



MINNESOTA HEAD START ASSOCIATION, INC.

Our Vision for Early Education and Care

2008

Investing in early childhood education and care is wise public policy. Experts from neuroscience to economics argue that using public dollars to ensure at-risk young children receive high quality early learning opportunities can have great returns for those children's lives and consequently for the broader community's economic development and well-being. Seven states have enacted, and at least one presidential candidate is campaigning on, universal voluntary pre-kindergarten policies, while many other states have increased their early childhood funding.¹ In Minnesota, two pilot projects are providing direct financial assistance to low-income families (either through a \$4,000 allowance or an up to \$12,000 scholarship), enabling them to enroll their children in high quality early learning opportunities.

The Minnesota Head Start Association applauds this public focus. As practitioners who have worked with Minnesota's lowest income children and their families for more than forty years, we understand well their lives, needs, and promise. Our experience strengthens our resolve and belief in an underlying philosophy:

*Every young child has enormous potential to blossom and develop,
and their early learning is essential to their later successes.*

Public dollars must not be merely spent on early childhood; they must be invested wisely and strategically. Every child needs high quality early learning opportunities, but to garner the broad impact anticipated by economists' cost-benefit analyses of public investment in early childhood, state funding must stay true to the well-defined objectives of the programs studied. First, these programs do not serve any and every child. They focus on *very low-income* children. Children living in poverty often experience more inconsistent family life, and are at-risk for fewer successes in childhood and later in life. Arguably, these children have the most to gain from rich early learning opportunities. Indeed, research documents the differences such experiences can have for these children's lives, whereas the long-term impact of public investments in middle-income children's early learning is still uncertain.

Simultaneously, the literature is quite clear that poorly focused, modestly funded programs do not significantly enhance young at-risk children's well-being and school readiness.² The early learning programs that demonstrate long-term impacts are intensive and of *high quality*.³ Policy makers must understand the true costs of replicating such programs. A \$4,000 allowance does not begin to address the needs of a young child living in poverty. Federal funding for Head Start averages \$7,000 per child for part-time, part-year services. Rather, the cost for an at-risk child to attend a quality, full-time early learning program is estimated at \$10,000 to \$13,000.⁴



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Given the proven long-term results of high quality early learning opportunities and the financial realities of their costs, we urge policy makers:

Invest first in the children with the most to gain, and ensure the investments are sufficient to pay for the quality that will actually produce the necessary impact.

We advocate the following Guiding Principles as minimal requirements for new public policies in the early childhood arena.

Guiding Principles

More High Quality Opportunities for More Low-Income Children

High quality education and care must be available to every one of the more than 50,000 Minnesota children under the age of five who live in poverty.⁵ Head Start currently is funded to serve about 17,700 children (0-5), but this is *only about one-third of eligible Minnesota children*. Moreover, the limited available research suggests that the education and care many of the remaining children experience is sub-optimal and meets only minimal standards.⁶ Improving the quality of care, and then subsequently increasing the number of low-income Minnesota children who experience consistent and continuous high quality care, must be our primary objectives.

Start Early

Most early childhood initiatives focus on preschool age children (ages 3-5), but this focus can come at the expense of investments in younger children (ages 0-3). Targeting at-risk preschool-age children may be too late for too many. The earlier children's developmental delays are identified, the more effective interventions can be. Often such concerns are not identified until children interact with a formal program that prioritizes early childhood screening. An impact study of Early Head Start, which serves low-income children ages birth to three and pregnant mothers, documents that an intensive program can improve very young children's cognitive development, breadth of vocabulary, and socio-emotional development as well as their parents' caretaking skills.⁷ Current funding limits Early Head Start to only about 1,400 Minnesota children.



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Address the Needs of the Whole Child and Family

To alter at-risk children's academic and long-term trajectories, early learning opportunities must focus on children's cognitive development, but also on their ability to interact in structured learning environments—skills like sitting still and paying attention, taking turns, and looking others in the eye during conversations. In fact, research documents how powerfully early social and emotional competence predict school readiness and later success.⁸

But, young children will not be prepared to master pre-academic or socio-emotional skills if their teeth hurt, if they are hungry, or if they are regularly absent because of unstable housing. Early learning programs that connect or provide families with appropriate community services to address these basic needs demonstrate success in the children's and parents' outcomes, such as reducing child maltreatment and out-of-home placements, and increasing parents' high school completion rates.⁹ Policies aiming to improve at-risk children's school readiness must also ensure the whole families' basic needs are met.

Parent Leadership

Head Start strongly supports family members as children's primary educators, recognizing that at-risk children's later cognitive and socio-economic successes are most strongly influenced by their parents. Policies must ensure early learning opportunities empower parents and encourage leadership through opportunities for parents to attend educational workshops, volunteer in classrooms, and engage in program management.

Reflective Diversity in Staff

High quality care means highly qualified educators and caregivers, trained specifically in early childhood development and prepared to address children's needs with constructive and instructive approaches.¹⁰ But parents of young children are often also looking for culturally appropriate care from providers whose diversity reflects their children's. In Minnesota, the cultural diversity of families living in poverty has changed dramatically.¹¹ High quality early learning opportunities must deliberately recruit staff from communities of color, but there must be a qualified workforce from which to recruit. Resources must be available and adequate for early childhood training and education. Moreover, funding per child must be high enough to enable early learning programs to offer competitive pay and benefits.



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Mixed Delivery System Based on Community Needs

Early education and care in Minnesota is currently delivered via a set of arrangements that vary greatly in quality and availability. This does not provide for equal opportunities for all children, and makes accountability and a systematic approach to implementation and evaluation difficult and inefficient. However, the current arrangements reflect, in part, parental and local community choices and assessments of needs. Rather than advocating replacement, we encourage coordination of existing early childhood education and care in Minnesota. For example, the State could offer incentives to replicate collaborative partnerships between school-based programs, Head Start and child care similar to the models in place in many communities across Minnesota. To remain efficient, this coordination must be at the local level. Different regions of the state have different needs, and policies must recognize that what works in Minneapolis will not necessarily work in Roseau.

Standards for Excellence

Early learning providers have a short time to make an enormous impact on at-risk children's lives, so they must be vigilant with their objectives. High quality requires standards for achieving excellence, as standards enable early learning providers to use common, measurable definitions to set goals and assess progress. Standards must be based on outcomes proven to influence children's later success, and programs must be held accountable to these standards. Head Start has long utilized standards across all domains of child development as well as within its program management systems. The Head Start Program Performance Standards allow programs the flexibility to meet standards while accommodating variations in community, cultural and individual children's needs. Policy makers must also guarantee adequate resources to enable programs to develop effective curriculum and staff expertise to successfully attain program standards.

Public Will for Committed Funding Must Be Built

Minnesota has a long history of prioritizing public investments in education as key to long-term economic growth. We now need to recognize that these public investments must be made even earlier in the lives of our most at-risk children. This requires:

- *A commitment to high quality and its real costs.* High costs in early education and care are driven by high quality: low staff-to-child ratios, teacher compensation, health and safety requirements, and appropriate facilities and equipment. Barely minimal investments will not appreciably enhance Minnesota children's school readiness or our long-term economic development.



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- ***Sustained investments.*** Investments that are made in early learning opportunities must be sustainable and flexible, and will need to increase over time to match the increasing costs of the education and care. We will need to be patient as the community benefits may not accrue for 15 or 20 years. We will need multiple funding streams and income sources, as well as new investments that extend, not replace, federal dollars. We also cannot take from one successful early childhood initiative in Minnesota to pay for another.
- ***Designing policies and systems that meet the Guiding Principles.*** Decisions must be made within a fact-based framework, informed by the high-quality research and the vast knowledge-base practitioners have learned about how to improve low-income children's lives and futures.

Minnesota's future success will require our current leaders to garner broad-based public will for these commitments. With effective leadership, Minnesotans will understand that the long term costs of inaction for our children and communities are simply too great.

Endnotes

- ¹ Pre[k]now. (2007). *Votes Count: Legislative Actions on Pre-K, Fiscal Year 2008*. Available at: www.preknow.org
- ² Shonkoff, J. & Phillips, D. (Eds.). (2000). *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. National Academy Press. Burr, J. & Grunewald, R. (2006). *Lessons Learned: A Review of Early Childhood Development Studies*. Available at: <http://minneapolisfed.org/research/studies/earlychild/>.
- ³ Grunewald, R. & Rolnick, A. (2006). *A Proposal for Achieving High Returns on Early Childhood Development*. Available at: <http://minneapolisfed.org/research/studies/earlychild/>.
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- ⁵ Children's Defense Fund Minnesota (2007). *New Government Data Show Number of Minnesota Children in Poverty Continuing Steep Climb*. Available at: http://www.cdf-mn.org/Press/PR_070828.htm.
- ⁶ Tout, K. & Sherman, J. (2005). *Inside the preschool classroom: A snapshot of quality in Minnesota's child care centers*. Minnesota Child Care Policy Research Partnership. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Department of Human Services.
- ⁷ Administration for Children and Families. (2006.) *Early Head Start Benefits Children and Families*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Available at: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/ehs/ehs_resrch/reports/dissemination/research_briefs/research_brief_overall.pdf



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- ⁸ Shonkoff, J. & Phillips, D. (Eds.). (2000). *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. National Academy Press.
- ⁹ Reynolds, A.J., Temple, J., Ou, S., Robertson, D.L., Mersky, J.P., Topitzes, J.W., & Niles, M.D. (2006). *Effects of a School-Based, Early Childhood Intervention on Adult Health and Well-Being: A 20-Year Follow Up of Low-Income Families*. Discussion Paper 102. Early Childhood Research Collaborative. Available at: <http://www.earlychildhoodrc.org/papers/catalog.cfm>
- ¹⁰ Barnett, W. S. (2004). *Better Teachers, Better Preschools: Student Achievement Linked to Teacher Qualifications*. Available at: www.nieer.org
- ¹¹ Children's Defense Fund Minnesota. (2004). *All Kids Count: Assessing the Well-Being of African-American, American Indian, Asian and Latino Children in Minnesota*. Available at: <http://www.cdf-mn.org/PDF/Publications/AllKidsCount.pdf>

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