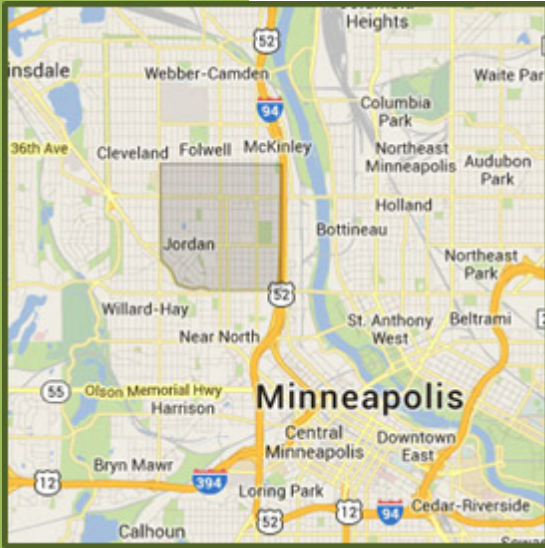


# Evaluation of Minnesota's Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge: Scholarships and Title I PreK Incentives

## Brief #2: Findings for the Northside Achievement Zone 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 ELD 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): the Northside Achievement Zone in Minneapolis (NAZ), the Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood in Saint Paul (SPPN), the White Earth Indian Reservation, and Itasca County,

This Brief #2 describes implementation and impacts in the NAZ for the period from January 2012 to September 2013.

### Early Childhood in the NAZ

Modeled after the Harlem Children's Zone, the Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ) is a 13- by 18-block area of north Minneapolis with concentrated programming and services. There are approximately 2,000 children under age 6 in the NAZ, with a large number (1,500) living in low-income households. The resources supporting early childhood development in the NAZ area before the start of the RTT-ELC grant included 9 licensed child care centers; 17 licensed family child care programs; ECFE and 10 School Readiness programs (called High Five and Three School) in Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS); developmental screenings through MPS, PICA Head Start, and Early Head Start; a crisis nursery for abuse and neglect prevention; public health home visiting, and parent education through the NAZ Family Academy (modeled after HCZ Baby College).

Coordinated early childhood planning in North Minneapolis began in 2005 with the "500 Under 5" Initiative. Leaders of this initiative built on these efforts and partnerships to form NAZ in 2010 with a goal of ending multigenerational poverty in the community. NAZ aims to do this by creating a single comprehensive system of



support for families that moves children through a “cradle-to-career” pipeline. The system is composed of a collection of partners, including parents, community-based organizations, schools, private and public funders, governmental organizations, and faith-based institutions. In 2012, the NAZ was awarded a federal Promise Neighborhood Implementation Grant and embarked on a process of rapid scale-up

### **How were RTT-ELC Scholarships implemented?**

NAZ began awarding RTT-ELC Scholarships in mid-December 2012, using a phased or tiered approach. First, NAZ Connectors (a “neighbor leader” often living in the community) referred already enrolled NAZ families who could benefit from stable ELD programming to NAZ Navigators. The Navigators assisted those families through the RTT-ELC Scholarship application process. Second, NAZ staff reached out to their partner ELD programs and asked them to identify potentially eligible children (i.e., area residents who were not yet enrolled in NAZ). NAZ staff contacted these families and those who wanted an RTT-ELC Scholarship were assigned to a NAZ Connector and then enrolled in NAZ.

NAZ targeted the RTT-ELC Scholarships toward children within 2 years of entering kindergarten, and their younger siblings. Consideration was also given to families with children under 3 when there were extenuating circumstances such as a socially isolated or mentally ill caregiver. This policy resulted in a higher uptake of RTT-ELC Scholarships per family and a higher proportion of infants and toddlers being served than was originally expected. Children receiving RTT-ELC Scholarships were also mostly referred to 3- and 4-star Parent Aware<sup>1</sup>-rated ELD programs that were also NAZ partners. This resulted in most RTT-ELC Scholarships being used for full-day, full-time center-based ELD programs that are relatively expensive compared with publicly funded School Readiness or Head Start programs.

These policies taken together mean that in the NAZ, RTT-ELC Scholarships were enabling very high risk children, most of whom were not previously in formal care, to receive high-quality early learning experiences. However, relatively fewer children were being served because most of their RTT-ELC Scholarship funds were not being blended with other funds (e.g., CCAP<sup>2</sup>) and because of the large proportion of younger children.

### **Who received RTT-ELC Scholarships?**

NAZ awarded RTT-ELC Scholarships to 127 children, 107 of whom (84%) consented to share their information with the RTT-ELC evaluation.

---

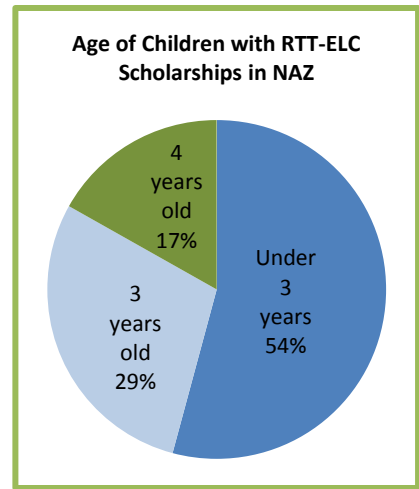
<sup>1</sup> Parent Aware is Minnesota’s Quality Rating Improvement System for ELD programs; <http://www.childcareawaremn.org/professionals-caregivers/parent-aware>

<sup>2</sup> CCAP = Child Care Assistance Program.



*“All the ELD centers except one are on our Action Team. ...So we have a relationship with these programs, they are signing on for our solution plan, which means they are saying they are doing things a certain way that we believe will help get our kids prepared for kindergarten. ...Because of that, we feel more confident that these kids are moving in the right direction.”*

- The majority of children receiving RTT-ELC Scholarships were African-American or African immigrants (78%) and spoke English as their primary language (90%). Slightly more than half were female (52%).
- More than half were under age 3 (54%), about one-fourth were 3 years old (29%), and one-sixth were 4 years old (17%).
- More than half of the primary caregivers of the children who received RTT-ELC Scholarships had not graduated from high school (53%).<sup>3</sup>
- Almost two-thirds of the children who received RTT-ELC Scholarships lived in single-parent households (62%).
- Almost one-third of families receiving RTT-ELC Scholarship funds used MFIP<sup>4</sup> (30%).



### How were ELD programs involved?

Within the geographic area of NAZ, there were 5 center-based ELD programs and 15 family child care programs (FCCs) for a total of 20 ELD programs located within the Zone boundaries.<sup>5</sup> These 20 ELD programs had 534 slots, 63 of which were vacant (12%). All vacancies were at FCCs.

- Most of these ELD programs were not yet rated in Parent Aware (85%). One ELD program was rated 3- or 4- stars, and two were rated 1- or 2-stars.
- The children with RTT-ELC Scholarships in NAZ were attending 9 ELD programs located outside of the Zone boundaries. All of these programs were high quality (100% rated 4-stars), and were NAZ partners.

### 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 NAZ, a total of 34 ELD program surveys were sent and 15 (44%) were completed.

<sup>3</sup> Data were missing for 21% of children.

<sup>4</sup> MFIP = Minnesota Family Investment Program.

<sup>5</sup> From the April 2013 data set from the National Association of Child Care Research and Referral Agencies (NACCRRAware).

---

*“The [RTT-ELC] scholarships are finding the right families and supporting them the right way. They create stability for the family.”*

---

- Almost half of the teachers in NAZ ELD programs had a Bachelor’s degree or higher (43%).
- CCAP was the most common source of funding for ELD programs in NAZ (53% of ELD programs received CCAP funds),<sup>6</sup> followed by cash donations from foundations or organizations (40%), and fundraising and individual donations (40%).
- Few 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 (3 programs, or 21%).

**Improved Access to High Quality ELD Programs.** The 7 ELD programs that reported serving RTT-ELC Scholarship recipients 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 ELD programs to increase services was to provide summer programming or parent support and education services. Other ELD programs provided more continuous care, increased the number of days of care each week, and increased the length of day.
- RTT-ELC Scholarship funds allowed 4 ELD programs to open a total of 48 additional slots to serve more high-needs children and/or improve the quality of their ELD programs.
- ELD programs also used the funds to provide professional development for teachers and other staff, improve the quality of classroom materials, and improve or increase the physical space.
- Many ELD programs that served children who received RTT-ELC Scholarships reported that the RTT-ELC Scholarships allowed them to serve more families who would otherwise be unable to pay, including families with parents who were not working or were homeless.

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

- In the NAZ, the biggest impact of the RTT-ELC Scholarships was that the program allowed children who were in inconsistent, informal care to now consistently attend licensed, high-quality ELD programs.
- Children spent time in enriching early learning environments and families were more stable and supported.

---

<sup>6</sup> Although NAZ RTT-ELC Scholarships targeted families who do not receive CCAP, the programs that serve those children may still receive CCAP funds from their other families.

- NAZ engaged over 100 of the highest risk young children and their families in a productive partnership. These families are now eligible for the full cradle-to-career support that NAZ strives to provide.
- RTT-ELC Scholarship funding allowed the larger child care ELD programs to serve increased numbers of high-risk families with greater confidence.
- RTT-ELC Scholarships helped improve the relationship between ELD program providers and the families receiving RTT-ELC Scholarships by allowing provider-family interactions to be about the children, rather than about payments.

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

In the NAZ, the Minneapolis Public Schools plan was targeted toward young children who will eventually attend NAZ anchor schools<sup>7</sup> (Ascension Catholic School, Elizabeth Hall International Elementary School, Seed Academy and Harvest Preparatory School, Nellie Stone Johnson Elementary School, Sojourner Truth Academy Elementary School, and W.I.S.E. Charter School). The plan included using the new Title I PreK Incentives funds to:

- Pay for a full-time transition to kindergarten teacher to coordinate/facilitate the transition into elementary school from early childhood education programs located in the NAZ
- Hold transition to kindergarten events/activities
- Fund a half-time parent educator/teacher to provide engagement and educational opportunities for family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) providers in the NAZ
- Purchase curriculum materials and materials for FFN providers
- Fund a full-time nurse or teacher to coordinate early childhood screening efforts including outreach, screening, and follow-up for children in the NAZ

Minneapolis Public Schools was awarded Title I PreK Incentives funds in January 2013. Because of the timing of the award, MPS was not able to hire permanent staff to fill the positions for the 2012-13 school year. In spring 2013, MPS began to use funds to purchase materials and to develop a plan to hire staff for the transition to kindergarten activities for the 2013-14 school year. It contracted with a person to begin conducting developmental screenings with medical providers and improve assessments and referrals. Starting in the 2013-14 school year, the funds will be used for staff salaries to continue to conduct screenings for children transitioning into kindergarten with planned outreach to FFN providers.

---

<sup>7</sup> Not all NAZ anchor schools are Minneapolis Public Schools; some are charter or private schools.



Because the new staff for the proposed Title I PreK Incentive activities were not in place by September 2013, none of the proposed activities had started. The activities will start by October–November 2013. These include

- The newly-hired transition to kindergarten coordinator will work on transition requirements and provide resources to children and families entering kindergarten in the NAZ anchor schools. This coordinator will also work in partnership with the anchor schools’ staff to support and promote effective kindergarten transitions.
- The half-time parent educator will provide educational opportunities for families and FFN providers in the NAZ. This person will work particularly closely with about 10 FFN providers, serving approximately 20 children, to support improvements in program quality, communication, training, and safety.
- The nurse hired to conduct developmental screenings in the NAZ will complete approximately 200 screenings by December 2013.

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

Interviewees in NAZ identified four significant expected impacts of the Title I PreK Incentives once fully implemented.

- First, the funds will allow the NAZ to conduct more screenings of young children.
- Second, the funds will enable school staff to provide more differentiated services to children (e.g., kindergarten transition supports to families).
- Third, the funds will allow MPS staff to focus more dedicated services on children who will attend the NAZ anchor schools (e.g., linking families to ELD programs, supporting transition to kindergarten).
- Fourth, the funds will enable staff to conduct additional outreach to ELD programs that previously have not been partner programs in the NAZ, thereby strengthening the connections between MPS and the early childhood community.

The contents of this report were developed under a contract from the Minnesota Department of Education to SRI International. This evaluation is funded by the Minnesota Department of Education using federal funding, CFDA 84.412A - Federal Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant. (Professional and Technical Services Contract No. E3701-3.4401; SRI Project EDD-21614).

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.



*“It really is part of a systems change approach for the whole community. ...It truly is being used as one tool of many to try to lift up a whole community and the children that are in that community for lifelong success.”*