

Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship Program

Summary of Issue Brief 1: *Early Implementation in Year 1*

This fact sheet describes the early implementation of the Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship Program. The summary includes what has been learned thus far about its effects on children, families, early care and education (ECE) programs, and the targeted communities in Saint Paul, Minnesota. The findings are based on review of project documents; interactions between the evaluation team and the implementation team over the past year; interviews conducted in June 2008 by SRI staff with Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF) developers and funders, members of the state legislature, implementation team members, and staff from agencies and programs who are implementing the scholarship program;¹ and two focus groups with parents of children who have enrolled in the scholarship program.



What is the Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship Program model?

The model includes three major interventions.

- **Parent mentoring**, which uses home visiting to provide parents with information about the characteristics and benefits of high-quality early care and education (ECE) programs.
 - Mentoring leads to parent empowerment—low-income parents are given information that can help them make good choices about how best to support their children's early learning and school readiness.
- **Scholarships** for low-income families to use to pay for high-quality ECE programs for their preschool children.
 - Scholarships lead to access to markets—low-income families are given the financial resources that will allow them to access high-quality ECE programs for their children.
 - If incentives to programs are increased, the market will respond (i.e., with increases in program supply and quality).
- **Implementation of an ECE program quality rating system** (called Parent Aware) to rate and monitor ECE program quality.
 - A rating system leads to increased accountability—ECE programs are accountable to produce positive results (e.g., get children ready to be successful in school because they have attended high-quality ECE programs).

Eligible families and children in the Thomas-Dale and North End neighborhoods in Saint Paul, Minnesota apply to receive scholarships for their children to use to attend high-quality ECE programs, rated as high-quality by Parent Aware.

How is implementation progressing?

As of July 2008, a total of 382 children are participating. Of those:

- 194 children met eligibility requirements to receive scholarships in 2008.
- Another 63 children have met eligibility requirements and will be 3 years old in 2009.
- A total of 125 infants have approved applications to receive parent mentoring and scholarships, eligible to enroll in ECE programs in 2010 ($n = 78$) or 2011 ($n = 47$).

Approximately 50% of the children enrolled are English language learners.



What did we learn from the interviews?

- The majority of respondents described the ultimate goal of the Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship Program as promoting school readiness in children from low-income families.
- Almost all respondents referred to collaboration in some form as the key to successful implementation, and they identified it as the main contributing factor to the accomplishments achieved so far.
- As the program continues to be implemented, a key issue is the impact of the duration of the project. Challenges include:
 - Will ECE programs locate in the targeted communities or expand their existing facilities or staff when there is no guarantee that the scholarship funds will continue beyond 2011?
 - Are the planned 4 years for the pilot project long enough for supply to increase? Are 4 years long enough for programs to attain high quality if they are not yet of high quality?
 - Are 4 years long enough for parents to create demand for the high-quality programs?
 - Is a pilot project of the scholarship model on a short time frame and in a limited geographic area a too conservative or limited test of a model that emphasizes the operation of “market forces”?



What do parents say about the scholarship program?

- Parents learned about the scholarship program in several different ways, but most learned about it from a caseworker.
- The majority of parents reported that they wanted their children to get a good education, to go to preschool, and to learn English.
- Some parents commented that their interest in participating in the scholarship program was the provision of funds that enable them to access care of any kind.
- Parents described that the different kinds of support and information they received from parent mentors was helpful (e.g., health and safety information, parenting information, referrals, locating programs).
- A few parents had enrolled their children in early education programs, and they cited several reasons for their choices, both educational and logistical.
- None of the parents reported that they had heard of Parent Aware. When the facilitator briefly described the Parent Aware rating system, it was clear that the parents wanted more information about Parent Aware.
- Across both groups, parents commented that transportation is a barrier to accessing early education programs.



What are the next steps?

The information from the brief is being used to inform the continuing implementation of the project.

