

Early Learning Scholarships: Supplemental Guide for Priority Populations

Priority populations for the Early Learning Scholarships Program are established by Minnesota Statutes, section 124D.165, subdivision 3.

Children ages 0 to 4 on September 1 of the current school year, or age 5 if not yet aged out of eligibility, who have been identified as meeting criteria in one or more of the following categories are eligible and prioritized to receive an early learning scholarship.

- The child of a parent under the age of 21 who is pursuing a high school diploma or General Education Development (GED®) diploma is eligible for a scholarship if the parent meets the income eligibility guidelines.
- A child whose family has experienced homelessness as defined under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, United States Code, title 42, section 11434a, within the last 24 months.
- A child in foster care or in need of child protective services.

In collaboration with the Department of Education, the Department of Human Services defines children whose families are receiving child protective services as those who are receiving an assessment or who are currently involved in any case management workgroup. Children who will turn 5 on September 1 remain age eligible until that date, and can be newly awarded or have a scholarship renewed between July 1 and August 31 of the funding fiscal year.

This guide supports implementation and was developed as a collaboration between the Minnesota Departments of Education and Human Services.

Area Administrators (AA) and early childhood programs that receive Early Learning Scholarship Pathway II funds (Pathway II programs) shall prioritize awarding scholarships to children who have been identified in these priority categories prior to awarding other scholarship applicants. If a wait list for scholarships has been established by an AA or Pathway II program, children in priority population status must be awarded from the wait list prior to any other children on the wait list. If a child is identified as part of a priority population at the time of application but their priority status changes while they are on the wait list, at the time funds become available, the AA or program with Pathway II funding must honor the initial priority status. The intent is to support stabilization for the most vulnerable children. Area Administrators or programs receiving Pathway II funding should refer questions of eligibility to the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) if the guidance below is insufficient.

Scholarship amounts are based on the Parent Aware rating level of the program. Starting July 1, 2020, children in a priority status, including children involved in child protective services remaining with a parent/guardian and children in foster care, will be eligible for a higher cap.

Parent Aware Program Rating Level	Scholarship Amount for Priority Status
Four-Star Parent Aware Rating	*Up to \$10,000 per child
Three-Star Parent Aware Rating	*Up to \$7,500 per child
One- or Two-Star Parent Aware Rating	Up to \$4,000 per child
Currently in a Full-Rating Pathway Cohort	Up to \$3,000 per child

Starting July 1, 2024, Early Learning Scholarships Pathway 1 can only be used at programs with a Three- or Four-Star rating. *Starting July 1, 2020, children in a priority status will be eligible for the higher cap indicated above. Scholarships for children not in priority status will not exceed \$7,500 for a Four-Star and \$5,000 for a Three-Star Parent Aware rated program. Refer specific questions to the Area Administrators or Pathway II program about the increased cap.

Scholarships for Children of Parents Under age 21 (Teen Parents)

A child is eligible for an early learning scholarship if they are the child of a parent under the age of 21 (“teen parent”) who is pursuing high school diploma or GED® diploma.

- Teen parents must supply their birthdate on the application to document their priority.
 - The parent’s age at time of application must be 20 years old or younger.
- An official letter verifying eligible education program participation, on letterhead from the education program the parent attends, is required with the application.

Applicants who meet criteria for eligibility as a teen parent must still demonstrate income-eligibility under Option 1 or Option 2, as detailed in the [State Early Learning Scholarships Manual](#).

Scholarships for Children Receiving Child Protective Services

Eligibility for Scholarships

A child is eligible for a state early learning scholarship if that child receives child protective services and is referred from the county or tribal social service agency. A child receiving child protective services is defined as a child whose family is the subject of a family assessment, family investigation, or is involved in any type of child welfare or child protection-related case management through a county or tribal social service agency, but who is not in foster care. Children in foster care qualify for an early learning scholarship under separate eligibility criteria. Sibling children, of eligible age, may also be eligible for an early learning scholarship as determined by the county or tribal social service agency in the case plan.

Families of children receiving protective services whose application is referred by a county or tribal social service agency do not need to submit income verification, but the referring agency worker's contact information must be included on the application.

Application Process for Children Receiving Child Protective Services

Comply with the following processes when applying for a child receiving child protective services:

- When a child's family is receiving child protective services but the child is not in foster care, the county or tribal social service agency should work together with the child's parent/guardian to complete and submit an early learning scholarship application.
- Under the eligibility of children receiving child protective services, a parent/guardian cannot apply for the early learning scholarship directly. Instead, once a parent/guardian completes the application, the application should be referred by a county or tribal social service agency to the Area Administrator for a Pathway I scholarship or the Pathway II program for a Pathway II scholarship.
- When the early learning scholarship application is signed by the parent/guardian and/or the county or tribal social service agency worker, with the county or tribal worker identified, this signed application serves as documentation of the child's protective service case.
- The Area Administrator may contact the county or tribal social services worker to verify. If there is no county or tribal worker identified, the family should be contacted to have the application referred via the worker.

Scholarships for Children in Foster Care

Eligibility for Scholarships

An age-eligible child is automatically eligible for an early learning scholarship if they are in foster care; documentation of income eligibility is not required. In cases where the parent of the child is in foster care, eligibility applies to the child as well, subject to age eligibility. Children of the foster care parent are not considered siblings of the child in foster care. Families who provide foster care and wish to apply for a scholarship must do so separately. All eligibility requirements must be met to receive an early learning scholarship.

Application Process for Children in Foster Care

A child in foster care is in the temporary care and custody of the county or tribal social service agency. The child's parent/guardian retain their legal rights until there has been a termination of parental rights. Until then, there is a short term shared custody between the county and the parent/guardian, unless there is an agreement or a court has issued an order indicating otherwise.

Comply with the following processes when applying for a child in foster care:

- Foster care parents cannot directly apply for the early learning scholarship. The county or tribal social service agency worker and the foster care parent may need to coordinate some of the details on the application to ensure accurate information, while the worker is required to sign the application on behalf of the county or tribal social service agency. If a child is in foster care, the address for the

parent/legal guardian on the application must be the county or tribal social service agency address, while the address where the child is placed in foster care should be included on the application under the Foster Care Information section.

- The *Early Learning Scholarship – Pathway I Application* is to be submitted to the Area Administrator for the county in which the county or tribal social service agency is located. The *Early Learning Scholarship – Pathway II Application* is to be submitted to the Pathway II program that the child is attending.
- The county or tribal social service agency address should be entered into the Early Learning Scholarship Administration System (ELSA) database under the parent/guardian address. Update the resident school district on the “Child” page to be the school district based on the address of the parent/guardian from whom the child was removed (required). The child’s current resident address, or as indicated by the county or tribal social services worker, will be entered as the child’s address in ELSA.
- In the case of a child in foster care, the scholarship should be administered at the county or tribal social service agency responsible for placement. If the Tribal Nation and Area Administrator area overlap with each other, coordination between the two parties must consider which agency can best serve the child with the priority status. If the worker or family specifically requested services by the Tribal Nation, then that is the direction to take.
- If there is a waiting list with the Area Administrator serving the county, but the foster care placement is in a different region without a wait list in the interest of meeting the needs of the child in priority status, the Area Administrators shall coordinate the application and award where funds exist.
- The county or tribal social services worker should have listed their business addresses under appropriate area of the application. Standard practice is if the application came to the Area Administrator location, you can process it.
- For assigning the State Student Identification (SSID) number, the foster care agency must inform the Area Administrator or Pathway II program of the resident school district that is applicable to the child.
- The foster parent may enroll the child in an eligible early learning program and complete *the Award Planning Agreement*. A copy of the agreement should be sent to the county or tribal social worker for their reference.
- Dual licensure for family child care and foster care occurs. Minnesota Statutes, section 245A.16 requires the variance to be issued by the Commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS). A family child care provider that holds a dual license may receive payment during their child care operating hours for a foster child in their care. The Area Administrator will need to verify with the county that the foster parent is dually licensed since the Minnesota DHS Look-Up system will only maintain one license category.

Change in Legal Status

Scholarships that are awarded to children in foster care may be renewed until the child/children are kindergarten age eligible, regardless of a change in their foster care status.

- If the child in foster care is reunified with their family, adopted, or their custody is transferred to a relative under a transfer of permanent legal and physical custody (TPLPC), the child retains the scholarship, and whoever is the child’s legal guardian does not need to reapply.

- The county or tribal social services worker needs to provide authorization/verification of the change of legal status to the Area Administrator or Pathway II program in order for communication to be made on the child’s behalf with the new legal guardian.
- The Area Administrator or Pathway II program should send the part of the application to the new legal guardian so they can update their contact information, and complete the agreement, consent, and Tennessee Warning. No disruption to the child’s scholarship shall occur while waiting for the return of the updated forms.
- If the child is age-eligible to renew their scholarship, the new legal guardian will complete renewal paperwork.

Scholarships for Children Experiencing Homelessness

Eligibility for Scholarships

Children experiencing homelessness are considered a priority to receive an early learning scholarship. Children may be considered as experiencing homelessness as defined under the McKinney-Vento Act, if any of the following pertains to a family’s residential status currently or in the past 24 months:

- Family is residing in a shelter
- Family is doubling up temporarily with other family or friends due to economic hardship
- Family is moving from place to place
- Family is living in a car, outside, public space, hotel, or motel due to lack of accommodation

Homelessness is not an automatic qualifier to receive a scholarship; income eligibility requirements must be met. For families that meet the definition of homeless, a scholarship may be awarded to support stability of programming for the child or to expedite the child being able to enroll or attend a high-quality early childhood program.

If no proof of income is available at the time of application for a family experiencing homelessness, the Area Administrator or Pathway II program can award a scholarship and indicate eligibility as “Income Verified by Evidence” for the purpose of ELSA. Access to supportive services are not to be hindered. The administrator must allow the family a reasonable amount of time to provide income eligibility documentation, or a self-declaration if they do not have income. If the family is determined to be over-income, the award will need to be rescinded. If documentation has not been received within 30 days of the scholarship award date, Area Administrators and Pathway II programs should follow up with family. In the case where early childhood services have already begun, the Area Administrator may reach out to the program to seek assistance in working with the family to submit income verification or risk the cancellation of the scholarship. Documentation, including declaration of no income, must be received within 90 days of the scholarship or the scholarship will be cancelled. If the family is determined to be over-income or no documentation of income is provided, the family and the program should both be given a 15-day notice period that the scholarship will be cancelled. Scholarship payments made will not be recouped from the family. Programs with Pathway II funding that have not verified income within 90 days of the award must cancel the scholarship.

Awarding Scholarships to a Child Experiencing Homelessness

In efforts to support continuity of educational experience while supporting housing stability, flexibility to determine geographical service area must be considered. McKinney-Vento allows the family to be served within the residential school district of their last known address or district enrollment, their current address/location, or where they are seeking stable housing.

Additional Guidance

Questions about accessing the Early Learning Scholarship Program, including specific questions regarding priority population access and eligibility, should be directed to MDE.ELS@state.mn.us with the subject line “Scholarships.”