Minnesota Department of Education

Early Learning Scholarships FAQ

General Questions

What are the Early Learning scholarships?

Early Learning Scholarships provide income-eligible families financial support for their child to attend a high-quality early care and education program. Scholarships may be awarded up to $5,000.

What is the purpose of scholarships?

The goal of the Early Learning Scholarships is to increase access throughout the state to high-quality early childhood programs and to support the school readiness of children with the highest needs.

How were the scholarship communities chosen?

Approximately 4,057 total scholarships will be available annually, reaching approximately nine percent (9 percent) of 3 and 4-year-old children in need.

Therefore, in order to ensure the scholarships are reaching the children with the highest needs, the Minnesota Department of Education developed a distribution plan:

Proposed distribution plan

- A balanced distribution based on poverty indicators for the Metro and Greater Minnesota, and reaching all of the Governor's 13 Economic Development Regions.

Determining factors for distribution among regions:

- Percentage of poverty based on kindergarten Free and Reduced-Price Lunch
- Existence of a Priority School in the community
    - Priority Schools are schools identified as the five percent most persistently low-performing schools.
- Existence of current state-funded Early Learning Scholarships
    - The communities receiving Early Learning Scholarships in fiscal year 2013 were Becker, Blue Earth, Clearwater, Pine and Nicollet counties; Wayzata school district; the cities of Duluth, Minneapolis, St. Paul and Willmar.

- Cities of the First Class
    - Minneapolis
    - St. Paul
    - Rochester
    - Duluth

Family access to scholarships

Eligible families will be able to access Early Learning Scholarships in two ways:

- Pathway I: Early Learning Scholarships awarded to eligible families through regional a scholarship administrator.
- Pathway I Scholarships will be awarded based on Parent Aware rating:
    - Tier I: Three to Four Star rated Parent Aware will receive up to $5,000
    - Tier II: One to Two Star rated Parent Aware will receive up to $4,000
    - Tier III: Participation Agreement in Parent Aware will receive up to $3,000
- Pathway II: Early Learning Scholarships awarded to eligible families through a designated Four Star Parent Aware rated early learning setting of their choice.

Will scholarship areas expand next year, or will they stay the same?

The areas where scholarships are available may be revisited if additional funding becomes available.

How many scholarships will be available in each region?

The scholarship funds available per region are as follows:

Region	**Total Scholarships**	**Funds for Administration**	**Pathway I**	**Pathway II**
Region 1	$424,175	$33,934	$195,121	$195,121
Region 2	$822,814	$65,825	$378,494	$378,494
Region 3	$1,423,940	$113,915	$655,012	$655,012
Region 4	$808,958	$64,717	$372,121	$372,121
Region 5	$1,084,855	$86,788	$499,033	$499,033
Region 6E	$574,766	$45,981	$264,393	$264,393

Region	Total Scholarships	Funds for Administration	Pathway I	Pathway II
Region 6W	$243,227	$19,458	$111,884	$111,884
Region 7E	$668,754	$53,500	$307,627	$307,627
Region 7W	$1,181,385	$94,511	$543,437	$543,437
Region 8	$729,344	$58,347	$335,498	$335,498
Region 9	$918,071	$73,446	$422,313	$422,313
Region 10	$1,801,642	$144,131	$828,756	$828,756
Region 11	$11,368,069	$909,446	$5,229,312	$5,229,312

Who are regional scholarship administrators and how were they selected?

The regional scholarship administrators will coordinate scholarships in each of the 13 Governor's Economic Development Regions. They were selected through a competitive grant process. The regional scholarship administrators are listed below:

Region 1	Tri Valley Opportunity Council	800-543-7382
Region 2	Mahube Community Action Partnership	800-450-1385
Region 3	Think Small	651-641-6604
Region 4	Lakes and Prairies Community Action Council	218-299-7065
Region 5	Mahube Community Action Partnership	218-632-3600
Region 6E	Prairie Five Community Action Council	800-292-5437
Region 6W	Prairie Five Community Action Council	800-292-5437
Region 7E	Pine Technical College	320-629-5164
Region 7W	Child Care Choices, Inc.	320-251-5081
Region 8	Southwest Minnesota Opportunity Council	800-658-2444
Region 9	Child Care Resource and Referral	888-450-2773
Region 10	Child Care Resource and Referral	888-450-2773
Region 11	Think Small	651-641-6604

How will regional administrators ensure families receive notification of scholarship availability in their region?

Pathway I Scholarships

The administrator in each region has created an outreach plan, in coordination with the eligible counties, to identify potential families with children eligible for Early Learning Scholarships. Outreach plans must include specific strategies for reaching culturally and linguistically diverse families and child care/early education programs.

Administrators will reach the most at-risk children and families through connections with home visits, local school districts, resource and referral agencies, providers of child care/early education programs, Minnesota Family Investment Program offices, Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, Child Care Assistance Program offices, Community Action Programs, employment service providers, food shelves, clinics, libraries and other local community agencies.

Administrators will identify a process to ensure that all eligible counties in the region receive a distribution of scholarships.

Administrators will assist families through the process of accessing Early Learning Scholarships including:

- Inform potential families about the Early Learning Scholarships, its benefits and requirements;
- Assist applicants in completing applications for Early Learning Scholarships using the standard application form to be developed by MDE;
- Verify applicants' eligibility, under the process determined by MDE; and,
- Inform applicants of their Early Learning Scholarship award and assist families in selecting and enrolling in an eligible Parent Aware early childhood program.

Pathway II Scholarships

A designated Four Star Parent Aware rated Head Start, child care, or school-based prekindergarten program has developed an outreach plan for informing families of the availability of Pathway II Early Learning Scholarships to attend their program. Pathway II sites were designated by the commissioner due to the demonstration of high quality and family demand for their program.

What is the difference between Pathway I and Pathway II Scholarships?

Pathway I Early Learning Scholarships are awarded to eligible families in identified counties though a regional scholarship administrator, and then the family chooses a Parent Aware program.

Pathway II Early Learning Scholarships are awarded to families through an eligible Four Star Parent Aware rated program of their choice.

In either case, the funds are paid to the program and not directly to the family.

How many scholarships are available in each Pathway?

A total of $10,143,000 in scholarship funds are available for each Pathway. Up to 8 percent of the scholarship appropriation ($1,764,000) will be available to the regional scholarship administrators for the purpose of administration.

Is there a website where we can go to get more information about scholarships?

Up to date information about the scholarships can be found here.

Is the Early Learning Scholarships program being evaluated?

MDE will contract with an independent contractor to evaluate the Early Learning Scholarship Program. The evaluation will include recommendations regarding the appropriate scholarship amount, efficiency, and effectiveness of the administration, and impact on kindergarten readiness.

Family Eligibility

What is the family eligibility for an Early Learning Scholarship?

For a family to be eligible for an Early Learning Scholarship, parents or guardians must meet the following eligibility requirements:

A parent must have a child three or four years of age on September 1 of the current school year, who has not yet started kindergarten; have income equal to or less than 185 percent of federal poverty level in the current calendar year, or be able to document their child's current participation in free and reduced-price lunch program or child and adult care food program, National School Lunch Act, United States Code, title 42, sections 1751 and 1766; Head Start under the federal Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007; Minnesota family investment program under chapter 256J; child care assistance programs under chapter 119B; the supplemental nutrition assistance program; or placement in foster care under section 260C.212.

A parent under age 21 who is pursuing a high school or general education equivalency diploma is eligible for an early learning scholarship if the parent has a child age zero to five years old and meets the income eligibility guidelines.

Any siblings between the ages zero to five years old of a child who has been awarded a scholarship under this section may be awarded a scholarship upon request, provided the sibling attends the same program.

Is the $5,000 scholarship per family or per child?

Families may have more than one child who is eligible for a scholarship. Each eligible child may receive up to $5,000 per 12-month period.

How long do children get to keep their scholarships?

A child who has received a scholarship can continue to receive a scholarship each year until that child is eligible for kindergarten.

If a child is age-eligible to attend kindergarten, but the family chooses to wait to enroll the child in kindergarten until the following year, can the child continue to receive a scholarship?

A child's eligibility for a scholarship ends when the child is age-eligible to attend kindergarten.

Do parents have a certain timeline by which they need to use the scholarship?

Scholarships are awarded a 12-month period. Children must enroll in a program within ten months after they are awarded a scholarship.

What is the screening requirement and who completes the screening?

A child who is at least three years old and has not completed Early Childhood Health and Developmental Screening (Early Childhood or Preschool Screening) under Minnesota Statutes, section 121A.16 to 121A. 19, and who receives a scholarship must complete the screening within 90 calendar days of first attending an eligible program. If a child is currently attending an eligible program when they receive a scholarship, the child must complete the screening within 90 calendar days of receiving the scholarship award.

What is the definition of "same program" for siblings?

Programs that are listed as one program for their Parent Aware rating are considered the same program for the purpose of serving younger siblings.

Does this scholarship impact the family's income?

Early learning scholarships may not be counted as earned income for the purposes of medical assistance under chapter 256B, MinnesotaCare under chapter 256L, Minnesota family investment program under chapter 256J, child care assistance programs under chapter 119B, or Head Start under the federal Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007.

Use of Scholarships

What can scholarships be used for?

Scholarships may be used to expand the availability of the early education program to serve more children with high needs, expand the length of the program services, cover parent fees, rates or other charges not covered by the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) or other programs, and/or enhance services to participating eligible children.

What does “enhance services” mean?

Program enhancement means to increase the type, intensity and duration of services provided through existing programs for participating children. The benefit of the scholarship is primarily focused on the child, but can benefit all children in the classroom. Program enhancement for children receiving scholarships is based on the research and includes:

- Increasing the intensity and length of instructional content and activities to address children’s learning needs adequately, and promote development to help close the “opportunity gap” so that children preform at age level or higher at kindergarten entry.

- Offering smaller class sizes and/or lower child-to-staff ratios to increase children’s gains in learning. For example, providing class sizes of fewer than 20 and child-to-staff ratios of 10-to- for four-year-olds. Due to developmental and learning needs, class sizes and ratios should be lower for three-year-olds than four-year-olds, such as a class size fewer than 19 and child-to-staff ratios of 9-to-1 for the younger preschool-age child.

- Offering comprehensive services that are responsive to children’s needs to improve learning outcomes-with a particular focus on opportunities for family engagement and parenting education. For example, programs could partner with Early Childhood Family Education to provide regular, ongoing parenting education on topics about transition to kindergarten and ongoing family involvement in their child’s learning in school, child development and learning, and parent-child relationships.

- Incorporating compensatory instructional services to accelerate literacy and language development for participating children. This may be a consideration for children participating in programs who are English Language Learners or for children whose opportunities for literacy and language development has been limited. Coordination of transition to kindergarten and the early grades with the local school district from the early childhood program to ensure a smoother transition to school and to help sustain the positive effects of the early education program into the early elementary grades.

Can scholarships be layered onto other funding?

Layering of funds with other existing resources is encouraged in order to increase access and services for children with the highest needs.

Can I use scholarships to serve current children?

Yes, the Early Learning Scholarships may be used to expand the availability of the early education program to serve more children with high needs, expand the length of the program

services and/or enhance services to participating eligible children. Scholarship funds can also be used to cover parent fees and copays.

Can programs receive both Pathway I and Pathway II scholarships?

Programs may receive Pathway I and Pathway II Early Learning Scholarships, as long as they meet the requirements of each type of scholarship. Pathway I scholarships can be used in any program that is participating in Parent Aware. In order to receive Pathway II scholarships, a program must have a Four Star Parent Aware rating and be designated as a Pathway II site by MDE.

My program serves children receiving child care assistance. Can a family receive child care assistance and a scholarship? How do they fit together?

Families can receive both child care assistance (CCAP) and an Early Learning scholarship. If a child is receiving CCAP, you must use CCAP funds first. We encourage you to maximize your scholarship dollars in conjunction with other programs and funding streams.

A common situation in your area might be a family with eligibility for CCAP but with challenges in covering the full cost of care to sustain stable enrollment in a high-quality program. In this situation, a scholarship could be used to cover family copayments, transportation or activity fees, and private pay rates not covered by CCAP maximums, and breaks or reductions in CCAP authorization/eligibility.

Below are examples of layering for a family authorized for full-day CCAP.

Example 1. Assumes a private pay rate of $150 per week in a family child care home.

County CCAP reimbursement (based on CCAP maximum rates)	Parent CCAP co-payment	Amount of private pay rate not covered by CCAP maximum rate	Bill to the scholarship fund
$134.07/week	$10/week (1/2 of a $20 biweekly copayment)	$15.93/week	$10 (copayment) + $15.93 (rate difference) = $25.93 x 4.33 weeks Total scholarship for one month = $112

Note: During a break in eligibility, the scholarship could be increased to cover the full $150/week to maintain program attendance for the child.

Example 2. Assumes a private pay rate of $ 170 per week in a child care center.

County CCAP reimbursement (based on CCAP maximum rates)	Parent CCAP copayment	Amount of private pay rate not covered by CCAP maximum rate	Bill to the scholarship fund
Weeks 1-3 $131.45	$0	$38.55/week Activity fee = $25	$38.55 (rate difference) x 3 = $115.65 + $25 (activity fee) = **$140.65**
Week 4 – NONE (Parent lost eligibility)	N/A	$170	$170 Total scholarship for 4 weeks= $140.65 + $170 = **$310.65**

Pathway I Early Learning Scholarships

Where are Pathway I scholarships available?

Pathway I Scholarships are available for families that live in one of the following counties:

Region 1	Norman, Polk, and Red Lake
Region 2	Beltrami, Clearwater and Mahnomen
Region 3	Carlton, Itasca, and Saint Louis
Region 4	Becker, Douglas, and Ottertail
Region 5	Cass, Crow Wing, Morrison, and Wadena
Region 6E	Kandiyohi and Meeker
Region 6W	Chippewa, Swift and Yellow Medicine
Region 7E	Isanti, Mille Lacs, and Pine
Region 7W	Benton, Stearns, and Wright
Region 8	Lincoln, Lyon, and Nobles
Region 9	Blue Earth, Brown, Nicollet and Watonwan
Region 10	Mower, Olmstead, Rice and Winona
Region 11	Anoka, Dakota, Hennepin, Scott, Ramsey, and Washington

Families can use their Pathway I scholarship at any program in Minnesota that is participating in Parent Aware, including a program that is located outside of the county in which they live.

How many Pathway I scholarships will be given to each county in each region?

Pathway I Scholarships will be distributed throughout the eligible counties in each region. The regional scholarship administrators must ensure that there is a distribution to each of the eligible counties.

How do parents apply for Pathway I scholarships?

Families will complete an application in order to apply for Pathway I Scholarships. Applications will be processed by the regional Scholarship Administrator

Can a family use a Pathway I Scholarship and enroll in a non-resident school-based program?

Families can use their Pathway I Scholarship at any program that is participating in Parent Aware.

How will families know that they can come to my program with a Pathway I Scholarship?

Families will be informed by the regional Scholarship Administrators of their options of programs in which to use their scholarships. Programs may also inform families if the program is eligible to receive scholarships.

What happens if a family with a Pathway I Scholarship moves to a different community?

Once a child is awarded a scholarship, the child continues to be eligible to receive a scholarship until they are age-eligible for kindergarten, regardless of their residence, unless they move out of state.

Can Pathway I Scholarships be used with any provider?

Any early childhood program accepting scholarships must be participating in Parent Aware, Minnesota's quality rating and improvement system.

Maximum scholarship amounts may vary based on the child care/early education program's Parent Aware rating level.

Families that receive a Pathway I Early Learning Scholarship and choose:

- A Three-or-Four Star rated program will be eligible to receive up to $5,000 per eligible child per year; or
- A One-or-Two Star rated program will be eligible to use up to $4,000 per eligible child per year in that program; or
- A program that has signed a Parent Aware Participation Agreement but does not yet have a rating are eligible to use up to $3,000 per eligible child per year in that program.

Beginning July 1, 2016, programs must have a Three-or-Four Star rating in Parent Aware in order to be eligible to receive scholarships.

What is Parent Aware?

Parent Aware is Minnesota's quality rating and improvement system. Information about Parent Aware.

How do I get started with Parent Aware?

If your program is a Head Start or a School-based prekindergarten program, contact Mary.owen@state.mn.us at the Minnesota Department of Education at 651-582-8399.

If your program is a licensed child care center or you are a licensed family child care provider, visit the Parent Aware website or call your local Child Care Aware of Minnesota organization

What happens if my program rating changes?

If your program's Parent Aware rating changes and you have a Pathway I Early Learning Scholarship, please refer to this chart:

Program's initial Parent Aware rating status	**Program's rating status change**	**Impact on Early Learning Scholarships (state-funded)**
Signed Parent Aware Participation Agreement	Does not have a rating and does not continue to pursue a rating in their cohort.	Payments stop in 15 days for current children. Program cannot accept any new scholarships.
Rated 1, 2, 3, or 4.	Rated but does not pursue a new rating, and rating expires.	Current children with scholarships can continue to use their scholarship (at the original amount) for their scholarship year. The program cannot accept new scholarships. If a program signs a Parent Aware Participation Agreement to get their rating renewed, the program will continue with their current children at the original rate, and can accept new scholarships at $3,000.
Signed Parent Aware Participation agreement or rated 1, 2, 3, or 4.	Rating increases.	Maximum scholarship amounts for current and future children with scholarships will be raised to the new level.
Rated 1, 2, 3, or 4.	Rating decreases.	Maximum scholarship amounts for current scholarship children stay at original amount. Maximum scholarship amounts for future children are at the new level.

Pathway II Early Learning Scholarships

Where are Pathway II Scholarships available?

Pathway II Early Learning Scholarships are awarded to families through an eligible Four-Star Parent Aware rated program of their choice.

How many Pathway II Scholarships will be given to each county in each region?

Pathway II scholarships will be available through Four-Star Parent Aware rated programs that are designated as a Pathway II site. Find available funding per school district attendance area.

How long does my program keep the Pathway II Scholarship?

Four-Star Parent Aware rated programs that are designated to be a Pathway II Scholarship site have been awarded a predetermined amount of scholarship funds for a 12-month period. These funds will stay with the program for 12 months.

Can a Pathway II Scholarship be used for more than one child?

Programs will apply for an amount of scholarship funds. It is possible that these funds may serve more than one child per $5,000.

If a child is benefiting from a Pathway II Scholarship and is subsequently identified as being a child with a disability does the child lose the scholarship benefit or are special education services provided in addition to what is offered through the scholarship?

Scholarship funds can be used to cover services that are not covered by other sources of payment. If a child has been identified as having a disability, there may still be services that can be covered if they are not covered through early childhood special education services.

Is my program eligible to be a Pathway II site?

In order to be designated as a Pathway II Scholarship site, programs must have a Four-Star Parent Aware rating and be located in school district attendance areas identified by MDE. View information about program eligibility and the application process. (http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSuc/EarlyLearn/EarlyLearnScholarProg/index.html).

What is Parent Aware?

Parent Aware is Minnesota's quality rating and improvement system. Visit the Parent Aware website to learn more.

How do I get started with Parent Aware?

If your program is a Head Start or a school-based pre-kindergarten program, contact Mary.Owen@state.mn.us at the Minnesota Department of Education at 651-582-8399.

If your program is a licensed child care center or you are a licensed family child care provider, visit www.parentawareratings.org or call your local Child Care Aware of Minnesota organization.

What happens if my program rating changes?

Programs must have a Four-Star Parent Aware rating in order to receive Pathway II Scholarships. If your program no longer has a Four-Star Parent Aware rating, you are no longer eligible to be a designated Pathway II Scholarship site.