

Getting kids kindergarten-ready:

A profile of the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation

By Ericca Maas

SINCE WORLD WAR II, Minnesota has enjoyed a thriving economy grounded in a well-educated, highly skilled workforce.¹ However, low levels of school readiness among the state's young children threaten to leave a generation of Minnesotans ill-prepared for achievement in school, life and careers. Ultimately, a widespread lack of school readiness could threaten Minnesota's ability to compete in the global marketplace.

Concerns over the state's future economic competitiveness have helped inspire the formation of the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF). The mission of MELF is to recommend to policymakers cost-effective strategies for preparing at-risk children to succeed in school. To accomplish its mission, MELF is supporting and evaluating a series of initiatives aimed at uncovering the most well-integrated, cost-effective system for preparing Minnesota's at-risk children for kindergarten.

The birth of MELF

The concept behind MELF took root in 2003 following the release of a study by Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis researchers Art Rolnick and Rob Grunewald.² Their study demonstrated that investments in high-quality early education yield a high public return in terms of lower educational costs, crime rates

and social service expenses. The study also found that the highest returns came from investments in at-risk children.³ According to Rolnick and Grunewald, "high quality" early education is characterized by well-trained teachers, low child-to-teacher ratios and the use of a research-based curriculum.

Influenced by the study's central finding that investments in early childhood education are a cost-effective form of economic development, a group of Minnesota business leaders convened to develop a strategy for investing wisely in early childhood education. The group, now called Minnesota Business for Early Learning (MnBEL), includes senior executives and other representatives from the state's business community.

In December 2004, the group issued a compelling report documenting a gap in school preparation: Only about half of the kids arriving in Minnesota kindergarten classrooms were prepared to succeed. Many of the underprepared kids were from families with low incomes or limited educational backgrounds.⁴ The report concluded that lagging school preparedness could threaten the continuing competitiveness of Minnesota businesses and jeopardize the state's high quality of life.

While the business leaders had ample evidence to support the case for bringing high-quality early childhood services to Minnesota's children, they had much

less information about how to deliver such services affordably and on a large scale. So MnBEL Chair Al Stroucken, who served as CEO of St. Paul-based H.B. Fuller Company at the time, and other group members designed a plan to learn more. The plan, which was issued as part of the group's December 2004 report, called for business and community leaders to unite around a "market-based, incentive-oriented strategy for delivering high-quality early childhood development experiences."⁵ The strategy centered on creating a foundation to conduct a demonstration and testing phase. Early childhood education advocates and the Minnesota State Legislature responded by establishing MELF in 2005.

A suite of initiatives

As described by MELF Executive Director Duane Benson, MELF is "an R&D engine for early learning in Minnesota." The foundation's board of directors includes CEOs from Cargill, Best Buy and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota. Its staff is raising money to reach a \$30 million fundraising goal.

MELF plans to gather information over a five-year period (2007–2011) and then issue a set of recommendations about how to create the most well-integrated, cost-effective system to prepare at-risk children for kindergarten.

MELF is currently completing a project-planning phase and is beginning to implement a suite of information-gathering initiatives. Through its initiatives, MELF will explore how to best prepare at-risk children for school and how to engage and empower their parents. MELF will also evaluate the effectiveness of various program models and determine the best way to measure children's experiences. MELF will look at both the supply side and demand side of the market for early childhood education by examining how to optimize available openings in quality programs and help families choose quality programs.

The MELF initiatives fall under two categories: Innovation Projects and Comprehensive Scalable Community Projects. All of the projects will be rigorously evaluated and are designed to address the information, quality and access gaps to which MELF has attributed Minnesota's low levels of school readiness. However, the two project categories differ in scale and scope.⁶

Innovation Projects

On an ongoing basis, MELF will target small "innovation grants" to early childhood development programs that either use promising strategies that haven't yet been researched or that meet the need of an underserved population or geography. To date, MELF is funding 12 of these Innovation Projects. Among other issues, the projects explore serving children with special needs, serving children from homes where English is not the primary language, and determining the optimal dosage (total hours of education per week) to make children school-ready.

Comprehensive Scalable Community Projects

MELF's largest initiatives will begin in January 2008. Known as the Comprehensive Scalable Community (CSC) Projects, these site-based initiatives will take place in a diverse set of geographies: the City of St. Paul, a school district in western Hennepin County, areas of North Minneapolis and an area encompassed by Blue Earth and Nicollet counties in southern Minnesota.

Through the CSC Projects, MELF will test and evaluate whether specific approaches to delivering high-quality early childhood development services in a community result in the outcomes MELF is working to achieve and whether those projects are "scalable," or can be delivered across geographies and to large numbers of children easily and with similar results. The outcomes MELF is working toward include increased parent engagement; better availability, quality, and stability of programs; and higher percentages of school-ready kids. MELF will provide some financial and logistical support, but local organizations and partnerships will administer each project.

The look of the site-based initiatives will vary by geography. However, projects will follow a similar approach that involves developing partnerships, working to ensure that a system of high-quality programs is in place, and encouraging coordination between public and private entities. In addition, each initiative will include a pilot of Parent Aware, a MELF-sponsored program that rates early childhood education providers and offers resources to help providers improve the quality of their services. (For more on the Parent Aware program, see the sidebar on page 4.) Details of the four CSC Projects follow.

St. Paul. The St. Paul site-based initiative is considered a centerpiece of MELF's work. Known as the St. Paul Early Childhood Scholarship Program (SPECSP), the initiative is a four-year, \$15 million project that MELF will conduct in collaboration with the City of St. Paul, St. Paul-Ramsey County Department of Public Health, and Resources for Child Caring.

The SPECSP is based on a scholarship model developed by Minneapolis Fed economists Rolnick and Grunewald.⁷ It will provide participating families with information and support to help them choose high-quality early care and education settings. It will also deliver two-year scholarships to cover the cost of attending such a program.

The SPECSP will be available to low-income families living in St. Paul's North End and Frogtown neighborhoods who have children aged prenatal to five years. Participating families will receive ongoing visits from a family mentor who will provide information on choosing quality early care and education. Mentors will also provide other support tailored to individual family needs. When a participating child is three, families will have access to a two-year scholarship of up to \$13,000 per year.

Families may use their scholarship in early childhood care and education settings that meet one or more of several predetermined quality criteria, including a high Parent Aware rating. Families may use their scholarships at any qualified early care and education program in the seven-county Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area. The SPECSP plans to reach approximately 1,200 children. MELF hopes the scholarship initiative will empower families to choose the programs that best meet their needs. Another hope for the scholarship initiative is to increase family access to and stability in high-quality programs.

Western Hennepin County. The Caring for Kids Initiative (CfKI), which covers the Wayzata Public School District in western Hennepin County, will also offer scholarships—although on a smaller scale—as part of an effort to get low-income children in the community ready for school. The CfKI is a partnership of Interfaith Outreach & Community Partners, Kids Care Connection and the Wayzata Public Schools Family Learning Center that will provide access to family support and quality early childhood education.

While Wayzata and several other suburbs west of the Twin Cities are known as relatively affluent communities, many low-income families have chosen to make the area their home. The number of students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunches has almost doubled in the Wayzata Public School District between 2001 and 2006. The CfKI will collaborate with early care and education providers, social service agencies, and other organizations to identify low-income and at-risk families in the coverage area and provide them with a variety of supports, including family mentoring and scholarships. The CfKI is also developing a Quality Provider Network that will include providers with high Parent Aware ratings. The network will offer its members training in early literacy, school-readiness curricula and child assessment.

North Minneapolis. Five Hundred Under Five (FHU5) is an effort to identify 500 children under age five in two North Minneapolis areas, learn about their lives and help them enter kindergarten ready to learn. The initiative is a collaboration among the Folwell Center for Urban Initiatives, Hennepin County, the Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board and the University of Minnesota Center for Early Education and Development (CEED).

FHU5 has three primary goals: engage parents early and often in their child's school readiness, retain and expand high-quality early childhood education settings and stabilize children in high-quality early childhood education settings. On the provider side, FHU5 will offer support to increase program quality, both in formal settings (e.g., childcare centers, preschools, and licensed family programs) and informal "family, friend, and neighbor" settings. On the family side, the project will conduct trust-building activities to engage and empower parents around school-readiness issues. FHU5 will use Parent Aware to help parents locate quality childcare arrangements. It will also make transition funds available so families can keep their children in quality childcare settings when government assistance is no longer available.

In a sense, FHU5 is a companion project to the Wayzata-based initiative described above. MELF hopes to use the information gathered through the CfKI and FHU5 projects to learn about the differences in school-readiness needs between low-income children who live

in suburban settings and low-income children who live in urban areas that have high concentrations of poverty.

Blue Earth and Nicollet counties. In the rural counties of Blue Earth and Nicollet in southern Minnesota, MELF has teamed up with area businesses and local educators at the elementary, secondary and post-secondary levels to create a pilot program that will address school-readiness issues. Participating businesses include Taylor Corporation, Midwest Wireless and Coughlan Companies. As of September 2007, MELF and its local partners have determined that the Blue Earth/Nicollet pilot will feature the Parent Aware rating system and a scholarship program. Further details of the pilot are in development.

Putting Minnesota in the spotlight

MELF will conduct rigorous evaluations of all funded initiatives to determine the impact and cost effectiveness of each strategy. The University of Minnesota CEED will coordinate the evaluations. The center will also develop a taxonomy of effective early childhood development practices and a model for measuring children's experiences.

Project evaluations will provide information about the challenges of implementing and coordinating each project. They will also include summary findings that document each project's impact on school readiness. The cumulative findings of the evaluations will be rolled into a set of recommendations MELF plans to issue to the Minnesota State Legislature in 2011. Policy-minded folks inside and outside of Minnesota are watching MELF's work closely. It is possible that these projects will put Minnesota in the spotlight as a leader in early childhood education.

Parent Aware offers ratings and resources to improve child development programs

Parent Aware, a project of the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF), the Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network and the Minnesota Department of Human Services, is designed to help MELF achieve its goals of increasing the level of parental engagement in early childhood education and the availability of high-quality early childhood development settings. The program will provide families with the information they need to choose appropriate, effective early care and education services. It will also offer providers support and incentives to increase the quality of their services.

Early care and education programs in a given geography will volunteer to participate in Parent Aware. Programs will then be rated on a scale of 1 to 4, 1 being the lowest and 4 the highest, based on indicators of health and safety, child progress, family partnerships, curriculum and instruction, and professional development. Program ratings will be made available to parents through a variety of outlets. Based on the ratings they receive, programs will be eligible for a combination of support and incentives to improve quality.

The support available through Parent Aware is designed to help programs that receive a rating of 1 or 2 increase the quality of their services. Support may include consultation services, educational opportunities for program staff, business training, or curriculum and assessment assistance. Programs that receive a rating of 3 or 4 will be eligible for an infusion of resources to help increase the number of openings or make other improvements.

¹ For a detailed discussion of Minnesota's post-World War II prosperity, see Terry Fitzgerald, "Business Cycles and Long-Term Growth: Lessons from Minnesota," *The Region*, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, June 2003.

² "Early Childhood Development: Economic Development with a High Public Return," *fedgazette*, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, March 2003.

³ Per Rolnick and Grunewald, conditions that indicate whether a child is "at-risk" include low family income, violence or neglect in the home, low parent education levels, low birth weight and parent chemical addiction.

⁴ *Winning Start: A Plan for Investing Wisely in Early Childhood Development*, Minnesota School Readiness Business Advisory Council Policy Task Force, December 2004. Available at www.mnbel.org.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *The Minnesota Early Learning Foundation 2006 Progress Report and Catalog of Initiatives* was consulted for information on the organization's history, goals and projects. This document is available at www.melf.us.

⁷ Rolnick and Grunewald, "A Proposal for Achieving High Returns on Early Childhood Development," Working Paper, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, March 2006. Available at www.minneapolisfed.org/research/studies/earlychild/highreturn.pdf