

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

## Brief #4: Findings for White Earth Nation 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 #4 describes implementation and impacts in White Earth Nation for the period from January 2012 to September 2013.

### Early Childhood in White Earth

The White Earth Transformation Zone consists of the White Earth (Nation) Reservation, which is located in northwestern Minnesota and encompasses all or part of Mahnomon, Becker, and Clearwater Counties. White Earth had a number of resources in place supporting early childhood development before the start of the RTT-ELC grant. These included 2 tribally licensed child care centers, 14 tribally-licensed family child care, 12 county-licensed family child cares, a parent mentor program, literacy mentors, nurse home visitors, two Head Start programs (White Earth and Mahube Head Start, Early Head Start), developmental screening, school-based School Readiness programs (four of the nine school districts), parenting workshops, Bemidji Regional Interdistrict Council (BRIC) special education program, and various events and resource guides available to the community.

The White Earth Child Care/Early Childhood Program (WECC/ECP) serves as a resource hub for many of the early childhood initiatives active on the reservation and also administers the RTT-ELC Scholarships. The White Earth Nation/Home Health Agency has a tribal home visiting grant (Title V Maternal Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting) to provide evidence-based home visiting for high-need families. The Home Health Agency provides funding for Parent Mentors and collaborates with the WECC/ECP to provide early childhood resources to families through home visiting.



*“The number one success is the increase of quality in the care. ... We have increased slots. ... It has strengthened the relationship between providers and their families.”*

Parent Mentors assist in connecting RTT-ELC Scholarship families with high-quality ELD programs, as well as provide screening and other critical services.

## How were RTT-ELC Scholarships implemented?

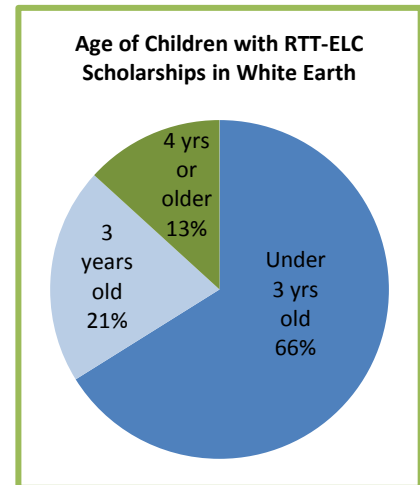
WECC/ECP began awarding RTT-ELC Scholarships in November 2012. To empower parents and build capacity among families, RTT-ELC Scholarship use was linked with parent education. To receive RTT-ELC Scholarships, parents agreed to work with a parent mentor and attend two parent (child development) trainings per year. Parent trainings focus, for instance, on child development, brain development research, education and parent engagement. Trainings are sponsored by the WECC/ECP and RTT-ELC Scholarship Program. The WECC/ECP advertised availability of RTT-ELC Scholarships to families on the White Earth Reservation. Applications were distributed on a first-come, first-served basis during the early phases of implementation but a ranking (point) system has since been enacted to determine priority. Due to limited funding and the demand, a waiting list has been initiated for RTT-ELC scholarships.

The WECC/ECP works closely with state CCAP<sup>1</sup> and tribal child care assistance programs to ensure that subsidies are used first to pay for ELD program costs, and the remainder was then covered using RTT-ELC Scholarship funds. A large number of RTT-ELC Scholarships in White Earth were used in licensed family child care ELD programs, while other RTT-ELC Scholarships were used in licensed child care ELD centers and used for additional hours in Head Start and school-based preschool programs.

## Who received RTT-ELC Scholarships?

White Earth awarded RTT-ELC Scholarships to 121 children.

- Two-thirds of the children receiving RTT-ELC Scholarships were under age 3<sup>2</sup> (66%), two-thirds were American Indian or Alaskan Native (64%), about one-fourth (26%) were biracial (26%), and all spoke English as their primary language (100%). Slightly more than half were male (56%).
- More than half of all children (59%) receiving RTT-ELC Scholarships were new to ELD programming.
- More than half of the primary caregivers of the children who received RTT-ELC Scholarships had attended some college classes or had an Associate's



<sup>1</sup> CCAP = Child Care Assistance Program

<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.



degree (58%). Two-thirds of parents/guardians were employed full-time or part-time (64%).

- More than half of the children who received RTT-ELC Scholarships lived in single-parent households (54%). One-fifth of the children lived with other relatives or foster families (20%).
- Among families receiving RTT-ELC Scholarship funds, use of CCAP was more common than use of MFIP (40% compared with 22%).<sup>3</sup>

## How were ELD programs involved?

White Earth had 7 center-based sites and 24 family child care programs (FCCs) for a total of 31 ELD program sites.<sup>4</sup> These 31 ELD programs had 471 slots, only 6 of which were vacant (1%).

- Almost half of these sites were rated in Parent Aware<sup>5</sup> (48%). 14 sites were rated 3- or 4- stars, and 1 site was rated 1- or 2-stars.
- The children with RTT-ELC Scholarships in White Earth were attending 11 ELD program sites. Seven of these sites were high quality (64%, rated 3- or 4-star), none had 1-2 star rating, and four were in the process of becoming rated (36%).

## 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 White Earth, 30 ELD program surveys were sent and 19 were completed (63%). Survey responses illustrate the need for additional ELD programs and increased support for existing programs.

- About one-third of the teachers in the White Earth ELD programs had a Bachelor's degree or higher (38%), while 30% had an Associate's degree, and 22% had graduated high school or received a GED. Most programs were not accredited (95%).
- Almost all ELD programs had a waitlist (89%).
- CCAP was the most common source of funding for ELD programs in White Earth (79% of programs received CCAP funds), followed by regular tuition and cash grants or cash donations from foundations or other organizations (16% each).
- Almost half 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 (44%).

<sup>3</sup> CCAP includes state and tribal CCAP programs. MFIP = Minnesota Family Investment Program.

<sup>4</sup> From the April 2013 data set from the National Association of Child Care Research and Referral Agencies (NACCRRAware). This includes both tribally-licensed and county-licensed ELD programs.

<sup>5</sup> Parent Aware is Minnesota's Quality Rating Improvement System for ELD programs; <http://www.childcareawaremn.org/professionals-caregivers/parent-aware>



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*“Providers who were not Parent Aware-rated sites said they wanted to get rated and wanted to be a part of it. It has pushed the movement.”*

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*“We would have a few more preschools open up in our community.”*

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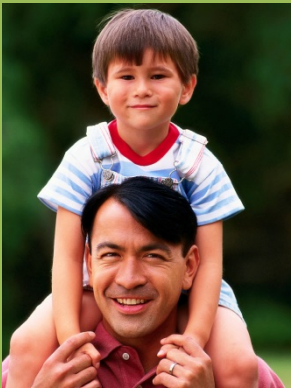
**Improved Access to High Quality ELD Programs.** The 14 ELD programs that reported serving RTT-ELC Scholarship recipients said that the RTT-ELC Scholarships allowed them to provide higher quality programming and more comprehensive services to children.

- The most common way RTT-ELC Scholarships allowed programs to increase services was to provide parent support and education services, followed by increasing the number of days of care a child receives each week. Less common supplemental services included increasing the length of day and providing more continuous care, summer programming, or health or developmental screenings.
- RTT-ELC Scholarship funds allowed 4 ELD programs to open 7 additional preschool or child care slots.
- 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 RTT-ELC Scholarship recipients 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 White Earth staff report?**

#### **For Children and Families...**

- RTT-ELC Scholarships were increasing continuity of care for the significant proportion of children who receive tribal CCAP subsidies.
- RTT-ELC Scholarships were also allowing a significant number of children who previously were in informal care settings to experience high-quality ELD programming.
- White Earth interviewees estimated that, as of May 2013, about half of children awarded RTT-ELC Scholarships were not previously attending a licensed ELD program. Once attending, several of these children were identified as needing further developmental screening and possibly more specialized services; this was considered to be a success of the RTT-ELC Scholarship program.
- Parental job turnover decreased because they were no longer concerned about their children’s care situations. Parents could work longer hours and accept jobs they otherwise would not have been able to accept.
- A number of older kinship care providers (e.g., grandmothers and great-grandmothers) were given a reprieve because RTT-ELC Scholarships enabled children they were caring for to attend licensed ELD programs.
- Linking RTT-ELC Scholarships with parent mentoring and workshop attendance also incentivized parents to accept these types of services.





*“Success in the community would be parents understanding how to take an active role in the education and care of their kids and see, down the road, them going to school conferences for their kids.”*

Interviewees expected that this increased parent education will benefit families in White Earth in the long term.

### **For ELD Programs...**

- The quality of ELD programming in the community improved because ELD programs had undergone the Parent Aware rating process. The availability of RTT-ELC Scholarships acted as a direct incentive for ELD programs to achieve 3- or 4-star status.
- Serving children with RTT-ELC Scholarships meant consistent pay for providers, and providers were thus able to reinvest that money in their ELD programs and the economy.

### **For Early Childhood Systems...**

- The RTT-ELC grant introduced new resources to the community by providing some supplemental funding for tribal staff to attend Parent Aware train-the-trainer classes. These tribal staff could then provide training to local child care providers who were aiming to achieve 3- or 4-star Parent Aware status. Approved training topics included the child care environment, child behavior, curriculum, and assessments.
- The parent training required as part of being awarded a RTT-ELC Scholarship helped increase parents’ awareness of what constitutes high-quality ELD programming and how to interpret the Parent Aware rating system. The relationship between ELD providers and parents has also strengthened because parents’ new knowledge about child development learned through mentorship and trainings empowers them to discuss their child’s progress with the ELD program staff.

### **Title I PreK Incentives in White Earth**

By September 2013, four of eight eligible school districts in White Earth (Bagley School District, Detroit Lakes School District, Fosston School District, and Waubun-Ogema-White Earth School District) had submitted applications to MDE to use Title I PreK Incentives and obtained approval.<sup>6</sup> Because of the delays in applying for Title I PreK Incentives, the evaluation team will conduct initial interviews with school district staff in November 2013 to learn more about their decision-making, plans, and the challenges they faced during the application process. This information will be included in the next Annual Report.

<sup>6</sup> These four school districts had been given small start-up grants during the 2012-13 school year to purchase materials and improve classroom spaces in preparation for submitting applications for Title I PreK Incentives for the next school year.

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.

