

Think Small is writing in opposition to HF2203 which would repeal the cap on Pathway II- Early Learning Scholarships. This policy change would reduce family choice and contribute to the decline in child care programs as Minnesota attempts to move into economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Think Small has been an administrator for Early Learning Scholarships since the pilot in 2010. We currently administer all Pathway I scholarships (PWI) for Hennepin and Ramsey Counties which account for roughly 40% of all state early learning scholarships. Prior to 2017 we also administered PWII scholarships for the 7-county metro. We have learned a lot about administering scholarships as well as the importance of scholarships to families.

In all that we do at Think Small we are working towards a population level result of all children in Minnesota being ready for Kindergarten. At the root of our theory of change is access for all children to high quality care. Early Learning Scholarships are an essential part of ensuring that access, particularly children from low-income families and children of color that are living within the opportunity gaps between white children and children of color. In FY20, 60% of all children awarded PWI were in a priority group and 73% of all children awarded were children of color.

Our theory of change is also predicated on family choice. Parents really benefit from the flexibility of being able to use the Early Learning Scholarship at a program of their choice. This allows low-income families to make choices about early learning programs based on characteristics that are important to them as opposed to just choosing the cheapest option or piecing together an unstable care plan. Our experience as Early Learning Scholarship Administrators also tells us that families' needs often change, due to variety of reasons, and families need to have the ability to adjust by changing programs at times. It is only through Pathway I Early Learning Scholarships that families have the flexibility they need to make these choices.

Finally, based on the most recent MDE- Early Learning Scholarship Use report we know that Pathway II Early Learning Scholarships are primary used in school-based early childhood programs. In contrast, Pathway I Early Learning Scholarships are primarily used in child care programs. Acknowledging the growing need for child care as an essential element of the state's economic recovery, it is essential that we do not create situations that would reduce the number of child care programs in the state and rather focus on efforts to increase the number of high quality child care programs to meet the needs of low income families.

We urge you not to support this bill as we believe it will exacerbate our already dire situations of our abysmal opportunity and achievement gaps as well as our growing child care crisis.

Sincerely,



Barbara Yates  
President and Chief Executive Officer