



WILDER RESEARCH, CHILD TRENDS, SRI INTERNATIONAL,  
AND CENTER FOR EARLY EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT,  
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA.

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# Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship Program

## Summary of Issue Brief 2: Implementation in Year 2

This fact sheet describes the implementation of the Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship Program in Year 2 (July 2008 to June 2009). 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 summer 2009 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; and four focus groups with 27 parents of children 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, North End and, beginning in 2009, in Payne-Phalen 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 August 2009, a total of 371 children are eligible to receive scholarships in 2009, with consent to also participate in the evaluation. Of those:

- 113 children met eligibility requirements to receive scholarships in 2008, and will enter the 2nd year of high-quality ECE program attendance in fall 2009.
- Another 132 3-year-old children have met eligibility requirements, and so far, are scheduled to begin attending a high-quality ECE program in fall 2009.<sup>1</sup>

As of September 1, 2009, 74 ECE providers in Saint Paul had enrolled in Parent Aware (the ECE program quality rating system) and were eligible to enroll children with scholarship funds. This is an increase from 46 ECE programs in the Saint Paul area in August 2008.

<sup>1</sup> During 2009, MELF experienced a 36% reduction in funding due to difficulties in fundraising as a result of the larger economic context. This reduction meant that the MELF board and staff had to make a difficult decision to cap enrollment beginning in Fall 2009. Thus, not all 403 children who met eligibility requirements will receive a scholarship.





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## What did we learn from the interviews?<sup>2</sup>

- The majority of respondents (i.e., program staff, providers, and policy makers) described the ultimate goal of the Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship Program as promoting school readiness in children from low-income families, with over 200 using scholarships to attend high-quality ECE programs in 2009.
- Many respondents commented that the scholarship program was increasing support for and awareness of high-quality ECE programs.
- The majority of respondents (80%) thought that the implementation of the scholarship program was going well.
- Some challenges to implementation included the following:
  - Some programs and families find the program's policies and procedures to be confusing. Because it was a pilot, the team was implementing a new program and it was hard to anticipate many of the policies and procedures that needed to be worked out.
  - The need for transportation to the ECE programs for many families continues to be a significant barrier to participation in the scholarship program.
  - Many different types of programs (center- and family-based programs, school-based, and Head Start) enroll scholarship children and each type of program experiences unique challenges to adapting the scholarship model to their existing operating policies and procedures.
  - Tracking the status of children in their ECE programs continues to present challenges because the evaluation and implementation teams do not have a shared database with the ECE programs.



## What do parents say about the scholarship program?

- Parents were enthusiastic about the scholarship program and stated that the program benefitted them and their children.
- Most parents described that they were participating in the scholarship program because, as several parents simply stated, "it's free" and "it's worry-free."
- Some parents noted that because the scholarship funds are guaranteed (i.e., not dependent on employment status, hours worked, or family income), participation provided them with school and work opportunities.
- Most of the parents expressed strong positive opinions about the parent mentors, noting that they were incredibly beneficial to their children and families.
- Parents identified several features of the ECE programs that they valued. These included:
  - Use of curriculum and high-quality early learning environments
  - Caring and compassionate teachers and staff whom their children like
  - Opportunities for parent involvement
  - Convenient location and transportation available

## What are the next steps?

- The information from the brief is being used to identify lessons learned from implementation of the project.
- Child outcome data for participating children are being collected annually, with kindergarten outcomes collected in fall 2010 and 2011.

<sup>2</sup> SRI staff conducted 34 semistructured qualitative interviews.

