



Summary MELF Research Findings May 2011

Over the last several months, the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF) has been steadily releasing a series of evaluations of various early education approaches it has been piloting over the last three years. The evaluations, taken as a whole, show a clear path for Minnesota to follow.

Results from studies conducted by MELF's outside evaluators provide clear evidence indicating Parent Aware Ratings and scholarships are a powerful combination to improve school readiness. Research findings show that MELF and its partners have identified an efficient way to move low income kids into high quality early education, and help those kids make more progress than expected in language, literacy and numeracy.

Evaluation Findings

MELF retained a number of independent researchers to evaluate its pilots, principally Child Trends, the University of Minnesota's Center for Early Education and Development, SRI International, and Wilder Research. All MELF research reports are available at www.melf.us, but these are among the more significant findings:

- **KIDS IN RATED PROGRAMS MAKING STRONG GAINS.** Children in highly rated programs showed significant gains in expressive and receptive vocabulary, phonological awareness, print knowledge and social competence.
- **LOW INCOME KIDS MAKE GREATER GAINS.** In terms of language and literacy measures, low-income children in rated programs made greater progress than the full sample of children.
- **22,000 CHILDREN IN PROGRAMS WITH COMMITMENT TO QUALITY.** At least 22,000 Minnesota kids, both low income and non-low income, are served in programs with Parent Aware ratings.
- **LOW INCOME KIDS MOVED INTO PROVEN QUALITY.** The coupling of the Parent Aware Ratings system and the scholarship program greatly increased low income kids' access to high-quality programs. Prior to receiving a scholarship, the majority of children were being cared for in unlicensed care (57%). After receiving a scholarship, all children were attending a programs that could prove, thanks to the Ratings, that they offered high quality learning education.
- **RATINGS EFFECTIVELY CONVINCE PROVIDERS TO IMPROVE QUALITY.** The Ratings and the rewards associated with them are successfully convincing providers to improve their early education quality. Over a two year period in St. Paul, the number of 3- and 4-star rated programs in and near the pilot area increased more

than 55 percent. Throughout the pilot areas, the number of rated providers increased each year the Ratings were in use. Finally, 63% of fully rated providers improved their ratings the second time they sought ratings.

- **SCHOLARSHIP SUPPORTS CONTINUITY OF CARE.** 93% of providers viewed the scholarships as helping children stay enrolled in high-quality programs (compared to 70% for traditional government assistance).
- **SCHOLARSHIPS REDUCE PAPERWORK FOR PROVIDERS.** Almost all (95%) of providers caring for families with scholarships said that the paperwork and administrative processes associated with scholarships were minimally disruptive to services, compared 64% who said that of traditional government assistance (Child Care Assistance Program, or CCAP).
- **RATED PROVIDERS USING GRANTS TO IMPROVE QUALITY.** Quality grant funds and quality improvement coaches are available to providers who volunteer to be rated and are attempting to improve their quality rating. These funds were used for improving the learning environment (58%), purchasing curriculum and assessment tools (33%), and covering the tuition for non-scholarship children (21%).
- **RATED PROVIDERS SAY PROGRAM HELPED THEM.** Parent Aware is a voluntary program, so no program ever has to be rated. But among those who have volunteered to be rated, 92% say that the Parent Aware program improved their quality, and over time more are volunteering (over 400 so far).
- **RATED PROVIDERS GAIN STARS.** Licensed family child care providers gained a full star upon re-rating, while center-based programs saw a one-half star improvement.
- **TEACHING MATERIALS IMPROVEMENT NEEDED MOST.** Rated programs were doing best in implementing best practices in the “Family Partnerships” category, and had the most work to do in the “Teaching Materials and Strategies” category.
- **ADS SPIKED ONLINE RATINGS USE, BUT STEADY PROMOTION NEEDED.** About 40,000 unique visitors visited the Parent Aware Ratings website, and many used the ratings to better inform their shopping. Visitors spiked by about 300% when a brief advertising campaign was piloted. However, only about 25% of parents with a child in a rated program had heard of Parent Aware, indicating that a sustained marketing effort is needed to increase the visibility of the ratings.

Background : The MELF Pilots

Only about half of Minnesota children are currently prepared for kindergarten, and too many never catch up. For this reason, MELF has spent the past three years piloting a number of approaches for improving the quality of early education quality in a wide variety of child care settings. The pilots took place in St. Paul, Minneapolis, Wayzata and Nicollet and Blue Earth Counties.

Parent Aware Ratings. The centerpiece of the MELF reforms are the Parent Aware Ratings, which measure child care providers' use of evidence-based best practices for preparing children for kindergarten. Examples of some of the best practices tracked are regular communication with parents, tracking each child's progress in learning, using evidence-based teaching materials and strategies, and improving teacher training and education. The ratings are voluntary. To encourage participation, providers can receive quality improvement grants and coaches, as well as the ultimate reward of public and private pay customers. More background is available at parentawareratings.org.

The Parent Aware rating system is a versatile reform tool. For parents, ratings serve as a sort of Consumer Reports-type resource to inform their child care shopping. For providers, the rating system serves as a clear quality improvement blueprint. For taxpayers, ratings could serve as a warrantee to ensure tax dollars don't flow providers who may not be using school readiness best practices. A video describing Parent Aware Ratings and quality improvement is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQj-zDL7GpU>.

Scholarships. Combined with Parent Aware ratings, MELF's privately-funded scholarship program for low-income children in Saint Paul was another central component of MELF's work to test cost-effective paths toward school readiness. The MELF scholarships are a flexible tool to help low-income children access high quality care. Because scholarships can only be used with providers who have high Parent Aware Ratings, they also serve as a reward for providers who volunteer to get rated and improve their quality.

Background: MELF's Policy Recommendations To The Legislature

MELF has proposed expanding many of the piloted reforms statewide over the next three years, and that proposal is under review by the Minnesota State Legislature this year. As introduced, the MELF-backed legislation (SF 339 and HF 669) is not dependent on new revenue.

Background: The Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF)

MELF was formed in 2006 and will, as originally planned, sunset later this year. The leaders of the following organizations are represented on the MELF Board: Best Buy Co., Inc., Taylor Corporation, Liberty Diversified International, Robins, Kaplan, Miller and Ciresi L.L.P., Ecolab Inc., Interim Solutions, University of Minnesota, UnitedHealthCare, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota, Cargill Inc., Cargill Foundation, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, CNote Management, McKnight Foundation, and the Minnesota Business Partnership.

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