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Suggested citation:

This report provides a brief summary of evaluation findings about the implementation and impacts of the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) Scholarships and Title I PreK Incentives in Itasca County across the three years of the evaluation (2012–2015). It also summarizes the long-term successes and lessons learned from implementing these two initiatives. The information in this report about implementation comes from three years of Annual Reports with findings from all four Transformation Zones (Zones).  

**What was Minnesota’s RTT-ELC grant?**

In 2011, Minnesota was awarded RTT-ELC funds. One component of the grant was to increase the school readiness of high-needs children by improving access to high-quality early learning and development (ELD) programs. Minnesota gave some of the grant funds as RTT-ELC Scholarships to families to enroll their children in high-quality ELD programs, and some funds were given as incentives to school districts to use Title I funds for preschool programs (Title I PreK Incentives). The two initiatives together were referred to as the RTT-ELC Access Strategies and occurred 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.

**What was the Itasca Transformation Zone?**

The Itasca Transformation Zone encompassed all of Itasca County, a large rural area in northeast Minnesota with approximately 1,300 children under age 6 living in low-income households in any given year. Interviewees noted that providing high-quality ELD programs and services for children birth to 5 years in a variety of settings across a wide geographic span is one of Itasca County’s challenges.

Across Itasca County, a number of early childhood supports were in place before the RTT-ELC grant, including several Head Start and Early Head Start sites, family child care programs, a few private licensed child care centers and school-based School Readiness programs, and several auxiliary family services like Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE), home visiting programs, and developmental screening services. The majority of ELD programs were licensed family child care programs. Many of these services were provided in a coordinated manner through the Invest Early collaborative, a comprehensive early childhood collaborative serving young children (birth to 5 years) and their families. Members of the Invest Early collaborative included Head Start programs, four school districts, the county’s public health agency, and local colleges.
Consistent with goals of the RTT-ELC grant, Invest Early’s primary mission is to serve high-risk families. To provide early childhood and family support services, Invest Early blended public and private funds. Under this model, parents generally did not know how their services were paid for; the family would complete a single application, and then Invest Early staff used the family’s eligibility for different funding programs to determine which funds to use to cover all of the family’s service expenses. For instance, some children’s family income qualified them to receive a Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) subsidy, which would have been combined with private funding from the Blandin Foundation to pay for all of the child’s necessary services. This approach, in which discrete funding streams are combined to cover a complete service unit, is known as braiding. Regardless of funding source, all staff attended the same professional development and trainings, which ensured common practices and procedures.

Despite the well-developed early childhood infrastructure and considerable capacity to serve families that existed in Itasca County before the RTT-ELC grant, not all early education needs were being met. Invest Early had waiting lists for preschool, and the part-time Head Start programs available did not meet many families’ need for full-time ELD programming. A lack of available physical space was a barrier to opening much-needed new classrooms, and many families needed transportation to available ELD programs in this geographically large county. Finally, Invest Early recognized that collaboration with private child care centers and family child care programs was not as well developed as it could be.

Because of its capacity to serve high-needs children and continued need to increase access to high-quality ELD programs, the Minnesota Department of Education selected Itasca County as one of four Transformation Zones to receive RTT-ELC grant funds. Although Think Small, a child care resource and referral agency, was awarded the grant, its subcontractor, the Itasca Area Schools Collaborative (IASC), was responsible for fulfilling the grant deliverables. As the governing body of Invest Early, IASC was responsible for administering the RTT-ELC Scholarships, the first RTT-ELC Access Strategy. For Title I PreK Incentives, the second Access Strategy, each school district that wanted to use the Title I PreK Incentives was required to submit an application to MDE that outlined a plan describing how it intended to use the incentives. In Itasca, four school districts applied for the RTT-ELC Title I PreK Incentives to begin use in the 2012–2013 school year: Deer River School District (Independent School District 317), Grand Rapids School District (Independent School District 318), Greenway School District (Independent School District 316), and Nashwauk-Keewatin School District (Independent School District 319).

“…what it’s done for families, for that family who was struggling to make it or was trying to piece care together or who couldn’t access care. We’ve been able to open up slots and provide scholarships to help them.”
What data collection methods were used in the evaluation?

Scholarship application data. Each Zone developed its own process and procedures for enrolling eligible families to receive RTT-ELC Scholarships, and each Zone developed an application form that families completed to apply for the scholarships. In addition, the evaluation team and MDE developed a set of questions to elicit child and family demographic information to be included in the application process; some of the questions were on the application form, or data for them were available on other databases used in each Zone (e.g., NAZ Connect database). The evaluation team worked with RTT-ELC Scholarship administrators in each Zone to obtain data exports between August and September of each year of the evaluation.

Phone interviews. To understand the implementation of the RTT-ELC Scholarships in each Zone, the evaluation team conducted 1-hour phone interviews between spring and early fall (May to September) in each of the three years of the evaluation, with a goal of interviewing all RTT-ELC Scholarship and Title I PreK Incentives administrators and key informants identified as central to the two initiatives’ implementation. Questions focused on the process of implementing the RTT-ELC Scholarships and Title I PreK Incentives; experiences engaging families with the two Access Strategies; perceived impacts of the two Access Strategies on children, families, ELD programs, and communities; challenges in implementing the two Access Strategies; perspectives on long-term, sustainable impacts attributable to the two Access Strategies; and perspectives on the role of state agencies in building high-quality, sustainable early childhood systems.

Online ELD program surveys and data from NACCRAware and Parent Aware. To understand the characteristics of the ELD programs and their participation in the RTT-ELC Scholarships program, the evaluation team sent online surveys in the summer or fall of each year (July-September or September-December) to ELD programs (center based, school based, family child care, and Head Start) that served children with RTT-ELC Scholarship funds or were located in the Zone. The evaluation team also used data from the Parent Aware website and NACCRAware, a web-based dataset from Child Care Aware® of America (formerly National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, NACCRA) that provides public-use data about many ELD programs, to identify all ELD programs in each Zone and their Parent Aware ratings. Data from NACCRAware also were compiled for each Zone each year to examine the supply of ELD programs and slots for each Zone.

Parent survey. To better understand the impact of the RTT-ELC Scholarships on families over the course of the initiative, the evaluation team surveyed 119 parents across all four Zones from spring through early fall of Year 3 (April to September 2015). The evaluation team used both qualitative and quantitative items, and surveys
were conducted either through phone interviews or through paper surveys. Questions focused on the process of applying for the RTT-ELC Scholarship, the process of finding and enrolling in an ELD program, previously attended and alternative child care settings, how the RTT-ELC Scholarship helped prepare their children for kindergarten, and how the RTT-ELC Scholarship helped their families in other ways. Additional information is available in a separate Year 3 evaluation report on child outcomes and family interviews.7

**Child assessments.** To determine the effects of the RTT-ELC Scholarship on child outcomes, the evaluation team implemented a quasi-experimental pre-post design using a sample of 4-year-olds—those receiving the RTT-ELC Scholarships to attend 3- and 4-star Parent Aware–rated ELD programs (n=100 across the four Zones) and a comparison group of children attending 1- or 2-star Parent Aware–rated programs (n=154). This comparison allowed the evaluation team to test whether children attending higher-rated ELD programs attained better school readiness outcomes than children who attended lower-rated ELD programs across the state after a full year of programming (2014–2015 school year). The evaluation team conducted weighted regression analyses for a battery of child assessments consisting of direct assessments and teacher-report assessments including (1) early language and literacy, (2) early numeracy and math, (3) social and emotional competence, and (4) approaches to learning, including executive functioning. Findings are available in the Year 3 evaluation report on child outcomes and family interviews.

**Online survey of Title I vignettes.** To obtain rich descriptive information about how the Title I PreK Incentives were used and their impacts on children and families, the evaluation team developed an online survey consisting of a set of questions to collect information from school district staff about the impacts of each use of the Title I PreK Incentives on an individual child and family. Data were collected in May 2015, with a follow-up round in November. From those data, the evaluation team wrote individual descriptive vignettes to capture the uses and impacts of the Title I PreK Incentives.

### Findings on RTT-ELC Scholarships

**How were RTT-ELC Scholarships used in Itasca?**

Each Zone adopted a model of RTT-ELC Scholarship implementation that both met state guidelines and addressed the specific needs of its community. Each Zone identified strategies for administering the RTT-ELC Scholarships, developed plans for how the RTT-ELC Scholarships would fit in with the community's existing early childhood activities, and worked to identify families who would benefit from participation.
Itasca chose to prioritize 3- and 4-year-old children with high-risk rankings when awarding RTT-ELC Scholarships, although some younger children also received RTT-ELC Scholarships funding. RTT-ELC monies were braided with other funds (e.g., Head Start, Blandin Foundation, School Readiness programs)\textsuperscript{8} to pay for children’s ELD programs, but the RTT-ELC funds were used specifically throughout the three years of the evaluation to:

- Extend half-day Head Start to full-day programming for some children;
- Pay for additional slots in Invest Early classrooms for students to attend ELD programs;
- Pay for ELD programs for families that previously had been paying out of pocket and/or had intermittent CCAP\textsuperscript{9}; and
- Allow 3- and 4-star-rated family child care programs and the YMCA to expand the length of services or enable families to receive consistent care at one center over the course of the week rather than split time between multiple centers.

In a new use of funds in Year 3, Itasca obtained a “mentor grant” via the RTT-ELC grant to provide professional development for programs that were rated (or in the process of being rated) in Parent Aware and were therefore eligible to serve children with RTT-ELC Scholarships. These trainings, which occurred four times a year, served to increase the quality of care provided to the community’s children and were also a means to coordinate funding and build collaboration across Itasca’s early childhood network. Feedback from programs, especially family child care programs and the YMCA, was overwhelmingly positive.

**Who used RTT-ELC Scholarships in Itasca?**

According to RTT-ELC Scholarship application data, Itasca awarded 274 RTT-ELC Scholarships to children over the course of the 3-year evaluation, 271 (99%) of whom had parents who consented to share their information with the RTT-ELC evaluation team. Information from this sample is summarized below.

- In Year 1, 149 RTT-ELC Scholarships were awarded, 53 more were awarded in Year 2 for a total of 202, and another 72 were awarded in Year 3 for a total of 274 over the three years.\textsuperscript{10}
- Half (53%) of children receiving RTT-ELC Scholarships were age 4 or older when they were awarded. The majority (84%) were White, and almost all (99%) spoke English as their primary language. Half (50%) were female.

### Age of Children with RTT-ELC Scholarships in Itasca

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 3 years, 20%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 years old, 25%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4 years old, 30%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 years or older, 23%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing, 2%</td>
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</table>
• One in ten (10%) children were still using RTT-ELC Scholarships as of October 1, 2015. About one-fourth (26%) of children used 1 year or more of RTT-ELC Scholarship funding. Another one-fourth (23%) used between 8 and 12 months of RTT-ELC Scholarship funding, and one-third (32%) used between 4 and 8 months of RTT-ELC Scholarship funding. Few children (7%) used less than 4 months of RTT-ELC Scholarship funding.

• About half (46%) of parents or primary caregivers had an associate’s degree or had attended some college. The majority (71%) were employed either full- or part-time.

• Nearly half (45%) of the children who received RTT-ELC Scholarships lived in single-parent households.

• Among families receiving RTT-ELC Scholarship funds, about half (48%) received public assistance from the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), whereas only 11% received subsidy funding from the Child Care Assistance Program.

How did the supply of ELD programs change over time in Itasca?

According to data from NACCRRAware:\n
• The supply of ELD programs in Itasca increased over time. In April 2013 (Year 1), Itasca had 84 ELD programs. By April 2015 (Year 3), the supply of ELD programs increased to 107, representing a 27% increase from Year 1 to Year 3.
  – Of the 84 ELD programs in Year 1, 21 were center-based sites and 63 were family child care programs.
  – Of the 107 programs in Year 3, 29 were center-based sites and 78 were family child care programs.

How did participation in Parent Aware and program quality change over time in Itasca?

According to data from the Parent Aware website:

• Participation in Parent Aware increased over time. In July 2013 (Year 1), only 15 sites were rated in Parent Aware, representing a 18% participation rate. By July 2015 (Year 3), 28 sites were rated in Parent Aware, representing a 26% participation rate and a 9 percentage point increase in participation.

• The number of 3- and 4-star-rated ELD programs increased over time. In July 2013 (Year 1), 13 Parent Aware–rated ELD programs were rated 3 or 4 stars, representing 15% of all existing ELD programs. By July 2015 (Year 3), 23 ELD
programs were rated 3 or 4 stars, representing 21% of all existing ELD programs and a 6 percentage point increase in these programs’ share of all ELD programs.

**What else did we learn about ELD programs?**

**What did the ELD programs in Itasca report on their surveys?**

To further understand the characteristics of the ELD programs around Itasca and their participation in the RTT-ELC Scholarships program, the evaluation team collected data by using online surveys. Surveys were sent to programs that served children with RTT-ELC Scholarship funds or were located within the Zone; as a result, the number of programs identified in this online ELD survey differ from the number of programs identified in NACCRRAware. In September 2015 (Year 3), 84 ELD program surveys were sent in Itasca and 29 (35%) were completed. Of these 29 programs, 5 were center based and 24 were family child care programs. In addition, 12 were Parent Aware rated, 3 were in the process of becoming rated, and 14 had no plans to become rated. Findings should be interpreted with caution; because of the low response rate, findings may not be representative of all ELD programs in Itasca. Low response rates and small sample sizes also precluded the evaluation team from analyzing data by program type, Parent Aware participation, or rating. For additional information on results from previous years, see the Year 1 and 2 Annual Reports.

According to self-reported data from the sample of returned Year 3 ELD surveys:

- One-third (34%) of Itasca programs that returned the ELD surveys in Year 3 used a formal curriculum.

- Half (51%) of the programs in Itasca that returned ELD surveys were either already rated or in the process of becoming rated in Parent Aware, and 40% of these programs reported that the RTT-ELC Scholarships had a lot of influence over their decision to become rated.

- Across all four Transformation Zones in Year 3, the majority (90%) of programs that had no plans to become Parent Aware rated were family child care ELD programs. The most commonly cited reasons for not planning to become rated were the lengthy rating process, the belief that their program was already high quality, and existing demand for their services, as demonstrated by wait lists. Making Parent Aware rating required and streamlining the process were the most commonly cited reasons why these programs would consider becoming rated.

- Fewer than half (44%) of teachers working in Itasca ELD programs that returned the survey had bachelor’s degrees. More teachers in center-based
programs (55%) than in family child care programs (23%) had bachelor’s degrees.

- About a third (31%) of program directors in Itasca ELD programs that returned the surveys had bachelor’s degrees. All program directors who returned completed surveys were White females, and the average age was 42.

What did ELD programs serving RTT-ELC Scholarship recipients in Itasca report?

According to self-reported data from ELD surveys, 9 of the 29 surveys completed were from programs that reported serving RTT-ELC Scholarship recipients.12 Responses from these programs indicated that the RTT-ELC Scholarships enabled the majority (7 of 9, or 78%) of programs to provide higher-quality programming and more comprehensive services to children.

- The most common way RTT-ELC Scholarships enabled programs to increase services was to increase the number of service days each week (6 programs), followed by providing more continuous care (5), increasing the length of day (4), and providing summer programming (4). Less common supplemental services included extended weekend or after-hours care (2).

- RTT-ELC Scholarship funds enabled 4 ELD programs to improve their quality and/or open 40 additional slots to serve more high-needs children. One of those programs was Invest Early/KOOTASCA Head Start, which served children in 12 program sites.

- ELD programs also used the funds 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 children receiving RTT-ELC Scholarships reported that the scholarships enabled them to serve more children with a disability or special need, more children in families who would otherwise have been unable to pay, and children in families with parents who were not working.

What did Zone staff and parents say were the impacts and short-term successes of the RTT-ELC Scholarships in Itasca?

Throughout interviews conducted over the three years of the evaluation, Itasca Transformation Zone staff noted several positive impacts on children, families, local ELD programs, and the broader early childhood community:

“We think increased access to early childhood programs among high needs children would probably be our number one immediate impact. We now have the ability to apply the early intervention to kids who we know are struggling.”
• The mentor grant awarded in Year 3 provided professional development opportunities for program staff, who were able to provide higher-quality services to children and families.

• Across all three years, RTT-ELC Scholarships created opportunities to attend ELD programs for families who otherwise would not have been able to afford them.

• Children who had previously been in informal care settings were able to receive high-quality licensed ELD programming throughout all three years, and children who had already been in care were able to attend more hours of programming (e.g., children in Head Start who were able to attend a full day of programs after receiving RTT-ELC Scholarships).

• Having children in stable, high-quality care enabled parents to enter the workforce or perform more consistently at their jobs throughout the evaluation period.

• Across all three years, many ELD providers responded to RTT-ELC Scholarship availability by making changes to their practices and going to trainings in order to improve their Parent Aware ratings.

• Continuing a trend that started in Year 1, more family child care providers became rated, further building the capacity of the larger child care community. A substantial number of center-based and family child care programs also attained 3- or 4-star ratings over the course of the evaluation.

• The availability of RTT-ELC Scholarships fostered connections over the years among ELD programs in the county, such as between Invest Early centers and family child care programs.
What did Itasca parents say were the impacts of the RTT-ELC Scholarship?

“(The RTT-ELC Scholarship) has created extra money within our home to allow us to shop for groceries better.”

“This scholarship has opened many doors for our family. I’ve received two certificates of completion from our community college while our child was in the program.”

“The teachers and family support staff have been amazing at our center. They definitely deserve more credit. They have helped us become stronger as a family and a greater part of the community.”

“My child took a full-time spot, and getting [money for her child care] has made a difference in deciding to pay a bill this month or skip it.”

“He loved it both years—it helped add more structure and routine to our day. The teachers were wonderful and knew how to handle the classroom well.”

“We needed emergency fuel assistance, and my son has special needs and is very difficult. We would not have been able to have him in a family daycare without him being kicked out.”

“I never had to guess if they were going to be open. I knew their hours, and I could count on them.”

“She looked forward to seeing her friends and maintaining friendships that she initiated. The whole curriculum fit well with her; she was able to follow along. She was able to learn on her own time, which was awesome. She loved her main teacher and the two helpers who were finally stable in the classroom. All around it was a really good fit.”

Across all four Zones and in Itasca, what did Zone staff say were the challenges of implementing the RTT-ELC Scholarships?

Across all four Zones, interview respondents noted in the Year 1 and Year 2 Annual Reports that it would have been helpful to have a planning year at the beginning of the grant. They noted that many start-up processes needed to be put in place prior to awarding RTT-ELC Scholarships and serving children in ELD programs.

Themes from interviews across all four Zones in Year 3 of the evaluation included the following:

- Across Zones, respondents commented that they were unable to reach all the children who could have benefited from RTT-ELC Scholarships. This was due both to limited funding and to the fact that some eligible families simply did not want to be served in ELD programs.

- As mentioned above, in some Zones, respondents felt that there was limited evidence that the RTT-ELC Scholarships incentivized many ELD programs to participate in Parent Aware. They commented that the rating process was particularly difficult for family child care programs to navigate, since it could be lengthy and costly. Itasca and White Earth may have had more success because Invest Early and White Earth staff were very engaged in helping ELD...
programs, noting that the “personal touch” may especially make a difference in rural areas.

- Respondents noted that the RTT-ELC Scholarships did not particularly encourage ELD programs to expand in size or encourage new programs to open in their communities. Challenges cited were that (1) the RTT-ELC Scholarships were time limited and ELD programs may be cautious about making new commitments without assurance of future funding, and (2) a limited workforce in rural areas limits the ability to expand classrooms or open new ELD programs. At least one Itasca respondent expressed that community- or program-based (rather than family-based) scholarships, such as the Minnesota State Pathway II Scholarships, were more appropriate for encouraging an increase in program capacity.

Respondents from Itasca noted some unique challenges as well:

- In Year 3 of the evaluation, respondents reiterated that the RTT-ELC Scholarship payment/reimbursement process was a challenge for both participating ELD programs and the Itasca administrators attempting to assist them. It was difficult for small programs (especially family child care) to carry operating expenses for up to 2 months while they awaited payment. They were able to manage this problem by having MDE advance the funds, which allowed administrators to process reimbursements in a more timely manner.

- Given that Invest Early staff served as RTT-ELC Scholarship administrators in addition to fulfilling their regular job responsibilities, the logistics of RTT-ELC Scholarship administration were burdensome. Staff needed to distribute information, share applications, and collect data. Respondents commented that any assistance from the state in streamlining processes, such as with paperwork, would have been greatly appreciated. Additionally, data that were collected were often incomplete or inaccurate, largely because of applicant self-reporting.

- Throughout the course of the RTT-ELC initiative, Itasca Transformation Zone staff were expected to keep records and generate data around RTT-ELC applications and awards, but they were given little guidance on how to accomplish this. The Itasca administrators were under the impression that participating in this initiative would include some technical assistance from the state around ways to manage data more efficiently and effectively, perhaps using a system standardized across Zones, but this did not occur.
Findings about Title I PreK Incentives

How did Itasca’s school districts use their Title I PreK Incentives?

Each school district that wanted to use the Title I PreK Incentives was required to submit an application to MDE in Year 1 (2012–2013 school year) that outlined a plan describing how it intended to use the incentives. MDE provided eligible school districts with information and guidance documents on Title I PreK Incentives beginning in spring 2012. In Years 2 and 3, the Zones submitted their plans for the subsequent 2013–2014 and 2014–2015 school years. MDE’s guidance to the school districts in the Zones about the uses of Title I PreK Incentives is contained in the Year 1 Annual Report.


In the Grand Rapids School District, the largest district in Itasca, the plan addressed the considerable waiting list for children to attend ELD programs by opening up new classrooms, with the funding being used mainly for salaries and instructional supplies. In the other three districts, the plans included use of funds to support interventionists to work with high-needs children on oral language skills and other curricular activities, support children with delays or disabilities, conduct assessments with children, and support the use of assessment data to plan instructional activities for individual children.

The districts in Itasca generally continued to use funds in Years 2 and 3 as planned and implemented in Year 1. In addition to uses described above, uses of Title I PreK Incentive funds over the years included:

- In the Deer River School District, the funds enabled the district to partially fund an interventionist position and a data analysis position to manage intervention data and create a seamless data sharing system between preschool and kindergarten teachers and other school staff in Years 2 and 3. Funds were also used to pay for additional preschool classrooms.
- In the Grand Rapids School District, the funds enabled the district to reduce the waiting list from 150–170 children to 75–80 children by Year 2. Funds were also used to hire a language interventionist.
• In the Greenway School District, the funds enabled the district to open another preschool classroom and serve additional students who had been on a waiting list. Funds were also used to hire interventionists.

• In the Nashwauk-Keewatin School District, the funds enabled the district to support additional preschool interventionists beyond the single one in the original plan. These interventionists supported preschool children who showed delays in meeting academic benchmarks.

The following vignettes illustrate how Title I PreK Incentives benefited children in Itasca and their families. The evaluation team used surveys from Zone staff but changed children’s names.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Itasca Use of Title I PreK Incentives: Early Childhood Interventionist</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tyler’s Early Childhood Intervention</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>In Itasca, both Greenway (ISD 316) and Nashwauk (ISD 319) school districts used Title I funds to pay for early childhood interventionists. These staff are professionals who work closely with children who have been identified as needing additional supports because of special developmental or physical needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tyler is one example of a child who benefited from this Title I-funded service. Raised by a single parent, 4-year-old Tyler had poor language and preliteracy skills that were jeopardizing his readiness for school. His mother, who was unemployed at the beginning of the program, reported that Tyler had been a high-risk pregnancy. Tyler lived with his mother and extended family and had experienced unstable housing at an early age. Because of the instability in Tyler’s life, he was referred to the Invest Early collaborative through early childhood screening and Itasca County Social Services, and subsequently was enrolled in a full-time early learning program.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Through his involvement with the early childhood interventionist, Tyler received additional programming, which included an individualized learning plan and developmentally appropriate, one-on-one instruction with a licensed instructor in a safe, stimulating learning environment. As a result of this targeted language and literacy instruction, Tyler improved dramatically in listening comprehension, following directions, speaking clearly, and using his growing vocabulary. By the end of the program, he demonstrated early knowledge of letters and an ability to represent ideas and stories through pictures, diction, and play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyler’s family benefited as well; Tyler’s mother learned to be a more positive parent through participating in Positive Solutions and Love and Logic, the program’s parenting classes facilitated by licensed parent educators. The guidance and respite care she received also enabled her to secure housing and a stable job. As a result of their involvement in this program, Tyler will move on to kindergarten and enjoy a more stable family life.</td>
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</table>
Deer River (ISD 317) and Grand Rapids (ISD 318) school districts in Itasca used Title I PreK Incentive funds to pay for additional preschool classrooms. These additional classrooms allowed both school districts to serve the needs of a greater number of children identified as high risk due to family income or other risk factors.

The example of Kayla, a 4-year-old girl living in Itasca, illustrates how preschool can have a profound impact on the life of a child. Although she enjoyed a stable home life, Kayla was diagnosed with special needs. The district’s Early Childhood Special Education Services referred the family to the Invest Early collaborative, and these agencies partnered to provide Kayla with high-quality, inclusive early childhood programming. Kayla was enrolled full-time in an additional preschool classroom funded by the Title I PreK Incentives. Programming included an individualized education program (IEP), instruction from licensed child care providers and instructors in a stimulating learning environment, an opportunity to learn through play and developmentally appropriate hands-on activities, healthful meals and snacks, monthly progress monitoring, and family outreach to support Kayla’s learning at home.

Thanks to a longer class day and more programming in her full-time preschool, Kayla grew by leaps and bounds in skills and behaviors, and was better prepared to enter mainstream kindergarten. Teachers felt Kayla’s gains were specifically tied to the number of days she attended, since this additional time helped her develop the skills she needed to meet the goals of her IEP. The family felt extremely grateful for the increased programming in the preschool program, and program staff reported that if funding had not been available to increase the number of classrooms, this child with special health needs would not have been able to make the developmental gains she needed to enter mainstream kindergarten.

What did Zone staff say were the successes of the Title I PreK Incentives in Itasca?

Over the three years of the evaluation, Itasca Transformation Zone staff noted during interviews several ways in which the Title I PreK Incentives had been successfully implemented. Throughout the evaluation period, school districts were able to:

- Hire interventionists, enabling the programs to better implement the Response to Intervention (RTI) model that was an ongoing part of their preschool programs;
- Identify students needing comprehensive and targeted intervention services earlier, serve more high-needs children in high-quality ELD programs, and use their paraprofessionals more effectively to provide comprehensive services;
- Have shorter waiting lists for PreK programs, leading to more children entering kindergarten better prepared for school;
- Improve the process for conducting assessments and using assessment data to inform instruction; and
- Build relationships and improve communication between the early childhood community and K-12.
What did Zone staff say were the challenges of implementing the Title I PreK Incentives in Itasca?

Similar to data about the RTT-ELC Scholarships, across all four Zones, interview respondents noted in the Year 1 and Year 2 Annual Reports that it would have been helpful to have a planning year at the beginning of the grant. They noted that many start-up processes needed to be put in place before beginning to actually use Title I PreK Incentives to serve children in ELD programs.

The interviewees in each Zone reported that in the third year, there were fewer challenges in implementing the Title I PreK Incentives in their school districts (for information about early challenges, see the Year 1 and Year 2 Annual Reports). Specific challenges identified by Itasca respondents included:

- The challenges most often noted by Itasca staff in Year 3 were concerns about continued funding of the programs created or expanded by the Title I PreK Incentives and lack of classroom space.
- All school districts mentioned funding concerns; two districts particularly noted the difficulty in pulling funding from their regular Title I grant in order to receive the PreK Incentive grants, especially in the face of reduced Title I funding overall.
- Two districts mentioned not having enough space for the needs of their preschool programs or schools overall. One district was prevented from serving more students by this challenge; the other found funding that allowed them to expand, with the goal of providing more wraparound services and a community school experience.
- One respondent commented that they had wanted to reach and impact more children but needed more funding in order to do so.
- Another said there was concern about rigor/quality of some of the other local programs, that they did not improve in quality as much as hoped.

Implications of Findings

Across the four Zones, what were the implications of the implementation findings about the Access Strategies?

There are several broad implications of the findings from this evaluation for implementing future early learning initiatives in Minnesota. These include the following:

- RTT-ELC Scholarships were easy for families and ELD programs to use, and ELD program staff and Zone administrators believed the scholarships’
approach to ensuring funding continuity benefited families and the programs (i.e., once a child was awarded the RTT-ELC Scholarship and began attending a highly rated program, funding was secured with no additional changes in eligibility until the child left the ELD program). These qualities helped make RTT-ELC Scholarships an effective way to increase access to high-quality ELD programming for high-needs children.

- Time-limited, initiative-based (or one-time grant) funding is a short-term financial benefit for communities but does not typically encourage the building of infrastructure for a strong and sustainable early learning system. Therefore, the state should strategize with local communities around ways to leverage grant funding most effectively while it is available, but also plan for sustainability of services after its end.

- In implementing the RTT-ELC grant, Minnesota created a framework for implementation that gave the Zones the autonomy to make certain decisions regarding how best to serve their unique populations. Although Zone staff acknowledged an inherent tension between federal and state agencies’ concerns (e.g., compliance with regulations, program scalability, replicability across multiple localities) and the priorities of local entities (e.g., flexibility, responsiveness to local context, history, and resources), many recognized that these priorities can be balanced. Doing so requires all parties to listen, communicate openly, and be willing to understand the other’s perspective and compromise as needed.

- Relatedly, throughout the evaluation, Zone staff expressed a desire for local autonomy in implementing any kind of early childhood initiative, but they viewed the state agency role as a convener to be important for supporting local communities to build strong, high-quality early childhood systems. They commented that the work with children and families takes place in the local contexts and programs but local communities need to share their strategies, challenges, and solutions with each other. The state can play a major role in fostering collaboration across communities such as the Zones, so that different localities can share ideas as well as resources.

- Zone staff also commented that state agencies should find ways to use statutes, policies, and funding to promote local collaboration rather than competition, and to support communities in developing and implementing strong, coordinated, and integrated early learning networks with the common goal of promoting school readiness.

- The evaluation data showed that local infrastructure available in a particular area (e.g., staff; existing relationships and collaborative early childhood entities or teams such as Invest Early in Itasca, NAZ in Minneapolis, Saint Paul
Promise Neighborhood in Saint Paul, and White Earth Child Care (WECC) in White Earth; and additional funding) had a direct impact on how each Zone implemented the RTT-ELC Scholarships, as well as implications for the long-term impact of the initiative on the community.

- For example, differences between NAZ and SPPN in levels of staffing and organizational capacity at the beginning of the RTT-ELC initiative affected how they did outreach to families, which in turn had an impact on the relationships families developed with the Zone outside of the RTT-ELC Scholarships.

- The level at which each Zone used outside infrastructure (e.g., SPPN relying on Think Small) versus building its own infrastructure over the course of implementing RTT-ELC Scholarships also had implications for how it would transition out of having the additional RTT-ELC funding for a few years only, as well as what long-term impacts the RTT-ELC initiative would leave on the Zone even as the grant ended.

- Zone staff expressed the desire for the state to serve as a clearinghouse for information on best practices, as well as locally collected data. They look to the state for high-level guidance and for information on national trends in early childhood policy and practice. Since the state also collects data across localities (e.g., from child care programs in various regions), the state can also play a role in giving data back to local early childhood stakeholders (e.g., about child care supply and Parent Aware participation) so that staff can make informed decisions and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their work to build high-quality local ELD programs and services.

- Zones made deliberate and difficult decisions about the population of children they wanted to target for receipt of RTT-ELC Scholarships based on the limitations of the funding and the scope and nature of their goals; some Zones awarded more RTT-ELC Scholarships to children early in the birth to 5 age range, committing them to several years of funding per child, whereas others focused on providing funding for preschoolers. Serving younger children over multiple years versus only serving 4-year-olds in the year prior to kindergarten entry has implications for the total number of children that can be served and the intensity or “dosage” with which each child can be served, given the limited funding. It is unknown which strategy gives a better return on investment regarding school readiness outcomes. It is important to note that research shows that children benefit from experiencing high-quality early learning environments consistently throughout the early childhood years.
Notes


2 Public funds included Head Start, school-based School Readiness, the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), and the newer RTT-ELC grant funds.

3 The Blandin Foundation is a private rural-based foundation in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, with the mission to strengthen communities in rural Minnesota. It provided the majority of Invest Early’s private funding.

4 MDE provided the Zones with a model scholarship application form that they could adopt or adapt.

5 Data from http://parentaware.org/.

6 Data from http://usa.childcareaware.org/.


8 Head Start funds were typically used first for children from the lowest-income families, because of the family income requirements. Blandin Foundation funds, school-based School Readiness program funds, RTT-ELC Scholarship funds, or some combination of these were used to serve higher-income children who were still at least 200% below the federal poverty level.

9 CCAP is the state’s Child Care Assistance Program.

10 These counts were made in July–August 2013 for Year 1, August–early October 2014 for Year 2, and August 2015 for Year 3.

11 ELD programs that served children with RTT-ELC Scholarships within the Zone but were not in NACCRAware are also included.

12 There is some discrepancy between RTT-ELC Scholarship Application data and the self-reported ELD survey about the number of programs that serve RTT-ELC Scholarship recipients. Whereas nine ELD survey respondents self-reported serving RTT-ELC Scholarship recipients, data exported from the Scholarship Application database in Year 3 indicate that only eight programs served RTT-ELC Scholarship recipients. It is possible that a program may have mistakenly identified itself as serving RTT-ELC Scholarship recipients and/or children transferred into and out of a particular program between Year 2 (August 2014) and Year 3 (August 2015) exports of Scholarship Application data.

13 Zones also received funds for 2015–2016 as well, since this was a 4-year grant.

14 This includes supports beyond those required as part of IDEA services.

15 RTI is a framework for a schoolwide approach to assessment, progress monitoring, and instruction that schools can use to “identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student’s responsiveness, and identify students with learning disabilities or other disabilities.” (For more information, see http://www.rti4success.org/.)

16 Some of these broad lessons learned also build on information contained in earlier evaluation reports.