

Hello,

My name is Nicki and I'm speaking on behalf of the parent side of things in the Robbinsdale district after having 3 children funnel through the VPK program offered through our district. Though my last child is about to complete this program I wanted to speak for future families that would benefit from this program. My husband and I are both college educated shift workers. We know the benefits of what a great early childhood education brings, we are well aware there is a great need nationwide for funded early childhood education programs and with out the help of this program we wouldn't have been able to afford such a great education to our children. We make too much to qualify for head start programs and too little to afford private preschools. This is the greatest opportunity for middle class families who are just getting by to be able to rest assure quality education for our 4 year olds. To cut this program would be a step back in the future of education.

Thank you
Nicki Nanninga

Hello,

I am a parent of three girls in the Robbinsdale school district. I am writing in support of continued funding for voluntary pre-kindergarten funding. We have taken advantage of the funded pre-k for two of our children; we plan to use this resource with our baby when she's old enough.

Between daycare costs, paying back student loans, and our mortgage, we would not be able to afford pre-k without this resource; our gross income is also too high to access low income pre-k programming. This resource has been hugely important for preparing our girls for school and will certainly pay dividends to the state in the future in terms of a healthier and better educated population.

Thank you for voting in support of this bill.

Sincerely,
Anna Bohlinger, PhD LMFT

“You know what, Momma? I really love preschool...” my son shared with me just this week.

Flashback to March 2020, when the pandemic lock-down began -- daycare shuttered and our “work from home” environment changed dramatically. Five-year olds are capable of many things, yet need help getting started. They are in the “I do it!” phase and we need to remember that building confidence

at this stage is critical for success in the years ahead. They have high-energy, need to get the wiggles out often, and have short attention spans. This was a big challenge with Mom and Dad working full time from home and big brother distant-learning too. Disney+ only works for so long.

The Virtual Pre-K option was our saving grace! It provided “something new to look forward to!” The teachers were understanding, energetic, and flexible. They filled our son’s afternoons with education, portioned in just-right sizes for him. They took breaks to get the wiggles-out, folded in phonics-awareness lessons, challenged the kiddos with in-home scavenger hunts, and delivered a bright spot of joy just when we needed it most. I never imagined my five-year old entering a password to turn on an iPad, navigating to the Google Meet icon, joining the meeting and running the mute and camera on/off buttons without me. “I do it, Momma! You go work...” he shared. (Insert jaw-drop here. It only took one week for him to build up this confidence. They are capable of so much!)

We’ve since transitioned to in-person preschool and it’s going well too. While parents treasure the new-found silence in the work from home setting, it’s important that the virtual Pre-K option remains an option.

When big brother came down with seasonal allergies and had to stay home from school one day, the doctor administered a COVID test, just in-case. Naïve Momma didn’t decline it, but would have in hindsight. That “just in case” forced big brother AND our preschooler to distance-learn-quarantine until the test results came back. That Thursday and Friday with students back in our house single-handedly ruined our work from home week. The constant interruptions, tears, and juggling devices and passcodes – it takes a toll on parents and students. Luckily, we were able to log in from home, so our kiddos didn’t miss a beat with the lessons being taught in-class.

I bring up this scenario, as I believe it is part of our new norm. The stakes are high to keep kids healthy. The stakes are even higher as we force kids to stay home “awaiting test results” and impact life at home on a moment’s notice. “Why am I not in-school?” they ask. The distance-learning / virtual Pre-K option is critical so kids don’t get behind as they await results in our “new normal world.” While parents can oftentimes “roll with” the off days, it’s important to keep the path as smooth and predictable for the students. The VPK option (full time or as-needed) delivers that predictability in an unpredictable world.

On behalf of five-year olds in Minnesota, know that they are capable of so much if we show them the way and harness and guide their energy correctly. Please consider funding that flexible VPK that works so well, now that teachers and parents and students have developed the skills in 2020. It is a lifeline and a critical option going forward. Thank you, in-advance, for consideration extending funding for such a critical path for our children.

Sincerely,

Ellen Wolf

Proud Robbinsdale School District Parent

612-615-2740 if questions

March 17, 2021

Representative Pinto and Members of the Early Childhood Finance Committee,

I am writing regarding the request to maintain early childhood funding for 4000 VPK/SRP seats (Sec. 5. Minnesota Statutes 2020, section 124D.151, subdivision 6) and the benefit Voluntary Pre-K provides to children, families and other early care and education providers in our district.

I am the ISD 191 Early Childhood Programs Coordinator overseeing Voluntary Prekindergarten, School Readiness, Early Childhood Screening and Early Childhood Family Education. I have served District 191 for over 30 years. Voluntary Prekindergarten has, by far, been the most impactful funding and programming legislation in my career. When 191 received initial funding for 116 seats in 2016-17, we immediately increased our ability to provide no cost high quality programming to children and families in our district. Over the course of the past 5 years, our VPK seat count has grown, our partnerships with other early education providers have expanded and our entering kindergartners are experiencing a smoother, more positive start to elementary school.

Minnesota's Ten Commitments to Equity include 1. Prioritize Equity and 2. Start Early. Voluntary Prekindergarten funding accomplishes these commitments and more.

Allowing VPK to serve all 4 year olds broadens our effectiveness in ensuring all children begin formal schooling with the behaviors and skills needed to have long term academic and life success. This key difference of more universal access narrows the gap of those receiving services due to meeting income guidelines only. Children and families experience many types of risk, including being slightly beyond the income qualifications for many types of assistance. Voluntary Prekindergarten programming demonstrates that by lessening our assumptions about the unique risks children and families may experience at a given time, especially in light of a pandemic, all children have the opportunity to be supported and nurtured as young learners.

The loss of Voluntary Prekindergarten seats would greatly impact the number of 4 year olds who could access a high quality early learning experience, not only in ISD 191, but across our state. VPK in our district directly increases our ability to provide truly equitable access for all children in our community. Currently, most other programs and funding streams do not allow for this type of access. We already know that starting early and providing high quality early learning experiences helps to close the achievement gap. This gap has the potential to widen even further without the continued support of VPK funds.

Should we lose the 184 continuation seats, children in Burnsville, Eagan and Savage will experience a greatly reduced opportunity to participate in early learning experiences that support and nurture the skills needed as they grow into the elementary school years. It diminishes their chance to establish relationships within their neighborhood schools and communities and impacts a smooth transition from early childhood to elementary learning.

Over the past 5 years, Voluntary Prekindergarten requirements have strengthened alignment both within school districts and in the community. Growing connections among all early care and education providers give children and their families choices in the type of programming model that works for their family. Referrals within the community and placements for children that best meet their needs maximize the funding resources provided at a federal and state level

while increasing our collective capacity to serve more children. 191 has partnered with providers in our area on shared professional development to improve and expand on consistent approaches for children's learning experiences. By aligning across programs and then vertically, across grade levels in district, children experience a more seamless transition from classroom to classroom. VPK guidance has been instrumental in this work.

Finally, Voluntary Prekindergarten has strengthened the professional understanding of the important work of early childhood both in the community and in the district. As Prenatal to Grade 3 Initiatives take hold across the state of Minnesota, you will find VPK districts are leading the way. VPK has placed the importance of the science of early childhood development and learning in the forefront of what is best for all young children, prenatal through age 8. We cannot afford to lose sight of the changes that are needed systematically to improve the experience and long term outcomes for children. Continuing to fund VPK is one way we can continue this important work. As a district coordinator, parent and grandparent, and lifelong advocate for young children, I respectfully ask you to consider maintaining VPK and SRP seats into the future.

Please feel free to contact me if you have questions or need more information. I have time conflicts during the hearing tomorrow but would be willing to try to arrange a time to present if that is preferred.

Sincerely,

Cindy Check

Early Childhood Programs Coordinator, ISD 191 ccheck@isd191.org

952-707-4155

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Representative Pinto and Members of the Early Childhood Finance Committee,

I am writing regarding the request to maintain early childhood funding for 4000 VPK/SRP seats (Sec. 5. Minnesota Statutes 2020, section 124D.151, subdivision 6) and the benefit Voluntary Pre-K provides not only to the children in the classrooms, but to other children, families, early childhood educators and the future early childhood workforce in the State of Minnesota.

I am a faculty member in the Early Childhood Studies Program in the Psychology Department at Metropolitan State University in St. Paul and also the acting President of the Minnesota Early Childhood Teacher Educators (MNAECTE). I have observed directly and discussed with colleagues, the numerous benefits VPK/SRP funding has provided in our state.

Locally, over the past several years, Metropolitan State University's Early Childhood Studies Program has partnered with School District 191 to provide experiential learning opportunities for Early Childhood Studies B.A.S. students. Metro's students have observed and participated in Voluntary Pre-K classrooms as part of observation and practicum hours for coursework in courses such as Positive Behavior Guidance, Observation and Assessment and Language and Communication. Students have also completed internship and student teaching in VPK classrooms. This is beneficial as school district sites provide a high quality environment with seasoned mentor teachers in which

pre-service teachers can learn, develop and practice skills, and receive feedback which has been prioritized in our state (Early Childhood Workforce, MN, 2018). Over 100 Metropolitan State University students have benefitted by observing and practicing in these high quality classrooms since the implementation of Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten.

In addition, the mixed delivery component required in Voluntary Pre-K programs has provided benefits to children, families and early childhood pre-service professionals. VPK has been a catalyst for school district outreach and connection to the broader early childhood field of professionals and providers. School District 191 has hosted several early childhood trainings and workshops for community early childhood professionals and families that benefit the children in the community through their care providers having a better understanding of early childhood development and issues. Metro State students have also been able to participate in these community trainings and workshops, better preparing them for the early childhood workforce.

Statewide, through MNAECTE meetings, other faculty colleagues have shared the benefits of VPK to their communities and early childhood education college students. There has been a value of VPK sites for providing high quality field placement for students in the metro and rural areas.

My hope in sharing this information with you is to provide additional rationale for continuation of the VPK/SRP funding by increasing awareness of the benefits that reach far beyond the seats in classrooms. Please feel free to contact me if you have questions or need more information. I have time constraints during the hearing tomorrow but would be willing to try to arrange a time to present if that is preferred.

Sincerely,

Carmen Cook, PhD Candidate
Childhood Studies Faculty, Metropolitan State University
President

Early
MNAECTE
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