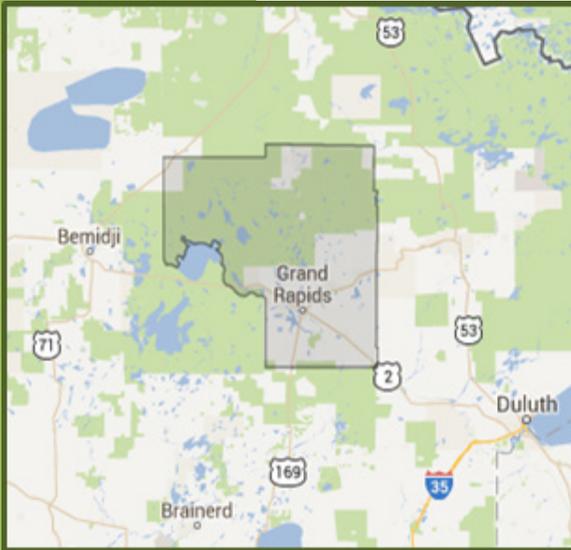


# Evaluation of Minnesota's Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge: Scholarships and Title I PreK Incentives

## Brief #1: Findings for Itasca County October 2013



In 2011, Minnesota was one of nine states awarded RTT-ELC funds. To increase the school readiness of high-needs children by improving access to high-quality Early Learning and Development (ELD) programs, some of Minnesota's RTT-ELC funds are being given as RTT-ELC Scholarships to families enrolling children in high-quality Early Learning and Development programs. Other funds are being given as incentives to school districts to use Title I funds for preschool programs (Title I PreK Incentives). These initiatives are occurring in four Transformation Zones across the state selected by the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE): Itasca County, the Northside Achievement Zone in Minneapolis (NAZ), the Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood in Saint Paul (SPPN), and the White Earth Indian Reservation.

This Brief #1 describes implementation and impacts in Itasca County for the period from January 2012 to September 2013.

### Early Childhood in Itasca County

The Itasca Transformation Zone encompasses all of Itasca County, a large rural area in northeast Minnesota with approximately 1,300 children under age 6 living in low-income households in any given year. Across the county, a number of early childhood supports already were in place before the RTT-ELC grant, including 3 private licensed child care centers, 62 licensed family child care programs, YMCA services, Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE), 6 school-based School Readiness programs across several school districts, Leech Lake Head Start and KOOTASCA Head Start (with a total of 10 Head Start sites across the county), Early Head Start, and numerous other child and family services such as home visiting programs and developmental screening services.

Many of these services are provided in a coordinated manner through the Invest Early collaborative. To provide early childhood and family support services, Invest Early blends public and private funds to serve families in a more seamless way that also includes broader family support services such as adult education (e.g., GED programs), transportation, mental health services, and health services.



*“There are more children who are being served that weren’t going to be served before because we were able to add classrooms...”*

## How were RTT-ELC Scholarships implemented?

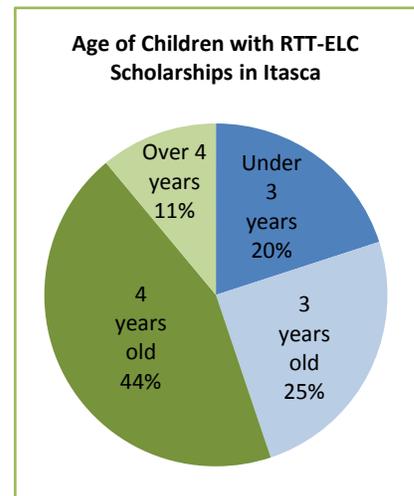
Itasca prioritized the RTT-ELC Scholarship funding for 3- and 4-year-old children with high needs, although some younger children also received RTT-ELC Scholarship funding. RTT-ELC Scholarship monies were braided with other funds (e.g., Head Start, Blandin Foundation, School Readiness) to pay for children’s ELD programming, but the RTT-ELC funds were used in these specific ways:

- Invest Early opened 25 new slots for children to attend high-quality ELD programs for 4 full days per week with transportation.
- KOOTASCA Head Start used some of the funds to increase services from half- to full-day for two classrooms with 17 children in each one.
- RTT-ELC Scholarships were awarded to some children attending Parent Aware<sup>1</sup>-rated private child care centers and family child care programs.
- Some RTT-ELC Scholarship funds paid for the YMCA to provide mental health services as part of comprehensive programming for children and families needing them.

## Who received RTT-ELC Scholarships?

Itasca awarded RTT-ELC Scholarships to 149 children, 146 of whom (98%) consented to share their information with the RTT-ELC evaluation.

- The majority of children receiving RTT-ELC Scholarships were age 4 or older<sup>2</sup> (55%), white (88%), and spoke English as their primary language (100%). Slightly more than half were female (53%).
- One-third of the primary caregivers of the children who received RTT-ELC Scholarships had a high school diploma or GED (35%), and half attended some college classes or had an Associate’s degree (49%). Most caregivers were employed full-time or part-time (79%).
- Almost half of the children who received RTT-ELC Scholarships lived in single-parent households (47%).
- Among families receiving RTT-ELC Scholarship funds, use of MFIP was much more common than use of CCAP (79% compared with 18%).<sup>3</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Parent Aware is Minnesota’s Quality Rating Improvement System for ELD programs; <http://www.childcareawaremn.org/professionals-caregivers/parent-aware>

<sup>2</sup> Age was calculated using September 1, 2012 because this allows the calculation of the year that a child would be eligible to enter kindergarten.

<sup>3</sup> MFIP = Minnesota Family Investment Program; CCAP = Child Care Assistance Program.

*“I think that the idea of rating [Parent Aware ratings] is a good idea to raise the quality of care for all the kids. So, that is evidence of success that there are people becoming rated and making changes to their practice.”*

## How were ELD programs involved?

Itasca had 21 center-based sites and 63 family child care programs (FCCs) for a total of 84 ELD program sites.<sup>4</sup> These 84 sites had 1,530 slots, 155 of which were vacant (10%).

- Fewer than one-fifth of these sites were rated in Parent Aware (17%). 13 sites were rated 3- or 4- stars, and 2 sites were rated 1- or 2-stars.
- The children with RTT-ELC Scholarships in Itasca were attending 24 ELD program sites. More than half of the 24 sites were high quality (63%, rated 3- or 4-star), 8% had 1-2 star rating, and about one-fourth were in the process of becoming rated (29%).

## The RTT-ELC Scholarship Evaluation Survey of ELD Programs

To understand the characteristics of the ELD programs and their participation in the RTT-ELC Scholarship program, online surveys were sent to ELD programs in each Zone or that served children with RTT-ELC Scholarship funds.

**Characteristics of the ELD programs.** In Itasca, a total of 73 ELD program surveys were sent and 36 (49%) were completed.<sup>5</sup>

- More than half of the teachers in the Itasca ELD programs had a Bachelor’s degree or higher (55%).
- Almost half of ELD programs in Itasca used a formal curriculum (47%).
- CCAP was the most common source of funding in ELD programs in Itasca (44% of ELD programs received CCAP funds), followed by regular tuition (19%).
- More than one-third of ELD programs that were rated in Parent Aware reported that the RTT-ELC Scholarships had a lot of influence over their decision to become rated (37%).

**Improved Access to High Quality ELD Programs.** ELD programs that reported serving RTT-ELC Scholarship recipients (10 ELD programs with 20 sites) said that the RTT-ELC Scholarships allowed them to provide higher quality programming and more comprehensive services to children.

- The most common way RTT-ELC Scholarships allowed programs to increase services was to provide more continuous care, followed by increasing the number of days each week and increasing the length of day. Less common supplemental services included providing summer programming, parent

<sup>4</sup> From the April 2013 data set from the National Association of Child Care Research and Referral Agencies (NACCRRAware).

<sup>5</sup> Some ELD programs have multiple sites (e.g., KOOTASCA Head Start and Invest Early), but completed a single survey for all sites, and are represented in this survey data as a single program.



*“Kids are in full-day programs now, where in the past they were in part-day programs.”*

support and education services, health or developmental screenings, and extended weekend or after-hours care.

- RTT-ELC Scholarship funds allowed 4 ELD programs<sup>6</sup> to open 35 additional slots to serve more high-needs children and/or improve the quality of their ELD programs.
- ELD programs also used the funds to improve the quality of classroom materials, provide professional development for teachers and other staff, and improve or increase the physical space.
- Many ELD programs that served children who receive RTT-ELC Scholarships reported that the RTT-ELC Scholarships allowed them to serve more families who would otherwise be unable to pay, families with parents who were not working, and more children with a disability or special need.

### **What impacts and successes of the RTT-ELC Scholarships did Itasca staff report?**

- RTT-ELC Scholarships provided relief to families through a reduction in financial and emotional stress.
- ELD programs also benefitted from greater continuity of care because consistent payment is guaranteed and they do not have to struggle to fill spots when families drop out due to lack of CCAP or MFIP coverage, which improves their relationship with families.
- Many ELD providers responded to RTT-ELC Scholarship availability by making changes to their practices and going to trainings as part of becoming Parent Aware-rated or improving their ratings.
- Many family child care providers have now chosen to become rated, building the capacity of the larger child care community.
- The availability of RTT-ELC Scholarships precipitated improved communication and the building of partnerships between ELD programs in the county.

### **How did school districts use their Title I PreK Incentives?**

In Itasca, four school districts used RTT-ELC Title I PreK Incentives in the 2012-13 school year: Deer River School District (Independent School District 317); Grand Rapids School District (Independent School District 318); Greenway School District (Independent School District 316); and Nashwauk-Keewatin School District (Independent School District 319).

In the 2012-13 school year, districts were able to serve additional children in high-quality ELD programs and also provide more comprehensive services for children needing extra support to improve their school readiness skills.

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<sup>6</sup> These four programs represent 14 different program sites.





- In the **Deer River School District**, the funds paid for opening one additional preschool classroom that served 17 children.
- In the **Grand Rapids School District**, the funds allowed the district to support an additional 51 children from their waiting list (two blended classrooms located at Itasca Community College and Cohasset Elementary School, one Invest Early classroom at Forest Lake Elementary School).
- In the **Greenway School District**, the funds allowed additional the district to open up one additional preschool classroom and served an additional 17 students that had been on a waiting list.
- In the **Nashwauk-Keewatin School District**, the preschool interventionist funded by the Title I PreK Incentives worked across three preschool classrooms at Keewatin Elementary School that served approximately 45 children.

## **What were the successes of implementation of the Title I PreK Incentives?**

As of spring 2013, Itasca staff noted that they have been able to use their Title I PreK Incentive funds to:

- Hire interventionists, allowing the programs to better implement the Response to Intervention (RTI) model<sup>7</sup> that is an ongoing part of their preschool programs.
- Expand the RTI model to three additional Itasca school districts.
- Serve more high needs children in high-quality ELD programs and use their paraprofessionals more effectively to provide comprehensive services.
- Have shorter waiting lists for preK programs, leading to more children entering kindergarten better prepared for school.
- Purchase additional curriculum and technology materials that have improved instruction.
- Support the transition between preschool and kindergarten for children by hiring a transition coach to develop a transition program.
- Improve the process for conducting assessments and using assessment data to inform instruction.

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*“I think success would look like having no waiting lists. All the kids that needed to be served were being served.”*

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<sup>7</sup> RTI is a framework for a school-wide approach to assessment, progress monitoring, and instruction that schools can use to “identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student’s responsiveness, and identify students with learning disabilities or other disabilities.” (For more information, see: <http://www.rti4success.org/>.)

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Full report available from the Minnesota Department of Education: Chen, W., Ferguson, K., & Spiker, D. (2013 October). *Evaluation for Minnesota’s Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge funds to promote access to high-quality programs: Year 1 annual report*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.