

PREPARED FOR THE SAINT PAUL CITY COUNCIL

SAINT PAUL EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM

Early Childhood Stakeholder-based Recommendations

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INTRODUCTION

The City of Saint Paul held a General Election on Tuesday, November 5, 2024. The special ballot question, resolution 23-1094, proposed a special levy to create a dedicated fund for children's early care and education using property taxes as the primary revenue. Voting YES on the ballot was a YES vote for an increase in property taxes. At the close of the General Election, 60% of voters who responded to the Early Learning ballot question selected NO to a property tax increase that would result in a designated Early Care and Education fund for Saint Paul's children, families, and providers.

In response to this stalemate, the Saint Paul City Council early learning planning committee again sought stakeholder feedback on potential next steps, both immediate and short term. The hope was to identify actions that would have a positive impact on Saint Paul's children and families by providing relief and opportunity, while also informing their upcoming legislative agenda.

The planning committee, consisting of Council Vice President Kim and Councilmembers Noecker and Yang, in collaboration with People of Victory LLC, identified a list of stakeholders to consult. This list included the following organizations. Those in black accepted the invitation to provide feedback. *Those listed in blue did not respond to the invitation.* Organizations listed with an asterisk provided feedback in written form.

African American Babies Coalition and Projects
Child Care Aware of Minnesota
Children's Defense Fund, Minnesota*
City of Saint Paul Mayor's Office
City of Saint Paul Office of Financial Empowerment
Hmong Early Childhood Coalition
House of Representatives, Dave Pinto
ISAIAH - Kids Count on Us
Minnesota Child Care Association
Saint Paul Children's Collaborative*
Saint Paul Federation of Educators
Saint Paul Parks and Recreation
Saint Paul Public Libraries
Think Small*
City of Saint Paul Councilmember Anika Bowie
City of Saint Paul Councilmember Cheniqua Johnson
City of Saint Paul Councilmember Saura Jost
City of Saint Paul Council President Mitra Jalali

Note that Councilmember Noecker met with Representative Dave Pinto. She independently collected his feedback, and it is not included in this report. Councilmember Noecker was also present during the Saint Paul Children's Collaborative board meeting from which feedback was gathered and submitted to People of Victory LLC for consideration in this report.

This same planning committee thoughtfully developed 6 concise questions to use in conversations with stakeholders. These 6 questions were also placed into an online survey for the convenience of stakeholder comfort and availability. An announcement to participate in stakeholder feedback sessions was sent on November 20th via email introductions by Council Vice President Kim. Stakeholder conversations were experienced through December 12th, while written responses were gathered through December 16th.

The questions posed were as follows:

1. What role should the City have in supporting families with children ages birth to 5 in Saint Paul?
2. What steps can be taken now to support those families?
3. What other ideas might you have for funding early opportunities for children?
4. Do you have an interest in aiding the leadership in next steps?
5. Did you read the Program Plan? If so, what did you like about the plan and what did you feel was missing?
6. Did you read the addendums? If so, which did you read, what did you like about the content, and what did you feel was missing?

The questions and responses below were provided through conversation or survey. Respondent indicates the organization as a whole and may have included multiple individuals, as was rarely a single individual.

QUESTION 1: *WHAT ROLE SHOULD THE CITY HAVE IN SUPPORTING FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN AGES BIRTH TO 5 IN SAINT PAUL?*

Participants mentioned:

- A need for the City to have a role without adding additional system(s) for families to become familiar with or navigate
- An emphasis on community-based programming reflective of the communities and neighborhoods being served
- Current systems, facilities, and programs being capable of serving children 3-5, rather than ages 0-2, stating buildings and programs needing upgrades, and staff needing training, to safely and knowledgeably service infants and young toddlers

Notable or Outlying Responses

- One respondent indicated specifically not providing support for ages 0-2, stating it was out of our boundary. This respondent stated two rationales for this stance:
 - There are not enough seats to service infants and toddlers.
 - No programming should happen outside of Saint Paul Public Schools capacity to serve.
- Another respondent indicated that programming should include continued advocacy, and connecting families to, and aiding in, navigating resources.
- An additional respondent noted they believe current City programming is successful; however, it would need to be expanded to more areas of the city with additional dollars which have been difficult to access.

Concerns

- Many existing programs are not full day, and instead are drop-in and require a child's caregiver to remain present. This can be prohibitive as many adults aim to participate in the workforce.
- Multiple programs focus on a single developmental domain and are therefore incomprehensive.
- Early childhood professionals are aware of the impact of early experiences for short-, middle-, and long-term benefit. Excluding ages birth through 2 in programming, in lieu of focusing on ages 3-5, is detrimental and opposed by families and several longstanding early childhood institutions.

Recommendations

- Delve deeper into current City programming and citywide programs for ages 0-5. Note:
 - access
 - location
 - program frequency
 - current usability by community
 - affordability
 - programming inclusive of the span of developmental domains, not limited to motor development or literacy
 - Continue partnerships with Parks, Libraries, College Bound Saint Paul, Minnesota Child Care Association, and others. Seek collaboration for the purpose of efficiency, effectiveness, and addressing multiple early domains.
-

QUESTION 2: *WHAT STEPS CAN BE TAKEN NOW TO SUPPORT THOSE FAMILIES?*

Response Synopsis

Participants had a range of responses, some detailed and some broad. Responses extended answers to Question 1, and were often specific to the respondent's organization function, skill, or capacity. Similar in most responses was the desire to assist families through increased and more effective promotion of current youth services across the city, as well as navigating and accessing these existing resources.

Participants mentioned:

- Establishing a One Stop Shop for all youth serving agencies and programs across the city to aid families with easier navigation of what was noted as a 'disjunct process'. This One Stop Shop could include:
 - Support to find financial assistance for program or service participation
 - Support to find transportation assistance for program or service participation
- Ongoing or quarterly convenings of stakeholders in early childhood services as previously facilitated by College Bound Saint Paul, but to include youth services

Notable or Outlying Responses

- One respondent mentioned providing services more equitably and equally across the city, stating, "Some areas have more programs for 0-5 year olds than others and these tend to be concentrated."
- The same participant also identified increasing wages for staff and hiring from communities with an outcome of diverse and mirrored representation in neighborhoods.
- A different respondent highlighted universal staff training in early childhood and youth services at no cost to participants.

- Another respondent's resolve was to provide more funds to Saint Paul Public Schools to open additional classrooms and collaborate with Head Start for more classrooms.
- A final response was to devise a method to make childcare more affordable.

Concerns

- Similar to responses from Question 1, excluding supports for ages birth through 2, in lieu of focusing on ages 3-5 or older youth, leaves a gaping unmet need.
- Staff supporting youth services generally do not address the unique needs of children in the early stages of life and instead focus on school-age children, contributing to early learner invisibility.
- Participant responses illustrate a trend of organizations centering their individual work, skill, clientele, or capacity, and not yet the potential of collective assets or impact.

Recommendations

- Reconsider and adjust the idea of a One Stop Shop and include both early care and youth services in the City and across city programs
- Establish a regular convening of early childhood and youth service professionals. The group would prioritize equitable access to affordable programs for all children, with an emphasis on specific outcomes within each age or developmental range

QUESTION 3: *WHAT OTHER IDEAS MIGHT YOU HAVE FOR FUNDING EARLY OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHILDREN?*

Response Synopsis

Respondents unanimously agreed on the existence of a substantial funding gap that makes early childhood programs prohibitive for many families. Most participants also identified a need for funding streams that are derived from federal dollars, rather than City dollars, and noted that many current subsidies are derived from taxes.

Participants mentioned:

- Current funding streams are available for children and families, but not providers
- A desire for increased federal, state, or county dollars, or other legislative funding streams before City investment
- A need to treat childcare as a public good just as education is treated as a public good

Notable or Outlying Responses

- One respondent's resolve was to forgo direct financial support for childcare, instead providing a basic cash transfer where families were given cash to apply as they deemed appropriate.

- Another participant recommended building public-private partnerships to garner funds to support early education across the city.
- A third response was to redistribute the wealth in Saint Paul by:
 - taxing those who earn more
 - mandating a tax in each tax bracket
 - using some lottery funds or taxes garnered from the sale of cigarettes or alcohol to fully fund, or decrease, the cost of childcare
- An additional respondent noted creating a funding stream for providers to cover the cost of education or training with an end result of a high-quality workforce.
- Viewing childcare as a public good just as education is a public good. The response noted moving the age of 'free' educational services to another age, such as 3, allowing all children aged 3 and older to attend school at no cost.
- A final noteworthy response highlighted the importance of teaching the public why early childhood investment is critical.

Concerns

- Participants were advocates for an early program, however, not through increasing their personal property tax.
- Some early childhood professionals and youth service workers and organizations are unaware of existing resources and opportunities to support professional growth.

Recommendations

- Educating the public is critical. Next steps must include ongoing public education that helps people to realize the current state of care and its trajectory.
- Support professionals by informing, building bridges to, and navigating existing resources. Knowing about and utilizing the existing programs, funding opportunities, education and training resources, partnerships, etc. is absolutely necessary before requesting additional funding in these same areas.
- Seek ways to advocate for increased funds for children and families at the county, state, and federal level as appropriate, while also participating in commissions, boards, and other advocacy efforts that properly position and inform the legislative agenda of the Council.

QUESTION 4: *DO YOU HAVE AN INTEREST IN AIDING THE LEADERSHIP IN NEXT STEPS?*

Response Synopsis

Overall participants were willing to support leadership with potential next steps as their work aligned. Many participants noted that their willingness to participate would depend upon the expected or required commitment, as well as any organizational direction provided by leadership.

Participants mentioned:

- Their participation to date was based on directives provided by leadership, as well as their organization's values and staff availability.
- Any further participation would be based on alignment of early learning goals and priorities with their organization's agenda.

Notable or Outlying Responses

- Two respondents mentioned that any further participation would require knowing in advance:
 - how this work or workgroup would be different than those they have participated in prior
 - a description of the role including any contributions or authority members would have
 - the expected time commitment
- Three responses noted that participation would be based on alignment of early childhood priorities.
- Three responses specifically stated that participation would be based on directions from their leadership; namely the Mayor of Saint Paul.

Concerns

- Stakeholders in City and citywide programming would need to contribute to leadership knowledge and direction so outcomes would be inclusive of the breath of experiences in St. Paul. Lack of contribution could impact the quality of a family's experience as it would be limited in perspective.

Recommendations

- Once early childhood priorities and an agenda are determined, identify specific tasks and roles needed, as well as ideal partnerships to fill roles and complete these tasks.
- Encourage City leadership to be invested in the agenda and refrain from deterring participation from staff preventing a well-rounded and well-informed outcome.
- Ensure non-City early childhood and youth services staff are engaged in the outcomes for more vast participant perspectives.
- Engage residents in processes.

QUESTION 5: *DID YOU READ THE PROGRAM PLAN? IF SO, WHAT DID YOU LIKE ABOUT THE PLAN AND WHAT DID YOU FEEL WAS MISSING?*

Response Synopsis

Overall, 100% respondents had not read the Program Plan in full, while 80% minimally read portions of the plan, "As it was lengthy." Their responses were largely based on limited

exposure to the plan. Because there was a range in responses, some quotes have been excerpted to highlight participant responses.

Participants mentioned:

- The Program Plan needing to name licensed-exempt programs and their experiences, not only childcare experiences.
- The Program Plan appeared to lack provider input. The plan fails to address provider points of reference.
- Workforce was not robustly addressed, nor has it been as vigorously explored as has been requested over the years.
- "... the plan focused on inclusivity, early intervention, data driven outcomes, and an emphasis on partnerships. We really appreciated the desire to help solve the problem with the inclusion of community voices."

Notable or Outlying Responses (will highlight several quotes as they span a spectrum and there are few generalizations)

- One respondent noted the plan, "Failed to mention who would manage the funds and what the accountability measures were going to be."
- "Missing in the plan was the need to address concerns over available childcare slots due to an increase in pre-kindergarten slots."
- "There wasn't actually a plan; there was an idea to hire someone to build from the ground up."
- One participant questioned, "Couldn't the money go to a student and fund a classroom in SPPS?"
- "Nothing in the plan worked well because it was privatizing public funding. The plan just points at a problem that needs to be fixed (childcare)."
- "We thought the plan was missing contingency plans for the pilot, for example, in case the program couldn't start immediately."

Concerns

- Over 80% of respondents had not read the Program Plan but preferred to read article overviews and watch comments from residents and others on the issue. Many, although not all, responses were made without awareness of the Program Plan.
- Responses relied heavily upon advancing individual organizations' agenda due in part to lack of awareness of the Program Plan details or early childhood priorities of other organizations.

Recommendations

- While developing an early childhood legislative agenda, be sure to engage stakeholders from multiple perspectives throughout the process. In doing so, assert the importance of shared expertise for a more equitable perspective. With intention, support service providers

and professionals with awareness of City and citywide programs benefiting children, families, and providers.

- Purposefully provide education opportunities regarding your legislative agenda and inform others of your details, as much as is appropriate. Avoid waiting until near a final product to educate the community. Allow organizations to share the task of educating the Saint Paul community on your selected topics.

QUESTION 6: *DID YOU READ THE ADDENDUMS? IF SO, WHICH DID YOU READ, WHAT DID YOU LIKE ABOUT THE CONTENT, AND WHAT DID YOU FEEL WAS MISSING?*

Response Synopsis

None of the participants read any of the three Addendums and noted these were not accessible to them. They were unable to comment on the content of recommendations listed in each addendum.

Participants mentioned:

- Having not read the materials

Notable or Outlying Responses

- None

Concerns

- During conversations, a total of 4 respondents, representing 2 organizations, had concerns regarding the participation of Family, Friend, and Neighbor providers or other cultural providers in lieu of childcare corporations. This topic was addressed in Addendum 3 on Family Friend, and Neighbor providers.
- In conversations and surveys, 3 participants were concerned with accountability measures. This information, not yet front facing, was developed in partnership with community during workgroups and is located in Addendum 1.

Recommendations

- Ensure the Program Plan and subsequent addendums are front facing on the City website. Placing these materials in reach of the general public can aid in education efforts.

BROAD RECOMMENDATIONS

Stakeholders were in general agreement that the City should have a role in early childhood programming. The following recommendations were derived from conversations with, and survey responses from, stakeholders. Recommendations provided are based on great similarity in response among participants.

Explore Current Programs

- Parks, Libraries, Pre-Kindergarten, HeadStart, etc. are already established programs. Respondents mentioned frequently the need to coordinate these current efforts, indicating these could be amplified and work together for a more comprehensive early childhood experience in lieu of a tax funded program.

One Stop Shop Portal

- Respondents made clear the need to have a centralized location to shop for, and pay for, programming. This was inclusive of both City supported programming such as Parks or Libraries, as well as programming provided throughout the city by organizations. Establishing a One Stop Shop portal would be an avenue for centralization and improved ability to connect to and navigate Saint Paul's resources.

Convening of Stakeholders

- Responses made clear the information gaps between organizations regarding service offerings and related details. Regular convenings of early childhood professionals and youth service agencies would encourage shared knowledge, collaborations, and comprehensive approaches for Saint Paul children, families, providers, and organizations.

Ongoing Advocacy

- The respondents were unified in their desire to have a body pursuing funding through county, state, or the federal level. Doing so would allow the City Council's legislative agenda to remain at the forefront.

Education

- Multiple respondents emphasized the necessity of educating the constituents and Saint Paul residents on the benefits of early education and programming, as well as the significance family and providers have in the early stages. Educating the public throughout the process of program development should be prioritized.

NEXT STEP CONSIDERATIONS

- Prior to a working group, identify the group's structure, propose how it will function, and note how this group will be similar to and different from prior groups convened by City Council for early childhood work.
- In advance of requests for broad partner participation, develop a more detailed role description with time commitments included.

Possible tasks that can be completed with less than \$500k, as outlined in the Program Plan, but specific to respondent feedback include:

- One Stop Shop

- Establishment of a One Stop Shop to serve as an entry point for residents to explore opportunities and experiences in Saint Paul, while also exploring possible financial assistance to support participation in these opportunities and experiences.
- The One Stop Shop would minimally include
 - Resident access for exploration and registration
 - Organization ability to input programs and activities
 - Ability to submit payment
 - Web access
 - App access
- A One Stop Shop development would require staff or consulting. This manpower is included in the \$500k cost.
- Buildup of Parks and Library Programs
 - Increase Parks and Recreation services across the city. This would need to include an increase in early programming, building upgrades, and staffing to support daytime experiences.
 - Revisions in Library services to include extending program locations and delivery models, while adjusting program times to better target specific communities. In addition, Library services will need to start collecting participant data for these drop-in services,
 - Parks and Recreation, as well as Libraries, will want to increase the amount of early development domains experienced in any one program as well as track early learning participant outcomes for non-drop-in programs.
- Advisory Commission
 - Related to Addendum 1, an Early Childhood Commission could be established as a working group with ongoing voice program or One Stop Shop development. Adjustments to the original recommendation of an Early Childhood Commission would need to occur to be inclusive of youth services, which typically includes ages 5-17.