

## Sheriffs join the push for more preschool money

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Preschool supporters hoping for more state funding are getting backup from an unexpected source: Law enforcement.

Sheriffs for Hennepin, Ramsey and Dakota counties entered the preschool fray Wednesday, calling on Minnesota legislators to invest a minimum of \$150 million into early learning programs they say would put 20,000 children in preschool, help close the state's glaring achievement gap and prevent future crime.

To drive home their point, the sheriffs paid a visit to a day care center run by the YWCA of Minneapolis, where they read books to a group of toddlers gathered at their feet. They also cited research showing that quality preschool programs lower the likelihood that low-income children will be arrested for a violent crime before they turn 18. According to the group Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, Minnesota could save as much as \$49 million annually in corrections costs.

"We must make investments in early childhood education for Minnesota kids now to avoid paying far more for the cost of crime in the decades to come," Hennepin County Sheriff Rich Stanek said, before sitting down to read to a group of preschoolers with Dakota County Sheriff Tim Leslie and Ramsey County Sheriff Matt Bostrom.

The three are entering the politically charged debate at a critical moment. Gov. Mark Dayton, Senate DFLers and House Republicans are locked in a three-way battle over how — and how much — to fund early learning efforts, with few signs of compromise so far.

Dayton has said that universal preschool is his top goal this year, and is pushing hard on a proposal that would make preschool a part of the public school system. The cost would start at \$343 million for two years, but grow later and require the hiring of thousands of public school teachers. It would continue the \$54 million in scholarships, or vouchers, now funding 12,000 youngsters at private preschools, as well as at public schools offering pre-K programs.

The House GOP prefers to support the existing network of private preschools. They would offer an additional \$30 million in vouchers tied to a ratings system that helps parents assess the quality of preschool programs. The Senate DFL is taking an altogether different approach, with a small \$5 million boost for preschool vouchers, but \$70 million for "school readiness" programs that offer individual schools maximum flexibility in determining how to prepare children for kindergarten.

Legislative leaders say the cost of Dayton's plan would be staggering, because once fully phased in, universal preschool would cost nearly \$500 million a year.

"We don't have enough staff or resources to fully roll out [universal preschool]," said Senate Education Committee Chair Chuck Wiger, DFL-Maplewood. He said the governor's proposal was "unrealistic" and said the additional funding for school readiness programs and scholarships "was the most practical" solution.

Figures analyzed

Days after the Legislature snubbed Dayton's universal preschool plan, the governor's office criticized the House GOP plan, releasing an analysis by the Minnesota Department of Education that said even with an extra \$30 million, fewer students would be served by scholarships under the Republican proposal.



The Dakota, Hennepin and Ramsey county sheriffs read Wednesday to preschoolers at YWCA of Minneapolis in Midtown, calling for more state funding for early learning programs.

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Education officials said that because the House legislation raised scholarship caps to about \$11,000, about 5,100 fewer students could be served if a majority of parents choose the highest-rated programs. MDE estimated the average scholarship amount would exceed \$10,000.

House legislators dispute that analysis, saying it ignores their requirement that state education officials set scholarship amounts based on market rates. House research staff estimated the average award would be closer to \$8,000, though the amount is ultimately up to Education Commissioner Brenda Cassellius, who has until July 1 to revise scholarship caps.

What the MDE analysis doesn't show is that if those caps are raised, it's possible fewer students also could be served by scholarships under Dayton's plan because it kept funding levels at \$54 million.

Dayton said he's not against raising the caps, but said the scholarship approach is challenging. Moreover, he urged Republicans — who are proposing \$2 billion in tax cuts — to prioritize funding for early learning.

"Compare a \$30 million increase for early childhood scholarships to a \$2 billion tax deduction and you see where their priorities are," Dayton said Tuesday.

### High day care costs

Prompted by concerns that current scholarship amounts don't cover the full cost of a high-quality preschool program, House members proposed raising the amounts of the vouchers.

Scholarships are capped at \$5,000 under current law. The median cost for a Twin Cities preschool program is more than \$11,000 annually, according to a 2012 Department of Human Services survey of child care providers. Officials project those rates will rise once an updated report is published soon.

Tammy Kane-Nyane, a 37-year-old single mom, said she had to make the difficult choice of reducing the number of days her 4-year-old daughter attends day care — from five to three — after the \$5,000 scholarship was used. It paid for four months of day care.

She now pays \$188 weekly to send her daughter to day care three times a week in downtown St. Paul, where she works. The other two days, a friend watches her daughter, Kane-Nyane said.

With three kids, she's juggling several financial obligations and has fallen behind on household expenses, such as rent, utilities and her car payment. But day care is a priority.

"It's a Catch-22," she said. "If you can't pay for day care, you can't work. If you don't work, you can't pay for day care."

Ramsey County Sheriff Bostrom said that quality early learning is too important to let slip, that opportunities for long-term, extraordinary changes will result "when you invest at the right points in the life of a person."

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