



The Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship Program Final Report

Parent Mentoring Services and Activities

Supporting Families' Engagement with Early Care and Education



Executive Summary

From January 2008 through June 2009, parent mentors from five agencies (Saint Paul Public Schools-ECFE, LifeTrack Resources, Minnesota Literacy Council, Neighborhood House, and Saint Paul - Ramsey County Public Health) made more than 1,800 home visits to approximately 380 families and 595 children. These mentoring home visits were part of the broader Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF) initiative aimed at improving the supply of quality early care in St. Paul communities, while giving parents the necessary information and resources to access that care. Improving access and supply are a means to boosting school readiness for low-income children. Over this period,

- Each family received an average of nearly 5 visits from their parent mentor.
- Parent mentors delivered more than 4,500 total activities/services to families.
- Most activities/services related to early childhood education and school readiness.
- Parent mentors provided the majority of activities/services directly to families, with less than 1 in 5 resulting in a referral to an outside agency.
- Parents reported very positive feelings about their home visiting parent mentor, expressing appreciation for the support and materials provided on visits.

Service delivery differed significantly across parent mentoring agencies.

- The number of families and ages of children served by each agency varied, with SPRCDPH serving the greatest proportion of total families and the overwhelming majority of those with infants.
- The total number of parent mentor visits per family ranged from approximately 3 to 6, with Lifetrack (5.6) and SPRCDPH (5.4) with the highest rates and NH with the lowest rate (2.8).
- With the exception of SPRCDPH, all parent mentoring agencies focused the greatest proportion of their activities/services on early education and care. SPRCDPH placed the greatest emphasis on child health and development-related activities/services, with a strong secondary focus on parent-related activities/services.

Overall, children participating in higher-quality early care through the receipt of scholarships for the two measurement periods when assessed exhibited

- improved language and early math skills,
- improved behavioral/social skills, and
- improved English language skills (for those who were English language learners).

In the St. Paul neighborhoods where these efforts were targeted, the number of high quality early care programs increased by more than 55% over the last measurement period. A number of existing programs improved their Parent Aware quality rating. A full report of the scholarship program results will be completed by December 2011.

Introduction

Longitudinal research suggests that well-focused investments in early care and education (ECE) can yield extraordinary public returns. The Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship Program (SPECSP) is a pilot project designed to realize such investments. SPECSP provided scholarships and parent mentoring to low-income Saint Paul-area families to facilitate their children's enrollment in high-quality early care and education (ECE) programs over two years. A final evaluation report of this multi-year effort will be completed this fall. More information on the scholarship component of the MELF initiative can be found at <http://melf.us/> and by clicking the links to scholarship-related work under Reports on the right-hand side.

Our efforts were a critical component of the broader effort to improve the participation of low-income children in high-quality early care intended to prepare them for successful kindergarten entry. Using a market model, this MELF-funded initiative simultaneously boosts the supply of quality care options, increases the knowledge of parents choosing care in the marketplace, while providing the financial resources for parents to purchase that care through scholarships. With the help of a parent mentor, families selected an ECE program that met quality standards set by the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation's (MELF's) Parent Aware rating system.

The Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship Program

Fed economists Rob Grunewald and Art Rolnick created SPECSP around three market-based interventions designed to increase parent empowerment, ECE access, and ECE program accountability. Specific long-term outcome objectives include: 1) children are succeeding in school, 2) parents are actively involved in the child's development and education; and 3) a variety of high-quality ECE programs are available in the community. SPECSP activities are particularly integral to the first and second outcomes.

- Scholarships up to \$13,000 per child per year grant low-income families financial access to high-quality ECE programs for their children and incent programs to increase quality and supply in targeted areas. Parent mentors helped to connect families to these funds through referral.
- Through regular home visits, parent mentoring provided families with information about the characteristics and benefits of high-quality ECE programs and empowered parents to support their children's early education and school readiness. This information educated parents about what to look for when purchasing child care.
- Minnesota's ECE program quality rating system, Parent Aware, increases accountability among ECE providers and provides incentives for programs to produce positive school readiness outcomes. Parent Aware is intended to guide parent decision-making.

The Parent Mentoring Component

Parent mentoring provided a crucial, consistent link between SPECSP and participating families through frequent home visits beginning at program enrollment and ending with the child's kindergarten entry. Parent mentors functioned as SPECSP's point of access to families, facilitating the identification of needs and barriers to early care and education. Parent mentors provided a variety of essential services to parents during each home visit, including (a) helping parents understand their options for selecting and enrolling their children in a high-quality ECE program; (b) modeling parenting skills, parent-child interactions, and school readiness activities; conducting parent and child assessment for health, development, and home safety; and (c) referring families to needed community resources.

Methods

Data presented in this report were collected by parent mentors at each home visit and relate to the family as a whole, rather than to the individual child or children enrolled in the program. A total of 1,832 Parent Mentor Data Collection Forms (collected between January, 2008 and June, 2009) were completed and analyzed.

This report will describe:

- Families that received mentoring services
- Frequency of mentoring services provided to families by each participating agency
- Types of activities provided to families through mentoring services by each participating agency
- Rates of direct service provisions by each participating agency
- A summary of the mid-project (Year 3) scholarship evaluation measures from MELF evaluators, SRI International.

Who Received Parent Mentoring?

Family eligibility for parent mentoring was based on child age, residence and income. At the time of enrollment, families must have:

- Lived in Saint Paul Planning Districts 6 or 7
- Had a household income at or below 185% of Federal Poverty Level
- Had a pregnant mother or child less than one year old during the enrollment year

A total of 387 families (with 595 participating children) received parent mentor home visits and are included in this analysis.

Scholarship Participants

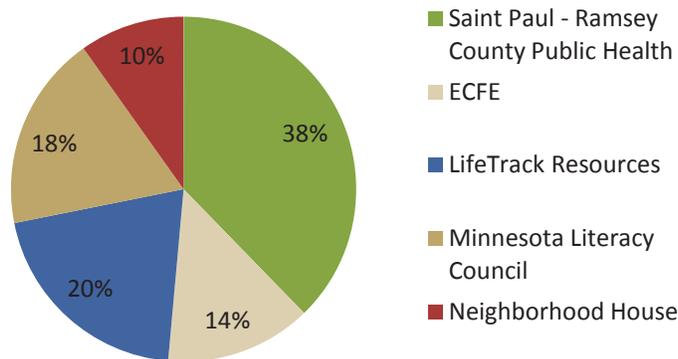
Among the 499 children who were age-eligible for scholarship participation, 348, or 78% received scholarships to attend high-quality early care programs. Among the array of providers who were responsible for informing parents of the availability of scholarships, a majority (36%) learned about scholarships from their parent mentors. Home visiting was a prominent service for most families (66%) served under the MELF initiative. A significant proportion of scholarship families (44%) reported speaking a language other than English in the home, about half (48%) received Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) benefits, and approximately 40% were families of color.

Who Provided Parent Mentoring?

Five local community agencies were contracted to provide parent mentoring services. Agencies were selected based on their experience working with at-risk, low-income families in Saint Paul. Though all agencies had expertise in delivering parent mentoring services, each had its own focus area, such as early learning, child development, or health.

- LifeTrack Resources (LifeTrack) is a community-based service organization that works with children, families and adults to overcome life’s obstacles, such as poverty, lack of education and physical and mental disabilities.
- Saint Paul Public Schools Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) program offers parent and early childhood education for families with children between birth and kindergarten age.
- Neighborhood House (NH) is a multi-cultural, multi-lingual center with programs in basic needs, education and youth leadership.
- The Minnesota Literacy Council (MLC) is a nonprofit organization that offers literacy services to adults, at-risk children, native-English speakers and recent immigrants.
- Saint Paul-Ramsey County Department of Public Health (SPRCDPH) promotes the health, well-being and health development of pregnant and parenting families through its Family Health Home Visiting program.

Number of Families Served By Agency
(N = 387)



Families were assigned to agencies based on a mutual match between children’s needs and agencies’ expertise. As a result, the number of families served by each agency varied.

How Many Parent Mentoring Visits Were Made?

On average, the duration of parent mentoring services was approximately seven-and-a-half months, meaning that most families did not enroll at the start of the program. Parent mentors made more than 1,800 total home visits to families. Families received an average of approximately 5 home visits from parent mentors, with slightly less than a third of all families (29%) receiving more than 5.

Families Served and Visits Made			
Agency	Families Served	Home Visits Completed	Average Visits Per Family
ECFE	53	353	4.8
Lifetrack	78	434	5.6
MLC	70	262	3.7
NH	37	104	2.8
SPRCDPH	145	779	5.4
TOTAL	383	1832	4.8

How Frequently Did Parent Mentoring Visits Occur?

Across agencies, parent mentors visited families an average of once every one-and-a-half months.

Average Visit Interval	
Agency	Average Visit Intervals (months)
ECFE	1.7
Lifetrack	1.2
MLC	1.9
NH	2.4
SPRCDPH	1.5
TOTAL	1.6

How Many And What Kind of Activities/Services Did Parent Mentors Provide?

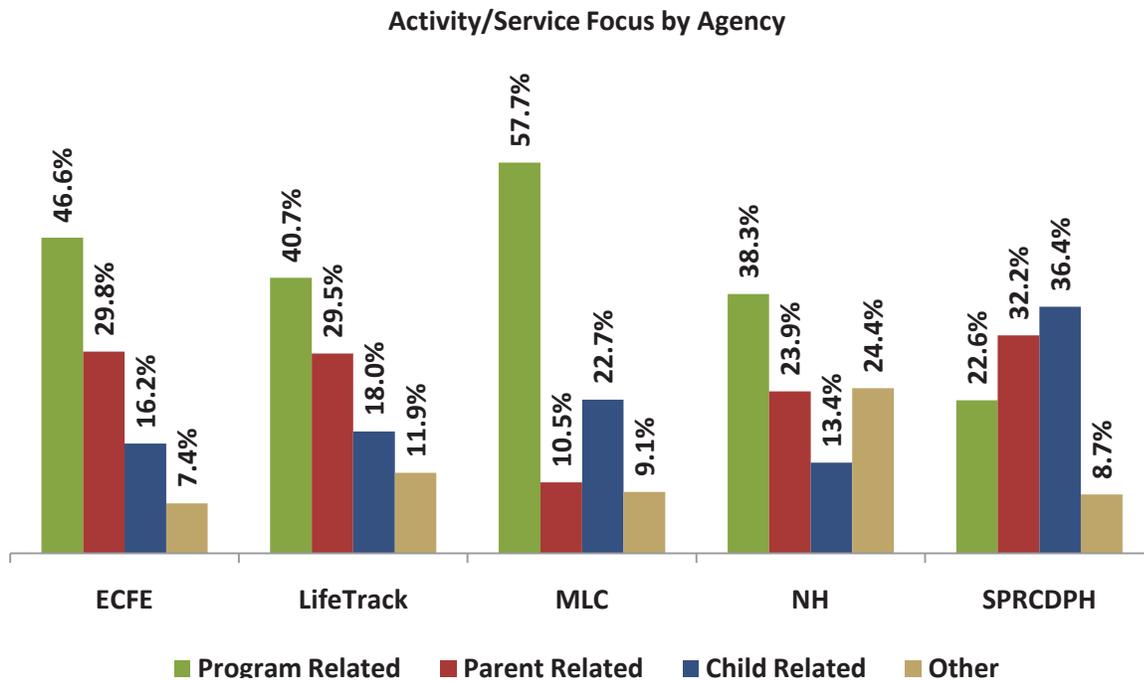
More than 4,500 total activities/services were provided during parent mentoring visits, with an average of 2.5 activities/services per visit. At each home visit, mentors recorded the activities/services they provided to families on a Parent Mentor Data Collection Form containing 30 separate designations. For each activity/service, mentors also recorded whether they provided it directly, referred the family to an outside agency, or did both. To facilitate analysis, we categorized these 30 discrete activity/service designations into four categories based on the locus of the activity/service: (a) Program-related, (b) Parent-related, (c) Child-related, & (d) Household-related. Listed below are the specific activities/services in each category:

Activity/Service Focus Categories			
Program	Parent	Child	Household
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choosing child care • Quality child care • Language / reading • Preschool screening • Early intervention • Preschool / Head Start 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modeling parenting skills • Mental health • Substance abuse • Employment services • Social security resources • Parenting education • Parenting support • Family planning • Education / job training • Literacy / GED programs • Voter registration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child health & nutrition • Behavior management • Developmental progress • Medical / Dental • Developmental screening 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety education • Low-income legal services • Homelessness prevention • Medical transport • Low cost / free tax prep • Crisis intervention • MFIP financial worker

How Did Activity/Service Focus Vary by Parent Mentoring Agency?

With the exception of SPRCDPH, all mentoring agencies concentrated the greatest proportion of their activities/services in the Program-related category, with a secondary focus on the Parent and Child categories. The Household category accounted for 6% or less of all activities/services provided across agencies. SPRCDPH, by contrast, placed the greatest emphasis on the Child category, followed

closely by Parent-related activities/services (32%). Differences in activity/service focus may be explained by varying agency expertise (SPRCDPH is focused on health; others are focused on education/life skills), as well as the unequal distribution of cohorts across agencies (SPRCDPH served a greater proportion of younger children than did most other agencies).



What Were The Top 5 Individual Activities/Services Parent Mentors Provided?

Language/Literacy Practices, the top activity, accounted for approximately 12% of all provisions and referrals. Choosing Child Care (9%), Modeling Good Parenting Skills (9%), Child’s Developmental Progress (8%), and Benefits of High-Quality Child Care (8%) were the next most frequent activity/service provisions and referrals.

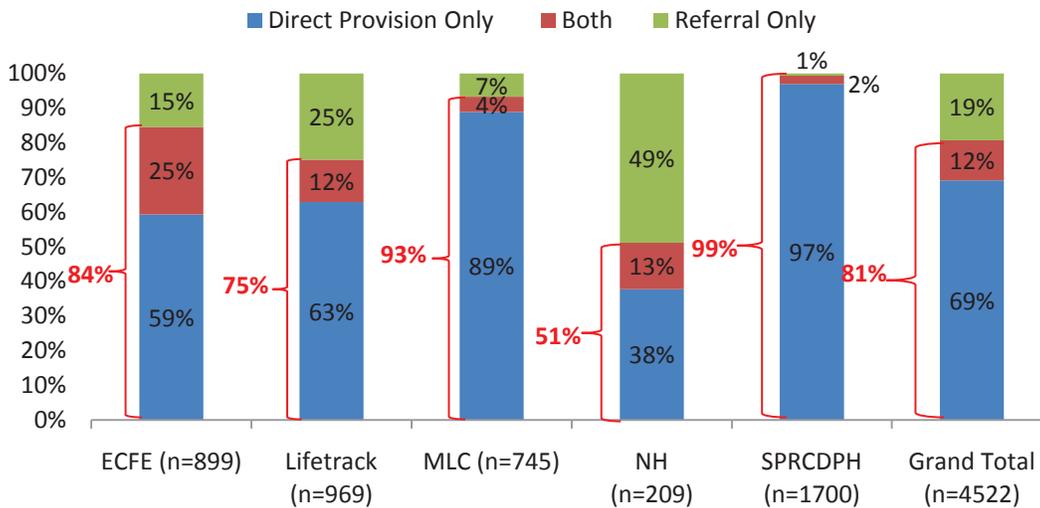
Three of the top five activities/services provided directly related to SPESP program objectives. Together, these top 5 activities/services account for 46% of all activities/services delivered by the program.

Did Parent Mentors Directly Provide Activities/Services, Refer Families to Outside Agencies, or Both?

With the exception of NH, mentoring agencies provided most activities/services directly to families. SPRCDPH directly provided virtually all activities/services (99%) and MLC directly provided the overwhelming majority (93%). While both ECFE and Lifetrack directly provided three-quarters or more their activities/services (84% and 75%, respectively), NH did so with approximately half (51%).

Based on the assumption that agencies will directly provide the activities and services with which they have expertise, SPRCDPH and MLC, followed by ECFE and LifeTrack, were best prepared to provide the full range of parent mentoring services. Direct activity/service provision (as opposed to outside referrals) also likely increased engagement with the parent and family.

Rates of Direct Provision, Referral and Both, By Agency



Parent Perspectives

Evaluators conducted parent focus groups in fall 2010 to learn more about family experiences related to MELF scholarships. Questions were oriented around the three prongs of the initiative: availability of quality care, affordability, and the information needed to recognize and purchase quality care. Parents were also asked about the ways in which participating in the initiative benefitted their families. The role of home visiting parent mentors was critically important to helping parents access child care.

For example, parents considered scholarships a far easier way to pay for child care than using the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) for ease of billing and payment as well as overall availability. Parents readily admitted that if it weren't for the ability to purchase higher-quality, more expensive care through the receipt of scholarships, their children would be cared for in far more informal settings such as by neighbors, family members, or multiple arrangements. Finally, most parents expressed very positive opinions of their home visiting parent mentors, noting that their support and the books and materials they provided to children were critically important in getting children excited about school and learning.

Are Children Ready for School?

Children who have accessed quality early care through scholarships who have been in care for at least two years (n=200) have shown important gains. Receptive vocabulary scores were significantly higher one year post-participation for scholarship children, a statistically significant increase in their estimated trajectory one year before. Early mathematical skills increased, as did social skills. Gains in English language skills were observed over the year for children for whom English was not their primary language.