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# Pre-Kindergarten Exploratory Allowances Project

## Summary of Interim Report

This fact sheet summarizes the early implementation of the Pre-Kindergarten Exploratory Allowances Project, including what has been learned thus far about its effects on children, families, early care and education (ECE) programs, and the targeted communities. The findings are based on a review of project documents, discussions between the evaluation team and the implementation team over the past year, quarterly reports of implementation progress, preliminary data about participants, and preliminary data about use of funds.<sup>1</sup>



## What is the Pre-Kindergarten Exploratory Allowances Project?

- Legislation was passed during Minnesota's 2007 legislative session to provide \$6 million in public funding to promote school readiness for children from low-income families. In this project, funds, referred to as allowances, are provided to parents to pay for high-quality early care and education (ECE) programs.<sup>2</sup>
- Three grantees were identified to administer the Pre-K allowances:
  - The City of Saint Paul with a subcontract to Resources for Child Caring (RCC) for Saint Paul
  - Hennepin County for North Minneapolis and Wayzata
  - Blue Earth County with a subcontract to Minnesota Valley Action Council (MVAC) for Blue Earth and Nicollet counties
- The projected number of allowances to be awarded was based on the percentage of total eligible children in the area.

## How is implementation progressing as of September 2008?

- Applications for allowances have been reviewed and approved for 913 children.
  - The majority of allowances were distributed in Saint Paul (65%).
  - About one-fourth (23%) were distributed in Hennepin County.
  - 12% were distributed in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties.
- Only 58% of the allowances funds had been dispersed to 49 programs as funds are not dispersed until children enroll in and attend the ECE program that the parent has selected.

<sup>1</sup> SRI International developed an evaluation plan in consultation with staff from the Center for Early Education and Development (CEED) at the University of Minnesota, DHS and MDE, and MELF. The Pre-K Allowances Project is not part of the MELF-funded portfolio of programs. MELF only funds the evaluation of the Pre-K Allowances Project. The Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship Program and its evaluation are funded by MELF. The evaluation of the Pre-K Allowances Project does not address the effects of programs on child developmental or school readiness outcomes whereas the Scholarship Program evaluation design includes the assessment of children's school readiness outcomes.

<sup>2</sup> The legislative session in 2008 reduced the funding for FY 2009 by \$330,000. Allowances may be awarded for up to 18 months or until the child enters kindergarten. Awards may not exceed \$4,000 in any 12-month period.



Questions to be answered in the final report include:

- Who are the children who receive the allowances (child and family characteristics)?
- What ECE programs and services do children access with their allowances, and do the allowances change what programs they use?
- How are the allowances used with other funding sources to increase the access and/or quality of ECE programs in which children participate?
- Are children who receive allowances using them to access high-quality ECE programs?



What programs are children attending using allowances funds?

- Nearly half of the children (46%) are at center-based child care programs.
- About one-third (35%) are using their allowance funds at Head Start.
- Nearly one-fifth of the children (17%) are attending school-based pre-kindergarten programs.
- Very few of the children (2%) are using their allowances at family child care programs.
- Data collected from the grantees' databases show that the majority of participants report that English is their home language.
  - In Hennepin county and Saint Paul, the next largest group speaks Hmong as their home language (13% and 9%, respectively).
  - The next largest group in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties report Spanish as their home language (7%).

What did we learn from the grantees and administrative staff at DHS and MDE?

- Overall, the interview respondents saw the ultimate goal of the allowances project as increasing school readiness of the participating children in the targeted communities.
- Respondents noted that there was uncertainty about whether the allowances were for the programs to improve quality or the families to increase access to high-quality ECE programs. Allowances were seen as combining a child-based and program-based funding mechanism in a single funding model.
- Respondents commented that there is widespread, positive community response to the allowances program.
- Respondents noted that the start-up activities for the allowances project have taken longer than many people thought they would take. It took at least six months to distribute the funds in the areas; and the three grantee contracts with DHS were not finalized until February 2008.



What are the next steps?

SRI staff will continue to collect data from parents, ECE programs, and the grantees that will answer the evaluation questions in more detail. The final report will include these data and be completed in September 2009.

