



# Frank Forsberg, Greater Twin Cities United Way

## Early learning scholarships will help prepare at-risk kids for kindergarten

A Civic Caucus Focus on Competitiveness Interview

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### Present

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### Introduction

Frank Forsberg is Senior Vice President of Systems Change and Innovation at Greater Twin Cities United Way. He oversees impact planning, public policy government relations and external engagement. He came to United Way in December 1999, after 10 years with Catholic Charities, where he was administrator of the Advocacy and Outreach Division. He began his career with six years of volunteer service in Pueblo, Colorado.

Forsberg is chair of the Executive Committee of [MinneMinds](#), a statewide campaign to significantly increase state funding to improve access to quality early childhood care and education in Minnesota. Supported by a broad base of organizations and thought leaders, Minneminds aims to make the state's youngest children its most pressing priority and most important investment.

Forsberg also serves on the board of the [St. Paul Promise Neighborhood](#), which offers comprehensive academic and social supports to children in St. Paul's Frogtown and Summit-University neighborhoods, and is chair of the board of the [Minneapolis Northside Achievement Zone](#), which has a \$28 million federal grant to support its work to end multi-generational poverty in North Minneapolis.

Forsberg earned a bachelor's degree in business from St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota, and a master's degree in public administration from Hamline University in St. Paul.

## Summary

Half the children in Minnesota are not ready to learn when they enter kindergarten, according to Frank Forsberg of Greater Twin Cities United Way. United Way and other groups advocate funding scholarships for low-income families to send their three- and four-year-old children to high quality early childhood programs as the best way to prepare at-risk children for kindergarten. He estimates it would take \$300 million per biennium to fully fund the scholarship program for all low-income three- and four-year-olds in the state. Governor Mark Dayton has proposed funding of \$50 million for the scholarship program in his FY2014-FY2015 budget. Expanding a quality rating system statewide is a high priority so parents will have reliable information to help them choose the best child care/early education programs for their children. Allowing parents to choose the best program for their children will bring about system reform, Forsberg says, because the programs will have to compete to offer the highest quality. The state's teachers union backs all-day kindergarten, which competes for funding with the preschool scholarship program. However, Forsberg says research shows that quality preschool education is more effective in preparing kids for success than all-day kindergarten.

## Discussion

**Greater Twin Cities United Way raises approximately \$90 million in donations per year, making it the second largest United Way in the country.** Historically, Frank Forsberg said, United Way was in the business of raising money efficiently and then giving the funds to its member agencies. "That has been a losing proposition over the last decade," he said.

As a result, United Way is now in business to address the most pressing issues and then ask people to donate to work on the most important issues. "We invest money in the best-performing nonprofits," he said. The organization also narrowed its community goals from 25 to 10. Getting all children fully ready for kindergarten is one of those goals.

**Half the kids in Minnesota are not fully ready when they enter kindergarten.** Forsberg asserted, "If United Way invests \$5 million annually in early learning programs, that helps 5,000 kids. That leaves 20,000 kids yearly who are entering kindergarten not fully ready. That's a long way from our ability to impact the problem through traditional grant making. We're a long way from our goal. That's what has United Way and other philanthropic organizations engaging in new ideas around systems alignment, systems efficiencies and periodically influencing public policy."

An example of systems alignment is Generation Next, a new collaborative focused on closing the achievement gap by aligning current efforts. "We're program rich in the Twin Cities and systems poor," Forsberg explained. "We have 500-plus initiatives to close the achievement gap and they're not integrated, organized or coordinated."

"In a period of long-term structural deficits at all levels of government, we can't build new strategies in old ways and with new money and new infrastructure," he continued. "In the future, we must prioritize and align resources with programs that have measurable, proven results."

**Minnesota has a rich history of promoting early education programs for at-risk children.**

- Jim Ranier, former chairman and CEO of Honeywell International, led United Way's effort in the '80s and '90s to create the Success By 6 collaborative in Minneapolis and to take it nationwide. Currently, 350 United Ways across the country run Success By 6 collaboratives.
- Art Rolnick, former research director at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, released important research approximately 10 years ago that showed a 16-to-one return on investments in quality preschool education for disadvantaged kids. "He put this issue front and center," Forsberg said.
- The business community created MELF (the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation) seven years ago. Forsberg said it accomplished two things in its five-year existence. (It sunsetted, as planned, at the end of 2011.)
  1. Parent Aware Quality Rating System . It built a quality rating system, called Parent Aware, for early childhood care and education. The system is in place in the metro area and is expanding statewide.
  2. Scholarships . It pilot-tested scholarships as a way to engage parents and allow them to make the choice about where to send their children to preschool and child care, as long as the program is rated as high quality. "This is system change," he said. Forsberg compared the preschool scholarship approach to the higher education system, where public dollars follow low-income students to various institutions through means such as Pell grants.

**An early childhood funder coalition realized that by themselves, they could not fund their way out of the problem.** Halfway through the MELF effort, United Way and others in the philanthropic community including The Minneapolis Foundation, Sheltering Arms Foundation, the McKnight Foundation and approximately 15 other philanthropic organizations, launched the Start Early Funders Coalition. Forsberg said the needs for increasing funding in early childhood are about \$300 million per biennium, which would provide enough funding so all low-income three- and four-year-olds could get scholarships for early education.

But the 20 philanthropic organizations together only contribute \$20 million a year to the effort. "Even if we doubled our commitment, we could only get \$40 million and none of us thought we could double our contributions," he said. The group realized they were not going to fund their way out of this. They decided to try to use their political and social capital and to try to bring about a sequential set of policy steps.

- Leadership. Their first order of business was leadership, he said. The funders coalition worked to establish a cabinet-level state office of early learning. They didn't quite succeed, but they did get a senior position for early childhood in the state Department of Education a year ago. Karen Cadigan, who comes from the early childhood program at the University of Minnesota, holds the position and reports to Minnesota Education Commissioner Brenda Cassellius. "This sets the stage for a potential cabinet-level office for early learning," Forsberg said. "Don't be surprised if we push for that in 2014."

- Accountability and Measurement. As a second step, the funders group put together a Federal Race to the Top proposal and got \$45 million to take the Parent Aware quality rating system statewide. "We're one year into that," he reported.
- Scholarships. During the summer of 2012, the Start Early Funders Coalition and early learning advocates joined forces and launched the MinneMinds Campaign. The campaign is requesting funding for early learning scholarships for all low-income three- and four-year-olds in Minnesota.

**Gov. Mark Dayton's budget has a line item of \$50 million for scholarships for three- and four-year-olds for the next biennium.** The scholarship program is targeted to families at 185 percent of the poverty level or lower. He said fully funding the scholarship program would cost \$300 million over two years, but "it's the first time in decades that the Governor has made an investment like this in early learning."

In response to a question about limiting the scholarships to low-income families, Forsberg said it's best to target the program where it will have the greatest return. "We get a better return if we invest in lower-income kids, who are at higher risk," he said.

**Early childhood education scholarships are competing with other education priorities, such as all-day kindergarten.** An interviewer commented that if we assume the state's education budget is not going to grow, early childhood programs are competing for the same pool of dollars as other education needs. Forsberg responded that business leaders see the scholarship program as high priority, but believe funding for scholarships could come out of any existing funds, not only out of the education budget.

MinneMinds leaders have talked with Education Minnesota, the statewide teachers union.

He said Education Minnesota is supporting the funding of all-day kindergarten statewide. Forsberg said the Governor's budget has proposed fully funding all-day kindergarten, which is a more expensive proposition over time than scholarships for three and four year-olds.

Forsberg pointed out that Rob Grunewald looked at the available research and found that the value of the benefits from early childhood programs will outweigh all-day kindergarten. "If we must prioritize, we must do so by objective research," Forsberg said.

An interviewer asked if there are educators who are allies in the push for early childhood learning. He said teachers feel blamed for low performance by kids who aren't ready to learn when they start kindergarten. He hopes teachers would be saying: If you make early childhood education available and have kids coming to school ready to learn, then you can evaluate us. He said he wishes unions would look at the long view: If education fails, no one will want to fund it.

Forsberg replied that MinneMinds is trying to build a broad coalition in the education area and pointed out that the Minnesota Elementary School Principals Association, the Minnesota Community Education Association and the Minnesota Head Start Association are some of the partners in MinneMinds.

In response to a question, Forsberg said the early learning scholarships would be parent-directed scholarships that offer parents choice and create market incentives. "It's a bit of a systems reform

initiative," he said. "Early learning programs will have to show parents they produce the best results; they'll have to compete."

**Parents' role in the early years is critical to their children's development.** An interviewer commented that research shows a high value for parents speaking to their kids. Children growing up in middle-class and upper-income households hear a lot more words from ages 0 to 3, particularly from 0 to 1, than the low-income group. "Correlations are so high and the cost is so low," he said. "Are we missing a trick by trying to go for scholarships for early childhood education, as opposed to scholarships to have volunteers work with parents to teach them how to talk to their children. There might be more bang for the buck."

"All of us who work in early childhood believe the parent role at home is vital," Forsberg responded. "United Way funds 25 programs and preschools and every one of them has a parent engagement program. It's a core requirement."

Research shows that 90 percent of brain development occurs by age five, he continued. It ties significantly to the parents' role. Investment in scholarships is vital; kids learn a lot of social skills in this environment. Also, 80 percent of mothers in our state work; we have the highest engagement of working moms in the country. Society must support the decision to have women and mothers in the workforce by providing high quality and accessible early care and learning.

**Business and community leaders support the statewide expansion of the Parent Aware rating system.** Forsberg said the independent nonprofit organization PASR (Parent Aware for School Readiness), which Minnesota business and community leaders formed in 2012, supports the statewide expansion of the Parent Aware rating system. Parent Aware is a free one-to-four-star quality rating system for child care and early learning providers that measures best practices, identified by research, that help children succeed in kindergarten and beyond. The state Department of Human Services leads Parent Aware, in coordination with the state Department of Education and Child Care Aware. Parent Aware is also supported by a unique partnership with community leaders through several organizations, including Greater Twin Cities United Way.

**Minnesota needs a system of early childhood education that works statewide.** An interviewer commented that the number of quality rated early learning programs is not yet adequate statewide. Forsberg responded that home-based care needs to get licensed and rated, childcare centers must improve their quality and get rated, and the network of school-based programs, church-based preschools and Head Start must also be rated over time. That requires an investment in their training curriculum and quality infrastructure. With the Race to the Top funding the state is doing that and United Way has invested \$3 million to get 350 childcare centers in the metro area up and rated.

"We need a broad and nimble system that works in Greater Minnesota, as well as in the metro area," he said. School readiness programs and Head Start operate in Greater Minnesota and must be a big part of the equation. They are the biggest drivers in their communities, because smaller communities often don't have childcare centers.