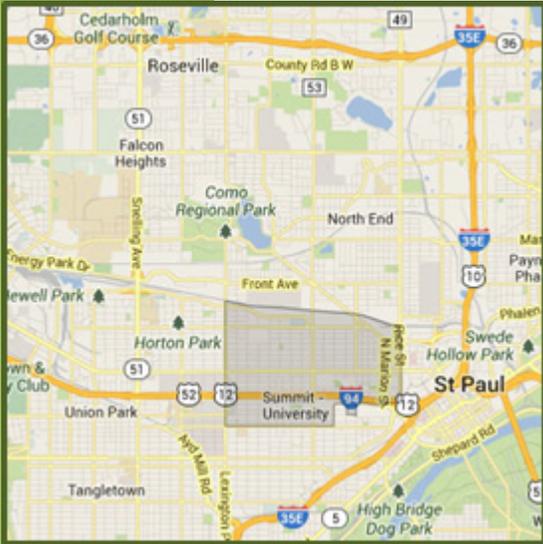


# Evaluation of Minnesota's Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge: Scholarships and Title I PreK Incentives

## Brief #3: Findings for Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood 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 #3 describes implementation and impacts in SPPN for the period from January 2012 to September 2013.

### Early Childhood in SPPN

The Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood (SPPN) is an area of west-central Saint Paul that includes the Frogtown and Summit-University neighborhoods. This community has close to 2,000 children from low-income families under the age of 6, and relatively few high-quality ELD programs. Early childhood supports in SPPN before the RTT-ELC grant included the following: 10 licensed child care centers, 49 licensed family child care programs, ECFE, 2 School Readiness programs in the Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS), Head Start (2 sites), Early Head Start, the AGAPE school for teens who are pregnant or parenting, the Jeremiah Program for single mothers and their children, and several other activity and enrichment centers.

The SPPN is a community-wide initiative that aims to “provide the academic and social supports children need to succeed in school and in life.” Originating in 2009, SPPN currently provides wraparound supports for children and their families from prenatal through grade 5, centered around three schools located within the community (Maxfield Magnet School, Jackson Preparatory Magnet, and Saint Paul City School). Approximately 80% of the children living within SPPN are ethnic



minorities (with a substantial proportion of immigrants and refugees), and a primary goal of the Promise Neighborhood, consistent with the RTT-ELC grant goals, is to close the achievement gap between these children and their more advantaged peers. Given the high level of diversity, SPPN's theory of change is centered on culture and increasing the cultural responsiveness of early childhood supports in the community.

### **How were RTT-ELC Scholarships implemented?**

SPPN began awarding RTT-ELC Scholarships in early winter 2012–13. The initial strategy for enrolling children was to ask ELD programs in the Zone to market the RTT-ELC Scholarships to families. ELD programs were encouraged to use the RTT-ELC Scholarships to fill to capacity and serve those on their waiting list. SPPN Community Navigators (staff in the SPPN who work closely with families), public health nurses, and family resource staff were also trained to inform families about RTT-ELC Scholarship availability and help them complete the application.

RTT-ELC Scholarships were awarded on a first-come, first-served basis, but priority for receipt was given to 3- and 4-year-old children, with younger siblings considered when there were extenuating circumstances. Largely because of the strategy of recruiting through ELD programs, about half the children who were awarded RTT-ELC Scholarships were already in an ELD program and receiving a CCAP<sup>1</sup> subsidy. In all cases, SPPN used all other forms of funding that children were eligible for first, and then used RTT-ELC Scholarship funds to cover the remaining costs.

In 2013, in SPPN, RTT-ELC Scholarships could be used in any ELD program that was Parent Aware<sup>2</sup>-rated or in the process of becoming rated, regardless of actual star rating. Beginning in January 2014, SPPN policy will be that all RTT-ELC Scholarships must be used in 3- or 4-star rated programs. Taken together, these policies mean that SPPN is serving relatively higher numbers of children, since the RTT-ELC Scholarship payout per child is lower when the majority of recipients are older, have CCAP, and/or attend a lower cost program.<sup>3</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup> Parent Aware is Minnesota's Quality Rating Improvement System for ELD programs; <http://www.childcareawaremn.org/professionals-caregivers/parent-aware>

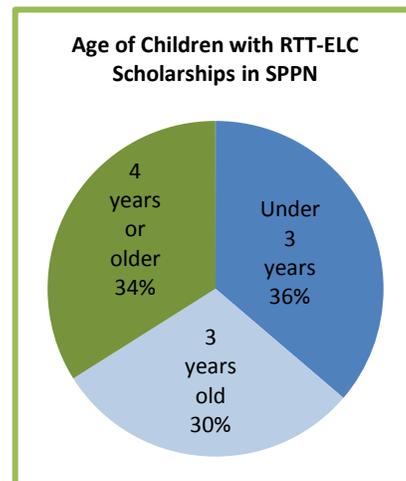
<sup>3</sup> In Saint Paul, state scholarships were also available to families, but SPPN decided not to use them with families in the SPPN because they had the RTT-ELC Scholarships available to them.



## Who received RTT-ELC Scholarships?

SPPN awarded RTT-ELC Scholarships to 281 children, 262 of whom (93%) consented to share their information with the RTT-ELC evaluation.

- About one-third of children each were in the categories of 4 years or older (34%), 3 years old (30%), and younger than 3 years old (36%).
- There were slightly more boys (48%) than girls (44%) (7% missing data).
- SPPN RTT-ELC Scholarship recipients were of diverse ethnicities; nearly half the children were African American or of African descent (47%), 13% were biracial, 9% were of Asian descent, and 8% were of Hispanic origin (18% missing data).
- The majority of children receiving RTT-ELC Scholarships spoke English as their primary language (76%). Other languages included Spanish, Hmong, Somali, and Karen.
- About one-third of the primary caregivers of the children who received RTT-ELC Scholarships had a high school diploma or GED (38%). One-fifth had not completed high school (21%). About half of caregivers were unemployed (49%).
- More than half of the children who received RTT-ELC Scholarships lived in single-parent households (55%).
- Among families receiving RTT-ELC Scholarships, use of MFIP<sup>4</sup> was more common than use of CCAP (38% compared with 28%).



## How were ELD programs involved?

SPPN had 13 center-based sites and 39 family child care programs for a total of 52 ELD programs.<sup>5</sup> These 52 ELD programs had 1,325 slots, 203 of which were vacant (15%).

- Fewer than one-fourth of these ELD programs were rated in Parent Aware (23%). Seven were rated 3- or 4- stars, and five were rated 1- or 2-stars.
- The children with RTT-ELC Scholarships in SPPN were attending 22 ELD programs. Almost three-fourths of the 22 ELD programs were high quality (73%, rated 3- or 4-star), 14% had 1-2 star rating, and 14% were in the process of becoming rated.

<sup>4</sup> MFIP = Minnesota Family Investment Program.

<sup>5</sup> From the April 2013 data set from the National Association of Child Care Research and Referral Agencies (NACCRRAware).



*“We are reaching more children. To me that is the goal. And children are participating in [ELD] programs. ...I think a portion of them are from the underserved populations where they weren’t being served at all before.”*

## 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 SPPN, a total of 66 ELD program surveys were sent and 28 (42%) were completed.

- Almost two-thirds of the teachers in SPPN ELD programs had a Bachelor's degree or higher (61%).
- CCAP was the most common source of funding for ELD programs in SPPN (71% of programs received CCAP funds), followed by cash grants or donations from foundations or other organizations (43%).
- Almost one-fourth 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 (24%).

**Improved Access to High Quality ELD Programs.** The 22 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 ELD programs to increase services was to provide more continuous care, followed by increasing the number of days each week and increasing the length of day. Less common supplemental services included providing health or developmental screenings, summer programming, parent support and education services, and extended weekend or after-hours care.
- RTT-ELC Scholarships allowed 6 ELD programs to open a total of 41 additional slots to serve more high-needs children and/or improve the quality of their ELD programs.
- These funds also allowed ELD programs 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 or were homeless, and more children with a disability or special need.



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*“...Once the families are in the class ... we are seeing some really great strides the kids are making, mostly in the social-emotional area. [...] That’s been really great, and the parents have been very pleased with the progress in this area.”*

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## **What impacts and successes of the RTT-ELC Scholarships did SPPN staff report?**

- RTT-ELC Scholarships increased continuity of care for working families who were struggling to meet ELD program co-payments or were on a threshold for qualifying for CCAP but were not eligible.
- For a small number of SPPN children in licensed center-based or family child care ELD programs, RTT-ELC Scholarships were providing more hours of care in the form of a longer day or week.
- RTT-ELC Scholarships provided necessary economic relief for families. In addition to allowing parents to work, RTT-ELC Scholarships were allowing parents to take English classes while their children were in care.
- Some ELD programs “blossomed” and become more high quality during the Parent Aware rating process.

## **How did school districts use their Title I PreK Incentives?**

In the SPPN Zone, the Saint Paul Public School District’s (Independent School District 625) plan included using Title I PreK Incentives to:

- Hire additional staff, including an Early Learning Community Partnership Coordinator (ELCPC), parent engagement staff in the Title I schools, and a part-time data analysis and alignment person.
- Implement parent-child classes for parents of children on the SPPS preschool waiting list, as a hybrid of Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) and a preschool program. Parents were in the classroom, with a teacher coaching and modeling interactions with the children for part of the time, and they were in parent education classes for part of the time.
- Hold monthly educational evening events for parents in these parent-child classes and other families in the community (e.g., literacy night with the library).
- Implement a summer program that targeted SPPN children entering kindergarten in 2013–14 who are also Title I eligible (e.g., low income, dual language learners, have special needs) but had no prior preschool experience. This involved conducting
  - An 11-site Summer Academy for 18 days in June-July 2013, with slots for 480 children.
  - An additional 10-day Kindergarten Camp in partnership with East Metro Integration District in August 2013 that served 155 SPPS children.
- Create a tracking system to aggregate all student data from the Summer Academy.



- Create an Early Childhood Network, a forum for ELD program staff serving 4-year-olds (e.g., Family, Friend, and Neighbor care providers, home visitors, child care center staff, principals, and kindergarten teachers) to encourage communication, coordination, and alignment across ELD programs and the schools.

## **What were the successes of implementation of the Title I PreK Incentives?**

- SPPN supported more high-needs children’s kindergarten transition by successfully implementing the parent-child classes for 30 children from January to May 2013, the Summer Academy for 377 children, and the Kindergarten Camp for 155 children who had no or limited preschool experience.
- Interviewees commented that the parent-child classes were successful in promoting children’s school readiness, supporting smooth transitions into kindergarten, engaging parents in children’s early learning, and establishing positive relationships between families and the schools.
- Children also benefited from developmental screenings that were conducted as part of these activities.
- Another success was the increased communication within SPPS, such as between ECFE and early childhood special education.
- SPPS’s relationship with Think Small (Minnesota’s child care resource and referral agency that administers the RTT-ELC Scholarships in Saint Paul) was also strengthened. A goal for next year is to forge stronger connections with individual child care providers in the community by continuing to work closely with Think Small. This is a continuing goal of the Early Childhood Network, which made good progress in the past year building connections between ELD programs and schools.

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*“Ultimately it benefits the families and kids, having more kids in higher quality care, having the quality and continuity of that care is really valuable for those families. ...Building awareness that this [RTT-ELC Scholarships] is out there. ...It starts to build an awareness about high quality care and why it is important.”*

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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.