents to support their families and for employers to find workers," said Jan Kruchoski, a co-chair of a statewide Early Care and Education Crisis Work Group, and former President of the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce's Board of Directors.

In the fall of 2019, a prominent bipartisan group of 150 private, public, and nonprofit leaders signed a letter to Governor Walz urging him to help the 35,000 low-income, left-behind children access quality programs. The letter can be viewed at <https://rebrand.ly/bipartisanletter>.

Beyond these leaders, a March 2018 Morris Leatherman survey found that an overwhelming 84% of Minnesota voters agree that "we should help the children most likely to fall into achievement gaps early in life, to prevent them from falling behind."

"I've studied this issue a very long time, and I'm not aware of another public investment that yields a better return-on-investment for taxpayers than targeted, high quality early learning programs," said Art Rolnick, PhD, a former economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, currently a Senior Fellow at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs. "Scholarships are obviously transformational for at-risk children, but they are also great for taxpayers, because we know that kids who are ready for school generate much lower government expenses."

Close Gaps by 5 is a nonprofit organization advocating for targeted quality early learning programs to close Minnesota's worst-in-the-nation achievement gaps by age five. The board of directors is led by Michael Ciresi, Founding Partner of Ciresi Conlin, and Ken Powell, former CEO of General Mills. Background information is available at [www.closegapsby5.org](http://www.closegapsby5.org).

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