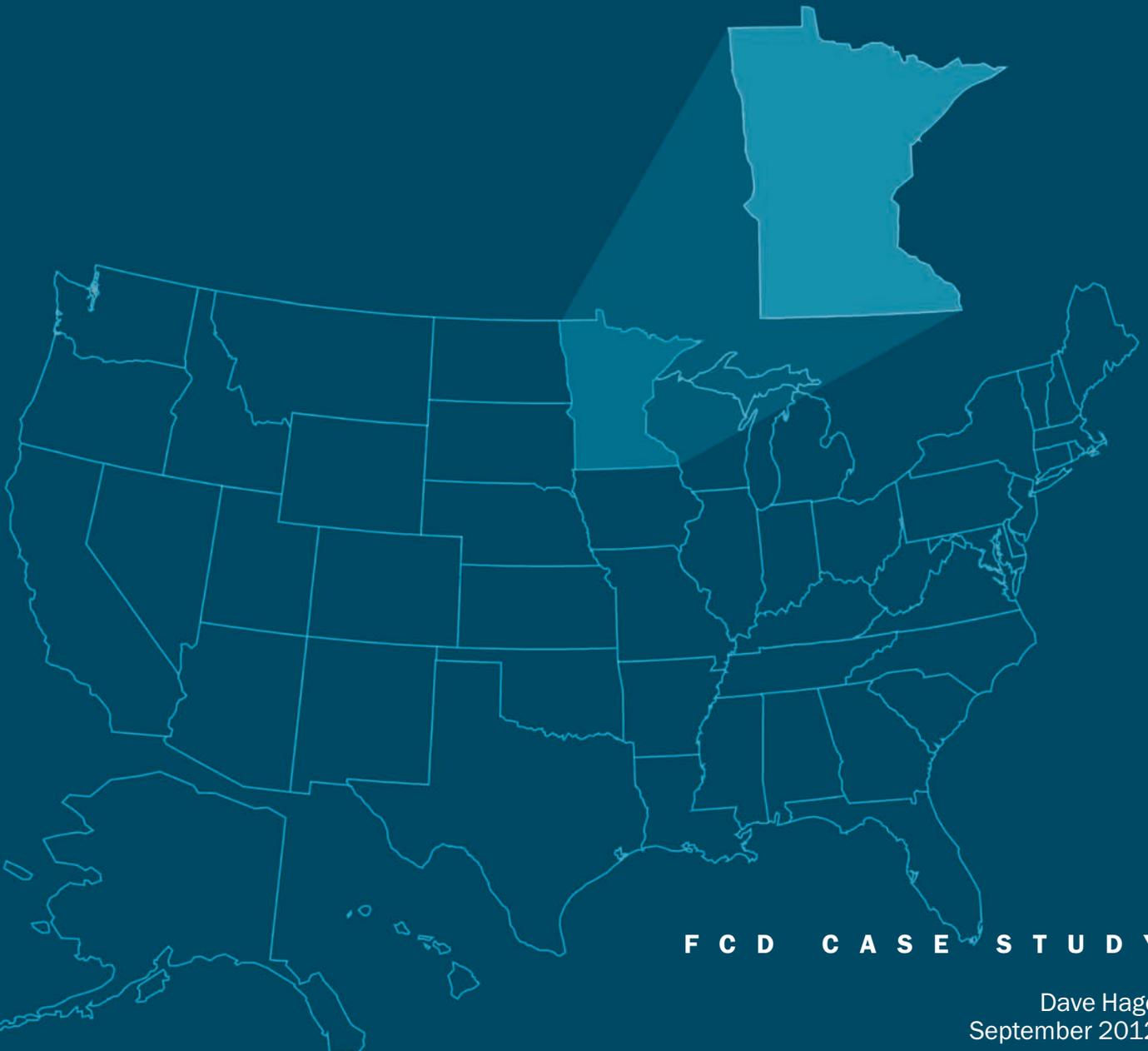


# Into the Fray:

How a Funders Coalition Restored Momentum  
for Early Learning in Minnesota



F C D C A S E S T U D Y

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## Introduction

In the fall of 2008, a coalition of Minnesota foundations commissioned a local research organization to assess the state's ability to undertake a major improvement in school readiness and early learning services for disadvantaged children.

The findings were discouraging.

Richard Chase, working at the research arm of St. Paul's Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, concluded that Minnesota lacked a political champion for early learning in the governor's office or any other executive agency. He observed that government authority over early childhood services was fragmented among three cabinet departments—Human Services, Health, and Education—leaving no agency with overall authority or vision. And, he said, advocates in the nonprofit sphere, while passionate and knowledgeable, lacked a common set of priorities and a cohesive strategy to advance institutional and political change.

“Stakeholders have expressed several early childhood goals—more money for programs, more quality in programs, more access to high-quality experiences, and more school readiness to close the achievement gap,” Chase wrote. “The goals are interrelated, but emphasize different strategies and lead to some confusion by legislators and other decision-makers about purpose and focus.”

“To make early childhood a priority,” he added, “stakeholders must be assertive to compete with other interest groups at the legislature and in local communities in order to get a bigger piece of the pie.”

And yet just three years later, Minnesota would win three highly competitive federal grants to fund important pilot projects in early education. The three grants, totaling nearly \$90 million over five years, would fund an ambitious cycle of early learning experiments, bringing high-quality education and family services to thousands of PreKindergarten children, while modeling rigorous evaluation and funding mechanisms for wider use (See Box). While \$90 million is only a fraction of the sum that would be necessary to extend high-quality education and care to all of Minnesota's low-income PreKindergarteners, it was enough to launch three ambitious, sustained experiments with national implications.

The largest of the three federal grants—a four-year, \$45 million Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant—would allow the state to offer childcare scholarships to hundreds of low-income families, develop a statewide quality rating system for PreKindergarten providers, increase training and education for the childcare workforce, and build a comprehensive system to assess the school readiness of the state's PreKindergarteners.

A second grant—\$15 million from the U.S. Department of Education's Investing in Innovation (i3) program—would fund scholarships for more than 1,000 low-income families in three communities to attend programs modeled on the Chicago Child-Parent Centers.

The third grant—\$28 million through the U.S. Department of Education's Promise Neighborhoods program—would fund a set of “wrap-around” services in a troubled neighborhood of North Minneapolis to help approximately 600 low-income families prepare their children for grade school and set them on a trajectory for college.

This abrupt turnabout in Minnesota's prospects reflected a number of fortuitous events, including the election of a new, more activist governor and a "coming-of-age" for local advocates who had spent years building the case for state and corporate support of quality services for low-income children.

Central to the achievement, however, was a coalition of Minnesota philanthropic leaders who sensed a

vacuum in state leadership and stepped in to fill it. Over the four years between 2007 and 2011, these leaders joined forces to provide research, seed money, staff, ambitious goals, expertise in child development, and tactical energy that gave early childhood services a new coherence in the state and a new momentum at the state capitol.

This case study tells their story.



## Decade of Setbacks

The state of affairs that Richard Chase described for Minnesota in 2008 was not uncommon across the country. In many states, authority over early childhood programs was scattered across health, education, and social service agencies—reflecting the ambivalence of American society about whether the PreKindergarten years are a time of intellectual preparation, play and socialization, or simple babysitting. These fissures had widened during the 1970s and 1980s, with the emergence of “family-values” partisans who fought several efforts to expand publicly funded child and family services. Though the facts were against them—both the emerging science on child development and the demographic realities of a changing society—many argued that child-rearing was solely the domain of the family, and they used the argument effectively to intimidate elected officials who sought greater public support of early childhood programs.

Yet in Minnesota, a state long considered a leader in child and family policy, Chase’s conclusions were startling. For more than two decades, Minnesota had spent heavily on public schools, public health, and family social services. It traditionally made full use of federal programs such as Head Start and Medicaid, and supplemented them with innovative state programs such as Early Childhood Family Education, an ambitious program to teach parenting skills to young mothers and fathers. For years, Minnesota had enjoyed a low child poverty rate, a high rate of child health insurance, and one of the best high school graduation rates in the nation.

Minnesota also had a long tradition of enlightened corporate leadership on family policy. As early as 1985, an executive named James Renier at Honeywell Inc. had championed the cause of early childhood education; with Democratic Mayor Donald Fraser of Minneapolis, Renier founded a group called Success By Six to support low-income families with young children. In 1999, a group of executives from major Twin Cities

Despite Minnesota’s reputation as a state dominated by Democrats, this history of investing in children reflected a long tradition of bipartisanship, including leadership from progressive Republicans such as Governor Elmer Andersen, a pioneer in public school finance, and Congressman Al Quie, a steady advocate of education funding at the federal level. This tradition culminated in 1990 with the election of Governor Arne Carlson. Though a tough-minded fiscal conservative, Carlson had himself grown up in poverty in New York City, and in adulthood became a champion of education and opportunity for disadvantaged children. On taking office as governor, Carlson created a new cabinet agency, the Department of Children, Families, and Learning, to fuse research and policy on child development and public education. He supported funding for the state’s Child Care Assistance Program, also known as “Basic Sliding Fee.” And when the federal mandate known as welfare-to-work arrived in 1996, he embraced a model developed by his Democratic predecessor, Rudy Perpich, which uniquely among the states promised to lift families out of poverty as it moved parents into the labor market—and spent heavily on quality childcare for families trying to leave public assistance.

corporations, troubled by Minnesota’s stagnation in economic development and education, formed a coalition called the Itasca Project to re-instill the state’s lost sense of leadership and human-capital investment. Among five key initiatives, including public transit and higher education, they named early childhood education as a core priority.

In addition, the state had a community of pioneering and energetic advocates for early childhood education, including a bipartisan Early Childhood Caucus in the state legislature and Ready 4 K, a small but sophisticated advocacy group founded by former Mayor Fraser and led by a respected former legislator, Todd Otis.

But the state had suffered crippling setbacks entering a new century. The recession of 2001-2002 created a deficit of more than \$2 billion in the state's biennial budget—one of the largest deficits, in percentage terms, facing any state. The 2002 governor's race went to Republican Tim Pawlenty, a brilliant and ambitious young legislator who had taken a no-new-taxes pledge and wedded himself to a social conservative wing of the Republican Party. Although Pawlenty accepted education as the key to Minnesota's future and gave several widely admired speeches on the topic of early childhood development, his no-taxes pledge led him to deliver a 2003 budget with grave spending cuts, particularly to the state's education and human services agencies.

Pawlenty's 2003 budget, as approved by the legislature, cut funding for the Basic Sliding Fee childcare subsidy by \$86 million, or more than one-third, and curtailed the state's supplement to federal funding for Head Start. Pawlenty also dismantled the Department of Children, Families, and Learning, returning authority for PreKindergarten education, early childhood health, and childcare regulation to three separate state agencies. In 2005, facing another in a series of seemingly endless budget deficits, the legislature trimmed funding for what had been a pioneering statewide PreKindergarten screening program that tested three-year-olds for their cognitive and emotional development.

By 2008, overall state funding for early childhood programs had fallen by nearly 20 percent in real terms, even as the number of Minnesota children living in poverty had nearly doubled. The state's educational "achievement gap"—measured as the difference between white children and children of color on Fourth and Eighth Grade federal reading and math scores—was the widest in the nation. *(Although the gap between white and Asian children was modest, a surprise since much of Minnesota's Asian population consists of Lao*

*and Hmong war refugees, who have historically struggled with economic and cultural barriers.)* A state report found that fully half of Minnesota five-year-olds arrived for Kindergarten testing as unready for school on domains such as literacy, mathematical thinking, and social development—with rates running much higher for children from families below 250 percent of the federal poverty level. (Poor school readiness results were especially high among African American and Latino children, although state officials found that the racial disparities disappeared once they controlled for family

income.) Head Start was serving just 30 percent of eligible children; Basic Sliding Fee was reaching just 20 percent of eligible families, and its waiting list had grown to several thousand families. "Their kids would be in Kindergarten by the time they got to the top of the waiting list for childcare assistance," observed Barbara Yates, a former assistant commissioner of education who was now leading a nonprofit advocacy group.

Minnesota's advocacy community seemed ill-prepared to deal with such a wave of political and economic

setbacks. Some threw in their lot with the public schools, mounting a campaign to fund Full-Day Kindergarten. Others began developing a market-based model that would raise money privately for childcare assistance and distribute it to families, leaving them to choose providers. Still others spent year after year at the legislature, unapologetically seeking a \$1 billion increase in state spending on early childhood services. "There were a lot of flowers blooming, but we weren't getting a bouquet," said Neal Cuthbert, vice president of program at the Minneapolis-based McKnight Foundation. "It was a lesson in what happens when you're not organized," said Denise Mayotte, formerly a program officer at McKnight and now executive director of the Sheltering Arms Foundation. "You're vulnerable to a change in the political landscape, and you can get crushed."

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## New Leaders

In December 2006, the McKnight Foundation in Minneapolis announced a new CEO: Kate Wolford, a grantmaker with broad experience in family development in Latin America and former president of Lutheran World Relief in Baltimore, Maryland. At the time, McKnight was Minnesota's largest private foundation, with assets of \$2.2 billion and grantmaking that ranged from the arts to community development to pollution and the Mississippi River. It also had a long tradition of supporting child and family services and, by one estimate, was Minnesota's second largest philanthropic funder of early childhood programs (after the United Way), with about \$5 million in annual support for a variety of agencies and partners. McKnight had supported Success by Six, the pioneering school readiness organization started by James Renier, and had funded Ready 4 K, the small but influential research and advocacy organization that had kept the drumbeat of early childhood education going through the late 1990s and early 2000s.

For more than a decade, McKnight had also been home to one of the state's most influential advocates on early childhood issues, Senior Program Officer Nancy Latimer. Latimer directed McKnight's Children & Families program, where she oversaw nearly \$20 million in annual grants to agencies such as Big Brother/Big Sisters, Jewish Family Service, and the YWCA. She was also a prescient thinker about the role that childcare would play in the welfare-to-work revolution of the mid-1990s, and had won national recognition for her work in child-abuse prevention. Latimer died of ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease) in 2006, but she had served as a mentor to several younger grantmakers who now worked at other foundations, and she had made McKnight a central player in Minnesota child and family policy.

After Wolford settled in and took stock of McKnight's work, she too found herself dismayed by the setbacks Minnesota had suffered on early childhood issues. She saw that the state had a number of passionate, knowledgeable advocates, and the topic came up regularly when she met with her counterparts at the state's other big foundations. And yet she felt Minnesota was falling behind other states. "I've never seen a place with so many meetings and so little progress," she later observed.

At about the same time, a reassessment was under way at the state's largest nonprofit funder of early childhood programs, the Greater United Way of the Twin Cities. Like many United Way chapters across the country, it funded dozens of charitable, community, and social services, and considered itself chiefly an impartial fund-raising conduit. By the mid-2000s, however, United Way leaders had come to feel that their traditional fund-raising structure—corporate and workplace campaigns—was growing outmoded and losing momentum. The board commissioned a strategy report by McKinsey & Co., and came away believing it needed to focus on a smaller number of priorities where it could be a community leader and demonstrate measurable results. Frank Forsberg, a senior vice president, thought early childhood investments met both criteria.

## Unexpected Help

As a backdrop to these developments, advocates for early childhood education received unexpected help from an untraditional quarter, the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. Arthur Rolnick, an economist and the bank's research director, had spent years studying government subsidies to a variety of projects, including industrial job creation and professional sports stadiums. He found himself a skeptic in essentially every case. But after conducting a careful study of the research literature on early childhood education, Rolnick realized he had found a public subsidy he could endorse. In 2003, he and fellow economist Rob Grunewald had published a paper in the Minneapolis Fed's newspaper, the *Fed Gazette*, which drew wide attention. They documented that \$1 spent on targeted, high-quality early childhood services yielded a return to the public of 18 percent or more—an astonishing result in economic literature—because the children who graduated from such programs performed better throughout school, were less likely to commit crime in adolescence, and enjoyed higher earnings as adults.

The Rolnick-Grunewald calculation showed early childhood education to be one of the best public investments documented in the economic literature. Rolnick's work soon received statewide, then national, attention and reverberated through Minnesota's corporate and political circles. It gave advocates new momentum in two ways: It provided an empirical, rigorous demonstration of the benefits of investing in early education, and it added a voice that would prove influential with business and political leaders.

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Rolnick was soon invited to join the board of Ready 4 K. Then, in 2005, he joined with Duane Benson, a former state senator and head of the Minnesota Business Partnership, to found a new group, the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation, or MELF. MELF quickly recruited a group of leading corporate executives to its board and began raising money to fund a two-pronged strategy: First, it would develop a rating tool that parents could use to choose high-quality childcare providers (and encourage providers to improve their own training and curriculum). Second, it would raise money to fund private scholarships that would allow low-income families to use high-quality childcare.

Meanwhile, change was under way at a third major Twin Cities social services funder, The Minneapolis Foundation. A community foundation with \$625 million in assets as of 2010, The Minneapolis Foundation had embraced the cause of Full-Day Kindergarten (FDK) under president Emmett Carson in the mid-1990s as a supplement to its funding of other early childhood services, and had become an influential voice at the Minnesota Legislature. Carson thought that, at a time of retrenchment and inertia in state government, FDK could rally broad support among educators and parents, and might provide an entry point to build legislative support for early education. He asked Karen Kelley-Ariwoola, the foundation's vice president of community philanthropy, to take the lead on the FDK campaign; she organized a series of community forums on the topic and began seeking legislators who might sponsor supportive legislation. But the foundation's support for Full-

Day Kindergarten puzzled some other members of the advocacy community, who feared it might compete with, rather than complement, the case for PreKindergarten education targeted at low-income families.

The Minneapolis Foundation, nonetheless, brought an important asset to the conversation. As a chartered community foundation, it could legally engage in political activity at the legislature, and it employed a team of lobbyists from the Faegre law firm in Minneapolis.

Then, in early 2007, The Minneapolis Foundation, too, got a new president: Sandra Vargas. Vargas had been the top executive officer of Hennepin County, the state's most populous county, and had served on a number of nonprofit and quasi-governmental boards around the Twin Cities. She was eager to see The Minneapolis Foundation collaborate with its peers. "Sandy came to me and said, 'I'd like us to find a way to partner with other funders interested in early childhood. Let's take a step back and look for a way to build some unity,'" Kelley-Ariwoola recalled.



## A Coalition Takes Shape

In the autumn of 2007, Wolford asked Christine Ganzlin, who had served with Nancy Latimer and was now running McKnight's Children & Families Program, to convene a meeting of peer grantmakers to discuss new steps on early childhood education. Ganzlin consulted her counterpart Missy Thompson at the United Way, whose traditional portfolio of family and children's grantees gave it broad experience in the field, and together they compiled a tentative list. It included Denise Mayotte, who also had worked with Latimer at McKnight and was now running the Sheltering Arms Foundation, a small but highly engaged funder of Twin Cities child and family services; Karen Kelley-Ariwoola from the Minneapolis Foundation; Peter Hutchinson, a public affairs consultant who had served briefly as Minneapolis schools superintendent who was now running the Bush Foundation, a large St. Paul philanthropy (2010 assets: \$760 million); and Kevin Walker from the Northwest Area Foundation, a large St. Paul foundation established by the heirs of railroad magnate James J. Hill (2010 assets: \$399 million). Meanwhile, Sandra Vargas made a call to James Hoolihan, president of the Blandin Foundation, a family foundation in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, with just under \$400 million in assets. Blandin had just launched an ambitious early childhood pilot project in central Minnesota that brought together many of the elements the Minneapolis funders were studying. It provided all-day, year-round care and early education—a rarity in rural counties—for 350 low-income children, using funds and staff from both the local Head Start agency and the Itasca County Area public schools. It also combined scholarships for low-income families with a quality rating system for childcare

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providers and funding for a formal evaluation of children's outcomes.

In February 2008, after a series of meetings, the group formally organized itself as the School Readiness Funders Coalition. The members included McKnight, the United Way, Blandin, Sheltering Arms, the Minneapolis Foundation, the Grotto Foundation of St. Paul, the Women's Foundation of Minnesota, and

a private nonprofit called Social Venture Partners. The members had two beliefs in common: Improving school readiness for Minnesota's disadvantaged children could trigger progress on a broad range of social challenges, and it was time for the state's philanthropic sector to reach beyond direct funding of services and take a role in the state's policy conversation.

At one of the coalition's first meetings, several participants recall, Hoolihan arrived with a report on early childhood policy drafted by three graduate students at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs. It included a full-page diagram of the interlocking providers and institutions that comprised Minnesota's early childhood care and education landscape. Everyone agreed Minnesota's system was incomprehensible. “We called it the spaghetti chart,” Mayotte said later.

From that series of conversations among the funders, two key analytical conclusions gradually emerged:

- Poring over financial records compiled by Richard Chase at Wilder Research, Forsberg and Thompson estimated that Minnesota was spending about \$1.6 billion annually on early childhood care and education. Of that, by far the largest share consisted of direct payments by parents to preschools and childcare

providers, about \$1.2 billion annually. State and federal funding streams added \$399 million per year—mostly in childcare subsidies to parents, Head Start, and the state’s Early Childhood Family Education program. The philanthropic funders combined were providing just \$34 million.

The coalition members concluded that if they were going to achieve broad systemic change in Minnesota’s early learning system, they must do two things: influence political decisions—meaning the governor and the legislature—on public support for early learning, and leverage the private payments of parents so they would sustain and encourage providers of high-quality care and education for their children. Said Forsberg, “Our sector was providing two to four percent of the funding for this system. If your real goal is to solve the problems of quality and access, it’s not a problem for philanthropy.”

- The group arrived at a second, parallel conclusion: If they were to influence the public sector debate, they needed a much more focused and compelling legislative agenda. About this time, Forsberg had a meeting with state Senator Geoff Michel, a sympathetic and influential leader in the GOP caucus. Forsberg went prepared with pages of documents and charts, only to have the senator tell him, “Frank, if you have to turn to Page Two, you’ve already lost most people over here.”

Karen Kelley-Ariwoola, who herself had registered as a lobbyist by this time, was equally blunt about the funders’ advocacy posture. “We came up with one proposal after another, and you would have to say, ‘This isn’t a plan, this is a grocery list.’ If the only message you have is, ‘We need more money,’ that’s just a nonstarter.”

Executives and program officers from the foundations kept meeting through 2008, and it soon became clear that if they hoped to get the legislature’s attention, to say nothing of changing the state’s sprawling network of early learning providers, they would need a high degree of unity—and a vigorous political program. Yet public policy advocacy was new ground for many of

the funders. Wolford recalls leaving one meeting and thinking, “I need to check in with legal counsel to make sure we could craft the partnership in ways that uphold our legal requirements as a private foundation. We didn’t want to back away from the challenge, because it was time to step up and move forward.”

The result was a coalition of funders that would prove extraordinary, in Minnesota and nationally, in several respects:

- It was unusual, to begin with, that so many large foundations in one state would make a priority of early childhood education. Whether because of Minnesota’s longstanding belief in the value of education generally, or because of local grantmakers’ early attention to research on child development, McKnight, Blandin, the United Way, the Minneapolis Foundation, and Sheltering Arms all had made young children a priority in their grantmaking.
- Second, in an era when many foundations hope to develop signature initiatives of their own design, members of the School Readiness Funders Coalition were willing to set aside their own particular variations on the early childhood theme and coalesce around a common philosophy.
- Third, they had deep confidence in empirical research. This may have been a legacy of Minnesota’s roots in the progressive tradition and its reliance on experts and social science, or perhaps it was a nod to the influence of local business executives, who lent their support to antipoverty efforts but came from a numbers-driven culture.
- Finally, they would soon prove unusual in their unapologetic political savvy and their willingness to engage in the world of lobbying, legislative strategizing, and the cultivation of elected officials. Children’s advocates and representatives of several childcare associations, who themselves had spent years lobbying at the legislature, were taken aback at first. “You don’t usually think of early childhood in the back rooms making deals,” said Ready 4 K’s Todd Otis, a veteran at the state capitol. “But they took the effort to a new level.”

## A Results-Focused Strategy

First, however, the School Readiness Funders Coalition would need a common philosophy of early childhood education to serve as their rallying point. Agreeing on this philosophy was no easy task, given the myriad strategies being pursued across the country and even within Minnesota. Although The Minneapolis Foundation had moved away from Full-Day Kindergarten, that approach still had adherents at the state capitol and support from the state's powerful teachers' union. Head Start, too, had influential supporters at the capitol and in rural counties, who felt any new funds should go to the proven local/federal model. Others wanted an even simpler solution—just reverse the budget cuts to Minnesota's Basic Sliding Fee subsidy program so that more low-income families could afford reputable childcare providers.

McKnight, however, had been gravitating toward an emerging national model of education reform known as PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>, which argued that children need a seamless set of services starting well before Kindergarten and moving well into the elementary school years. A growing body of research showed that waiting until Kindergarten was too late, because important brain development happens much earlier in a child's life, and that ceasing intensive services when children enter grade school risks losing any early gains to “fadeout.”

**Finally, to give the coalition eyes and ears at the state capitol, The Minneapolis Foundation agreed to loan its team of lobbyists from the Faegre firm, particularly Nancy Hylden, to the effort. That step would prove prescient within a year, when rounding up votes for even modest legislation became pivotal.**

McKnight hired The Bridgespan Group of Boston to help focus its own strategy on early education policy, and soon was narrowing its grantmaking strategy from the broad array of child and family services to one focused on the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> model. The decision was not without controversy, especially among agencies that had long received McKnight funding. But in 2009 the foundation realigned its children and family grantmaking and announced a new initiative with a tight focus on increasing the share of Twin Cities children reading at grade level by Third Grade.

McKnight also formed an Education and Learning National Advisory Committee (ELNAC), a group of philanthropic and scholarly experts on child development and early learning practices who would convene periodically in Minneapolis to advise the foundation.

Other members of the funders' coalition weren't prepared to embrace PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> at the exclusion of other early education philosophies, but they agreed they had more than enough common ground with McKnight to move forward together: a commitment to expanding the reach of high-quality

early learning, an integration of PreK education with public schools, and rigorous measurement systems to assess the progress of Minnesota's children.

So that they could start their new effort from a strong evidence base, they commissioned Richard Chase's 2008 "assets review" of Minnesota's early childhood efforts. Although Chase found himself discouraged by Minnesota's shortage of political leadership, inadequate funding, and fragmented advocacy, he also gave the funders encouragement: "Minnesota needs leadership," he wrote, "and many in the political sphere are waiting for the philanthropic community to take the lead."

To bring greater sophistication to their advocacy efforts, at Kelley-Ariwoola's suggestion the funders hired the Public Strategies Group, a St. Paul consulting firm known for its nonpartisan and pragmatic approach to solving public affairs problems. Public Strategies, too, argued that Minnesota's political leaders were waiting for the foundation community to exert leadership on early childhood initiatives. But the firm, which was known for a "third way" philosophy that charted a course between Democrats and Republicans, took a decidedly conservative approach in its report to the coalition. It said the funders should call for Minnesota to put most of its money into measurement and accountability tools, rather than simply subsidizing more access to early education, because public funds were scarce and decision-makers in state government were looking for more "bang for the buck."

Finally, to give the coalition eyes and ears at the state capitol, The Minneapolis Foundation agreed to loan its team of lobbyists from the Faegre firm, particularly Nancy Hylden, to the effort. That step would prove prescient within a year, when rounding up votes for even modest legislation became pivotal. "Nancy Hylden made all the difference," said state Senator Terri Bonoff, a new member of the legislature who quickly became a crucial advocate for the funders' cause. "She understood how legislators think, and she was tireless in finding solutions they could vote for."



## Entering the Political Arena

By early 2010, the funders felt ready to make their effort public and launch a bid for action at the state legislature. Though the coalition had no full-time staff or office space of its own, it was operating on a budget that year of about \$200,000 from member contributions—enough to contract locally for research, grantwriting assistance, and public relations advice—and had the ability to raise additional funds for special projects. On March 10, the members called a press conference at the capitol, with Karen Kelley-Ariwoola and Frank Forsberg presenting what they called “An Agenda to Achieve Learning Readiness by 2020.” They had hired a Twin Cities public relations firm, Tunheim Partners, and the press conference was carefully scripted so the message would be clear and they would speak with one voice.

The agenda had three pillars: leadership, accountability, and funding.

- **Leadership:** The leadership portion was simple—The group recommended that the legislature create a cabinet-level office of early learning to oversee Minnesota’s many early childhood education, health, and development programs; to serve as a clearinghouse for research and policy development; and to be held accountable for the state’s progress over time toward school readiness for all children.
- **Accountability:** The accountability pillar was more detailed. The first recommendation was that Minnesota reinforce the goal, already in state law, that every five-year-old be ready for school by 2020, establishing milestones to measure whether the state was making progress. Children should be screened in five “domains”—physical development, the arts, personal and social development, language and literacy, and mathematical thinking—and the state should develop culturally appropriate tests to measure children’s progress. A second

recommendation was that Minnesota adopt several accountability measures, including universal screening of PreKindergarten children (at the time, Minnesota was screening just a sample of three-year-olds); a quality rating system for childcare providers and PreKindergartens; and an annual public report card on whether children’s school readiness was improving.

- **Financing:** Pillar three, financing, was more nuanced. It specifically urged that the legislature fund an office of early learning, a statewide quality rating system for early care providers, a statewide report card on the school readiness of young children, and universal readiness screening of PreKindergarteners. But it also made a nod to the much larger challenge: actually paying for thousands of Minnesota children to gain access to high-quality PreKindergarten programs. “Funding early childhood care and education is complex,” they wrote, “and Minnesota faces a funding dilemma with no easy immediate solutions.” In a single concluding paragraph, they noted estimates by several experts that simply expanding access to high-quality early education so it reached all of Minnesota’s low-income preschoolers would require additional state outlays of \$250 million to \$290 million annually—enough to more than double what the state was then contributing. Building measurement and accountability systems, and funding additional training for early education teachers, would require a good deal more. They did not address the politically fraught question of how Minnesota might pay for such an expansion.

## Lawmakers Take Notice

The press conference generated only modest news coverage, but the force and specificity of the manifesto instantly gained traction with lawmakers and civic leaders. MELF, with its economic research and roster of corporate executives, had “made it cool for Republicans to talk about early childhood education,” recalls state Senator Geoff Michel, a Republican from the Minneapolis suburb of Edina. The funders’ coalition, he added, brought a nonpartisan and authoritative voice that gave it unique stature. “They hosted retreats and brought in experts. They made sure every event was bipartisan—six Democrats and six Republicans,” Michel said. “And they weren’t just asking for money. They were asking, ‘How can we as a state use resources in a better way for a better result?’”

Within weeks, the coalition and early childhood advocates scored the first of three important political victories.

That same spring, a bipartisan group of legislators had introduced a bill authorizing a task force to study the creation of a cabinet-level office of early learning. Minnesota was due to elect a new governor the following November, and no one could be certain whether Tim Pawlenty’s successor would make early childhood a priority in the executive branch. A cabinet-level agency would improve the prospects.

The bill had energetic support from a small, bipartisan group of lawmakers, but they recognized that other legislators had become hardened after seven years of chronic state budget deficits, and that getting a majority to say “yes” to any new state program would be a challenge. Nancy Hylden suggested a novel but appealing solution: If the legislature would

authorize the study, the funders would pay for the staff to write it. “Legislators would be getting good information on an important topic, and they wouldn’t have to pay for it. It’s pretty hard to vote against that,” observed Denise Mayotte. “One advantage we had over any branch of government is that we could move quickly—we could come up with \$25,000 without endless meetings and debate,” said Karen Kelley-Ariwoola.

**To underscore his commitment to the issue, the new governor also issued “A Seven-Point Plan for Achieving Excellence,” which embodied many of the funders’ group recommendations.**

The bill passed, and that summer Governor Pawlenty’s Early Childhood Advisory Council appointed a task force on creating an office of early learning. Three researchers were commissioned to write the study: Karen Cadigan, a recent Ph.D. graduate of the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota; Steffanie Clothier, director of family and children’s

policy at the National Conference of State Legislatures; and Nara Topp, a consultant to the Minnesota Department of Human Services. They set in researching the topic over the summer, studying both Minnesota’s existing governance structure and solutions in other states, and in January 2011 delivered a 67-page report detailing how Minnesota might establish such an office.

Their timing would prove to be perfect. The November 2010 governor’s race went to Mark Dayton, a former state cabinet commissioner and U.S. Senator, and a Democrat with an interest in social justice and economic opportunity. When Dayton’s transition team set up offices, the advocates and the funders were ready to give his advisers, ready-made, the case for an office of early learning and a detailed blueprint for creating it. By early spring of 2011, Dayton had agreed to set aside a

deputy commissioner position in the Department of Education to supervise early learning policy, and Karen Cadigan was named to the job. To underscore his commitment to the issue, the new governor also issued “A Seven-Point Plan for Achieving Excellence,” which embodied many of the funders’ group recommendations. He also established a cabinet-level Early Learning Council, headed jointly by the commissioners of education, human services, and health, to bring agency coordination and institutional heft to the effort.

Later that spring, the funders’ coalition and early childhood advocates scored a second political victory. While the November 2010 election had transferred the governor’s office from a Republican to a Democrat, it had done the opposite in the legislature: A long-standing Democratic majority had given way to Republican majorities in both chambers. Conservative Republicans in the House of Representatives quickly moved to cancel state funding for Parent Aware, the childcare quality rating system that had been developed by MELF and McKnight and was now

supported by the state. The Republican caucus included a large bloc of social conservatives with close ties to the state’s “family-values” lobby, which regarded any state intervention in the childcare system as government meddling in the family realm.

The funders’ coalition, however, recognized that defunding Parent Aware would be a serious threat to progress on early childhood education. Parent Aware was more than just a rating tool. Its four-star rating system gave providers a powerful incentive to adopt quality curriculum and hire well-trained staff. It aspired to steer hundreds of millions of dollars that already were in the childcare system—parents’ payments for childcare—toward high-quality providers rather than casual or kin care. And it gave Minnesota credibility with public and private funders by assuring that their money would go toward high-quality programs capable of preparing children for school. Working quietly in committees, a bipartisan group of Republican and Democratic moderates beat back the proposal.



## Three Ideas, Three Grants

Meanwhile, a third important development was emerging inside the Dayton administration. The new Commissioner of Education, Brenda Casselius, had invited Barbara Yates, a former assistant commissioner and co-executive director of MELF, to come back on loan to the department and help with the staff transition. Casselius had learned that the U.S. Department of Education's Race to the Top grant program now had an early childhood component, and she was considering applying. Casselius, a former middle school principal and school superintendent, did not have a strong background in early childhood issues but proved a ready listener to the early-learning advocates who had made their way to her office. But she was also aware that Minnesota had suffered an embarrassing defeat in a previous Race to the Top application, under Governor Pawlenty. She sought Yates' advice. Yates thought the components assembled by MELF, Ready 4 K and the funders' coalition put Minnesota in competitive position under the federal guidelines and emphatically said yes. Governor Dayton shortly gave his assent.

Knowing that the grant application would run to hundreds of pages and require weeks of intensive effort for a department just getting up to speed, Casselius and Cadigan turned to the funders' coalition for assistance. As it happened, an experienced consultant and grantwriter named Laurie Davis had worked with MELF; Duane Benson agreed to make her available to get the application started, and The Minneapolis Foundation and the United Way agreed to pay her salary. At the same time, the United Way, with support from the Otto Bremer Foundation in St. Paul, built a public website where providers, scholars, and others across Minnesota could contribute ideas and data for the application.

The funders' coalition would prove crucial to the application in two other ways. The rules of Race to the Top emphasized not just access to early education,

but rigorous evaluation of program quality and children's outcomes. Parent Aware, the quality rating system that had just been saved in the legislature, would be the crucial element. Many researchers still consider it an open question whether quality rating systems accurately measure quality in childcare settings, or improve the quality of care and instruction; but the presence of such a tool fulfilled a crucial requirement in the federal request for proposals.

Then in July, just as the grantwriting team was getting up to speed, a budget standoff between Governor Dayton and the legislature's Republican majority threw the state into gridlock, leading to a three-week shutdown of all government offices. With the grant deadline just weeks away, all work on the application by agency staff at Education, Human Services, and Health officially came to a halt. Facing a crisis, the funders' coalition stepped forward again. The United Way agreed to continue collecting data and suggestions on the Race to the Top website. Laurie Davis, technically under contract to the United Way and The Minneapolis Foundation, continued assembling the application. The government shutdown ended in late July and on October 11, the 695-page application went into the mail to Washington.

By coincidence, but not entirely by accident, two other Minnesota groups with an interest in opportunities for children were simultaneously preparing their own federal grant applications—again, with support from the foundation community.

Art Rolnick had by this time retired from the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank and become a fellow at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs. He was joined by Arthur Reynolds, a former University of Illinois researcher who was well-known as the evaluator of the widely respected Chicago Child-Parent Centers. Reynolds and Rolnick had launched a collaboration called the

Human Capital Research Collaborative, and together they came up with the idea of expanding the Child-Parent Centers model beyond Chicago to other communities in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. In addition, they hoped to create pilots for Rolnick's model of childcare scholarships to families and the Parent Aware quality rating system. In the fall of 2011, they applied for a \$15 million U.S. Department of Education grant known as Investing in Innovation, or i3.

Just a few miles away, in north Minneapolis, a group of community leaders was considering a federal grant application of its own. The Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ) had been created to improve education and employment services in a neighborhood chronically troubled by joblessness, crime, and poor school achievement. It, too, bore the fingerprints of the McKnight Foundation. In 2007, McKnight had taken a group of Minneapolis community leaders, including two officers of NAZ's predecessor organization, to New York City for a site visit to Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Children's Zone. When they returned, they shared their lessons at a series of community forums, and the NAZ was created on the template of Canada's project. Now, four years later, NAZ's leaders sought to build a comparable "cradle-to-college" model for disadvantaged children in north Minneapolis. They applied for a \$28 million Promise Neighborhoods grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

Although the organizations had separate missions and were applying for different grants, they had several precepts in common:

- They believed in targeting assistance to low-income families rather than funding universal PreKindergarten.
- Funding would take the form of scholarships paid directly to parents rather than payments to providers or other institutions. The family scholarship model became influential in Minnesota after its adoption by Rolnick and the MELF organization, who argued that it increased parents' engagement in choosing care for their children and forced providers to compete on the basis of their credentials. The original MELF pilot project in St. Paul, for example, gave each family an annual scholarship of \$13,000 for full-time center-based care and \$9,360 for full-time licensed family home care—but only if they used providers who met the staffing and curriculum standards set by Parent Aware. As a political matter, the scholarship model bridged the gulf between Democrats, who wanted to put more money into the early childhood system, and Republicans, who resisted giving more money to state subsidy programs, Head Start agencies, or other public institutions.
- The projects would seek integration between public schools and PreKindergarten programs; they embraced the Parent Aware philosophy of measuring childcare quality and steering parents toward high-quality providers;
- And they required some tool to measure school readiness and other outcomes for children.

Targeting assistance at low-income children, a philosophy rejected by leaders in many other states, had been a foregone conclusion almost since the beginning of the funders' coalition work, and it had several rationales. First, an overriding goal for the Minnesotans was to close the state's yawning achievement gap in the public schools; children from middle- and upper-income families were thought to be doing fine in school, and the funders'

goal was to help disadvantaged children catch up. Second, the implicit message of the Rolnick-Grunewald research was that early childhood investments earned a spectacular return precisely because they were targeted at the children who most needed help. And finally, there was the perceived reality that the state's political leaders—and voters—would never approve the hundreds of millions of dollars required for universal PreKindergarten or childcare services.

Building a continuum from PreK well into elementary school was also an early precept shared by most of

the funders, borne of the growing body of research literature and the proven success of the Chicago Child-Parent Centers. As they considered specific mechanics of funding and delivering early learning programs, the funders' coalition and other players gravitated toward the model of scholarships coupled with a quality rating system, because the early MELF pilot projects already had shown promising results under rigorous evaluation and were gaining a strong reputation among the state's political and civic leaders.



## Washington Says Yes

In December 2011, these three separate but ambitious endeavors suddenly bore fruit, all within a few days of each other.

Rolnick and Reynolds were awarded a five-year i3 grant of \$15 million, making them one of just 23 recipients in a field of more than 600 applicants. The grant was conditioned on their ability to raise \$1.5 million in matching grants from private sources; within a few weeks, they raised some \$2.7 million from foundations in Illinois and New York as well as Minnesota.

That same week, the Northside Achievement Zone announced that it had received a five-year, \$28 million Promise Neighborhoods grant from the U.S. Department of Education, also conditioned on its ability to raise matching funds.

And a few days later, the U.S. Department of Education announced that Minnesota would receive a Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant of \$45 million over four years, to be matched by a state contribution, making Minnesota one of just nine successful states out of 36 applicants.

By the middle of 2012, Minnesota was seeing more—and more promising—activity on early childhood education than it had seen in years. Using the Rolnick-Reynolds i3 grant, the St. Paul Public Schools were preparing to offer services modeled on the Chicago Child-Parent Centers to more than 1,000 low-income families through six public schools. A second pilot under the i3 grant was gearing up on Minnesota's Iron Range, sponsored by Arrowhead Head Start and the public schools in Virginia, Minnesota. Parents at both sites would receive

scholarships to send their children to rated, high-quality childcare providers and PreKindergartens, with public schools helping design curriculum and teacher training, and outcomes evaluated independently.

In north Minneapolis, NAZ had begun building a “wrap-around” set of services for low-income families with PreKindergarten children. It would hire 20 full-time mentors, who would help parents find

high-quality PreKindergarten programs and begin mapping a college trajectory for their children. A set of parenting classes called Family Academy/ Infant and Toddler, developed in conjunction with education researchers at the University of Minnesota, would be offered to 650 families. And 550 children would receive two-year scholarships to attend three-star or four-star rated childcare centers or PreKindergartens,

with an executive of the Minneapolis Public Schools advising on curriculum, teacher training, and other issues.

Finally, in St. Paul, three state agencies—Education, Human Services, and Health—were starting work on their three-pronged Race to the Top grant, now supplemented with \$60 million in state and federal funds. They will spend \$25 million to expand and refine Parent Aware, the tiered quality rating system for PreKindergartens and childcare providers. Another \$17 million will support workforce training and degree programs to assure a supply of qualified teachers at PreKindergartens and childcare providers. Some \$30 million would be made available in access grants to low-income families, and \$21 million

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would be set aside for comprehensive assessment of school readiness in the state's PreKindergarteners.

The funders' coalition, meanwhile, had undertaken an organizational move of its own by merging with a second Minnesota philanthropic group, the Early Childhood Funders Network (ECFN). Roughly a decade old, ECFN counted about 30 foundations in its membership, including some who belonged to the funders' coalition but also many smaller philanthropies representing rural parts of the state. The ECFN had a history of working closely with providers of childcare and family education, particularly on peer education and best practices, and was active in some 90 small communities across

the state. The merger gave the coalition broader reach—to rural Minnesota and the provider community—while bringing together policy research with on-the-ground practice expertise. It chose a new title, the Start Early Funders Coalition for Children and Minnesota's Future, and named Denise Mayotte, Karen Kelley-Ariwoola, and Frank Forsberg as co-chairs.

As a result, by the midpoint of 2012, Minnesota stood at the threshold of a new era that could redeem its own history as an innovator in child and family policy while modeling promising strategies for other states.



## Significant Challenges Remain

Even though Minnesota stood at the threshold of a new era, it faced important challenges in the effort to fundamentally improve early learning opportunities.

- **Going to Scale:** First among these was to demonstrate that the various projects could replicate the results of models such as Chicago's Child-Parent Centers, with measurable and lasting improvements in the social and academic outcomes of disadvantaged children. One preliminary evaluation of the MELF scholarship pilot in St. Paul's Frogtown neighborhood, now serving 348 children, is encouraging. SRI of Menlo Park, California, and Child Trends of Washington, D.C., found in their Year 3 Evaluation that the number of families using highly rated PreKindergartens or childcare providers (rather than unrated neighborhood providers or kin care) had risen 55 percent since the program's outset, and that children were showing measurable improvements in vocabulary, early math, and social skills by the time they reached Kindergarten age. Yet whether such results can be brought to scale across many programs and hundreds of families in many communities is widely considered to be an open question. A related challenge is to build participation in Parent Aware, the state's nonprofit quality rating system for childcare providers. Although backed by a prominent group of academic and business leaders, it was operating in only eight of Minnesota's 87 counties as of July 2012. Only about 400 providers had volunteered to seek a Parent Aware rating, out of some 1,500 childcare centers and more than 10,000 home-based childcare providers in the state.
- **Building the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Continuum:** A second challenge will be achieving and sustaining a seamless partnership between Minnesota's public school districts and the PreKindergarten and child care providers who aspire to partner with them. Years of experience in funding early childhood services had shown the staff at McKnight that children's early gains can fade out in elementary school without close alignment of training and curriculum, and many in the funders' coalition were familiar with the way that PreK providers and public schools sometimes operated in parallel but separate universes. Karen Cadigan's detailed design for a new Office of Early Learning reflects a mindfulness of the need to align many institutions that have not traditionally worked together. School districts in St. Paul and Virginia, Minnesota, have entered the experiment enthusiastically. But broad and sustained institutional buy-in remains an open question. For example, many PreKindergartens and early care providers have resisted programs that grant ratings or accreditation, arguing that they lack the time and money to meet regulatory goals. At the same time, a long history of tension between Head Start operators and some public school districts—a tension found in many states—also suggests that the partnerships will take deft and sustained effort.
- **Funding Access:** Even if the pilot projects can surmount these difficulties, an over-arching question remains: Does Minnesota have the fiscal capacity and political will to fund high-quality care and education for all of the state's 133,000 low-income children? The additional cost, \$250 to \$290 million annually, would represent a doubling of current state spending on such programs—an ambitious goal under any circumstances. The state's budget picture has improved substantially in the 18 months since Governor Mark Dayton took office, but many of the state's lawmakers cut their teeth on a decade of chronic and punishing budget deficits, and the unsteady nature of the 2009-2012 economic recovery has raised lingering worries about state finances. A related question is who would

control the state legislature going into the budget-writing session of 2013; every member of both chambers would be up for election in November 2012, but as of 2011, both chambers had large caucuses of free-market and family-values conservatives who staunchly opposed public spending on early childhood services. In preparation for the 2013 legislative session, the funders' coalition in the summer of 2012 had moved on to a new phase: Preparing a major "ask"—legislation that would represent a major state funding commitment to expanding access, together with a communications campaign to build the case with lawmakers and the public.

- **Sustaining Progress:** Finally, no one can rule out a political reversal of the kind that took effect in 2002, when Minnesota elected a Republican governor deeply committed to low taxes and small government. It was just such an election, coupled with the bruising recession and budget deficits of 2002, that launched Minnesota into a decade of stagnation, even decline, in addressing child poverty, children's health, and early childhood services. The creation of a new, cabinet-level Office of Early Learning creates a potential institutional bulwark against such a tidal shift—but, like many elected leaders before him, Tim Pawlenty did not hesitate to dismantle the institutional innovations of his predecessors.



## Lessons Learned

The Minnesota experience offers important lessons for those seeking to advance the cause of early childhood education and to improve the opportunities facing children at risk for poor education outcomes.

- Even a small number of philanthropic organizations, acting in concert, can alter public thinking and win important political victories. Even before they coalesced as the School Readiness Funders Coalition, the McKnight Foundation and the United Way kept early childhood development on the radar of thought leaders, corporate executives, and elected officials through a turbulent period, so that there was support in place when the state's tides shifted. Then, acting together, the funders marshaled empirical research that corporate and political leaders could not ignore, developed replication strategies and organizational models, crafted a tightly focused agenda that held appeal on both compassionate and pragmatic grounds, and helped their political and business allies with messaging and tactics that overcame opponents. Finally, by providing staff or targeted grants of modest amounts, the funders kept the larger Minnesota public sector moving forward when political events threw obstacles in the way.
- Modest amounts of money from the nonprofit sector can leverage large changes in the public sector. By retaining attorney and lobbyist Nancy Hylden, The Minneapolis Foundation gave the funders' coalition instant credibility among state legislators who were sympathetic but unable to move legislation. By offering \$25,000 to pay for a study of the creation of an Office of Early Learning, the foundations not only allowed skeptical legislators to vote for a desired piece of legislation, but also built a persuasive case and developed a practical blueprint that would change the larger state bureaucracy in a pivotal way.
- Clear priorities and decisive strategy are essential. For years, Minnesota's advocates had made a persuasive case—at legislative hearings, to newspaper editorial boards, before civic leaders—that Minnesota needed to invest more in young children. Yet many of those audiences came away confused and wondering just where the state should concentrate effort and funding. By coupling the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> concept and its powerful empirical research with the pragmatic approach of quality ratings and scholarships, the funders formed the nucleus of a broad and enthusiastic coalition.
- Strategic communications can play an important role. In addition to holding a capitol news conference to announce their agenda, the funders and their contract communications firm produced a coordinated series of briefing papers, newspaper op-eds, research retreats for legislators, and other documents that described Minnesota's challenge and the documented benefits of quality early education. As a result, there was broad public and political support for increased investment, and battles could be fought chiefly over tactics and timing.
- Social science can change minds when it presents clear evidence of needs and benefits, documented by credible researchers. The single best example in Minnesota was the 2003 paper by Rolnick and Grunewald demonstrating high economic returns to quality early education targeted at disadvantaged children. By framing the argument as an investment return, Rolnick and Grunewald expanded the constituency to business leaders and fiscal conservatives who were sympathetic but unconvinced; they also gave traditional advocates an important new arsenal of evidence. Similarly, the early evaluations of the St. Paul MELF pilot, the stature of researchers at the University of Minnesota, and the arrival in Minnesota of Arthur Reynolds and his influential evaluation of the

Child-Parent Centers in Chicago gave the cause critical mass that skeptics could no longer ignore.

Minnesota still stands some distance from fulfilling the promise of school readiness for all its disadvantaged children. By 2010, more than one-third of its children lived in households below 200 percent of the federal poverty line—including 133,000 children under age six who are likely to need substantial PreKindergarten help to thrive in school and life. While the \$90 million in five-year federal grants announced in late 2011 will touch hundreds of families and sponsor important experiments, Richard Chase of Wilder Research has estimated that Minnesota would have to spend up to \$2.5 billion over five years to fund the ambitious effort envisioned by the funders' coalition: scholarships to make high-quality early education available to all low-income children, a statewide system to rate the quality of providers and assess the school readiness of children, and additional training for early education teachers and staff.

Nevertheless, the Minnesota experience offers encouraging signs—not only for the thousands of disadvantaged children who will be touched by the federal grants in their state, but for the broader research and advocacy community. It shows that philanthropic organizations, by deploying sums of money that are relatively modest compared to public budgets, can cause change in major institutions and on a very large political scale. It suggests that, quite beyond the direct funding of services, foundations can change the course of public debate by marshaling empirical evidence, bringing research to bear on policy development, finding leverage points in the political establishment, and supplementing the moral case for early childhood investment with convincing pragmatic arguments. Employed adroitly and decisively, those tactics took a state where opportunities for disadvantaged children were growing steadily narrower and opened a promising new set of horizons.

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