

An Education Secretary's view of Minnesota

Written by
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The following opinion piece, written by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, originally appeared in the Star Tribune on Sunday, July 21, 2013.

The best ideas to put children on a path to school success rarely come from Washington, D.C.

President Obama has put forward a plan to make high-quality preschool affordable for all children — a vital step in putting young people on a path to a thriving middle class. As I saw firsthand in a pair of visits in the Minneapolis area on Tuesday, that effort builds on the work of states like Minnesota.

The day began at Pond Early Childhood Family Center in Bloomington, where I sat with students who sang a song, recited the alphabet and discussed some of their favorite words. The visit was an inspiring example of great educators helping kids get ready for kindergarten in a setting of joy and support.

Later Tuesday, Gov. Mark Dayton, Education Commissioner Brenda Cassellius, and other leaders from business, the military, government and the clergy, joined a town-hall discussion at Kennedy Senior High School. At that town hall, parents, teachers, education leaders and others from throughout the state made clear that they have seen the power of early learning — and that they know we must reach many more children.

That understanding did not emerge from Washington. Forward-looking states have led the way — including Minnesota, where Dayton this year signed a bill that invests nearly \$200 million in early learning, helping tens of thousands more children attend high-quality child care, preschool and all-day kindergarten.

Minnesota has made a priority of preschool through an Office of Early Learning, a Children's Cabinet and an Early Learning Council, which together ensure that the cradle-to-career continuum begins with a strong start. In addition, as a winner of a Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant, Minnesota is creating systems and infrastructure that offer new ideas to other states.

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Minnesota's work represents real progress for families and children in the face of great need. The state's new investments will reach about 8,000 children over two years, but that leaves many 3- and 4-year-olds — some 35,000 of them — without access to high-quality early learning opportunities. And that's why we need to work hard, in Minnesota and across the country, to reach so many more students.

Why? Because of the pivotal role that quality preschool education can play in a child's life. Studies confirm what every teacher knows: Young children who experience secure, stimulating environments with rich learning opportunities from an early age are better prepared to thrive in school. They reap benefits in high school graduation rates and employment, and are less likely to commit crimes.

Experts — including Art Rolnick, a former senior vice president at the Federal Reserve office here, who joined the town-hall discussion — have made a strong case that public investments in preschool return many times more in savings and benefits. As Rolnick — a tireless advocate for early learning — has said: "The best economic development strategy is investment in early childhood." Acting on that knowledge will help to position young people to do well in an increasingly competitive and globalized workforce.

Yet today, millions of young children in this country lack that opportunity. Among 4-year-olds in the United States, fewer than three in 10 attend a high-quality preschool program. The availability of high-quality learning and development programs for infants and toddlers likewise presents challenges for families. And the gap is especially pronounced in low-income communities.

That's why the president has put forward a plan to make high-quality, full-day preschool available to all 4-year-olds from families whose incomes are at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty line — a major help to families working to balance work and family responsibilities and the costs of child care.

All federal costs of this proposed state-federal partnership would be covered by a new tobacco tax — meaning it won't add a dime to the deficit. States would receive incentives to provide voluntary high-quality preschool with low class sizes, qualified teachers and stimulating learning experiences.

The plan also would launch a new Early Head Start-Child Care partnership to expand high-quality early learning opportunities for infants and toddlers, along with voluntary home-visiting programs in which nurses, family educators and social workers connect low-income families to health, social and educational supports.

President Obama has spoken about America's basic bargain: that people who work hard and shoulder their responsibilities should be able to climb into a thriving middle class. Restoring that bargain, he said, is the unfinished work of our generation.

Minnesota is doing that work in earnest. Your children are better for it.

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