



SRI International

Evaluation of the Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship Program Summary of Issue Brief 1: Early Implementation in Year 1 September 2008



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Summary of Issue Brief 1: Early Implementation in Year 1

Overview

The evaluation of the pilot of the Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship Program includes both process and outcome components. This is a short summary of implementation of the Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship Program.¹

The summary describes how the model is being implemented and what has been learned thus far about its effects on children, families, early care and education (ECE) programs, and the targeted community (districts 6 & 7 in Saint Paul, Minnesota).

The summary contains four sections of findings 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 the 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;² and two focus groups with parents of children who have enrolled in the scholarship program.

The sections on findings describe the following:

- How the model was intended to be implemented as conceived by its developers and funders and how planning developed and implementation is progressing.
- The interview respondents' perceptions about goals, outcomes, and accomplishments so far.
- The interview respondents' perceptions about the progress of the implementation (successes and challenges) and the facilitators and barriers to implementation of the model, and lessons learned and recommendations about what needs to happen next to achieve the project goals.
- How the parents of children who have enrolled in the scholarship program are experiencing the program so far.

¹ This summary is taken from a larger report describing in more detail the implementation progress. The larger issue brief report is available from MELF.

² SRI staff conducted 33 semistructured qualitative interviews with key staff from MELF (funders and scholarship model developers) and from programs and agencies involved in implementation of the scholarship pilot model program. All interviews were recorded digitally and notes were taken during the interviews.

The information from the brief can be used to identify the following:

- Activities and strategies that should be continued.
- Changes in activities and strategies that should be made to improve implementation.
- Issues or challenges that need further discussion, consideration, planning, and/or resources to improve implementation and meet the goals of the pilot project.

Findings: Part 1—Implementation Plan for the Pilot Project

The developers (Rolnick and Grunewald) and individuals representing MELF were asked about the impetus for the pilot of the scholarship program and their vision of the scholarship program addressing early childhood issues. The respondents articulated key features of the model including the following:

- The model rests on the assumption that in a market-driven system, people behave in their best interests (i.e., parents are invested in the best interests of their children, the child care workforce and ECE program administrators want to make a living).
- In developing the scholarship model, the developers kept in mind three principles which guided the program and implementation:
 - **Provision of financial resources to families.** It is essential that parents from low-income families be 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.
 - **Increased accountability.** It is essential that ECE programs be held accountable to produce positive results (e.g., get children ready to be successful in school). Programs that produce positive results will be eligible to receive higher payments, in the form of scholarships, for the children they serve, thus incentivizing ongoing performance. If programs are provided with incentives to produce positive results, they will respond to produce positive results.



- **Parent empowerment.** It is essential that low-income parents be given information that can help them make good choices about how best to support their children’s early learning and school readiness. If parents are given the information about the characteristics and benefits of high-quality ECE programs for their children’s learning and school readiness and the monetary resources needed to access these programs, the empowerment will create demand, which in turn will promote long-term sustainability of the supply of high-quality ECE programs.

How is implementation progressing?

- As of July 2008, 194 children met eligibility requirements to receive scholarships in 2008.
 - 106 children were eligible for a scholarship to enroll in programs beginning September 1, 2007. These children are considered the ramp-up cohort 1 and will have received between 6 and 18 months of high-quality ECE program exposure depending on when the family found a program in which to enroll their children and when the children could enroll. As of July 2008, however, only 42 of these children were enrolled in 11 Parent Aware-rated programs using the scholarship funds.
 - 88 children have been determined to be eligible for a scholarship to enroll in programs beginning September 1, 2008. These children are considered the first group of children to receive the maximum amount of scholarship to enable them to attend 2 full years of a high-quality ECE program before entering kindergarten (cohort 2). As of July 2008, none of these children was enrolled in a Parent Aware-rated program using their scholarship funds.
- Another 188 children have met eligibility requirements.
 - Cohort 3 will not be eligible to enroll in an ECE program using their scholarship funds until September 1, 2009; they also will receive the maximum amount of scholarship and ECE program attendance (i.e., 2 years). Currently, 63 children are in this group and signed up to receive the scholarship next year.
 - 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 ($N = 47$).

Findings: Part 2—Interview Respondents’ Perception of the Goals and Vision of the Early Childhood Scholarship Model

Interview questions were developed to examine whether respondents’ perceptions of the scholarship program and the implementation of the scholarship program are consistent with the vision and assumptions of the scholarship model. Key findings include the following:

- The majority of the 33 respondents described the ultimate goal of the Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship Program as promoting school readiness in children from low-income families.³ Some respondents also mentioned that promoting school readiness will in turn close the academic achievement gap that exists at kindergarten entry and persists throughout the school years for this group of children.
- Some respondents (about one-third) also stated that the goal of the scholarship program is to (1) increase access to high-quality programs for children from low-income families, including increasing available supply of high-quality ECE programs that children from low-income families can access, and (2) empower parents to be involved in their child’s education and educate parents about the benefits and features of high-quality ECE programs.

Findings: Part 3—Interview Respondents’ Perceptions of the Scholarship Program Implementation—Accomplishments, Successes, and Challenges

Accomplishments and successes of early implementation

- A common theme across respondents was that getting an innovative project like the scholarship pilot program off the ground was a feat in itself. A number of respondents commented that there were no blueprints to look to that would direct the implementation.
- Respondents viewed the outreach strategies as effective for getting the word out and having influence in the pilot community.

³ SRI International staff did not ask specifically what respondents meant by the term “school readiness,” although several respondents volunteered that they thought readiness includes cognitive, language, social, and motor skills.



- Respondents viewed the scholarship program as reaching “unreachable populations,” including new immigrant populations, as a huge success so far (e.g., refugees from Burma/Myanmar and Thailand, and Hmong families, as supported by the enrollment data from the implementation team).
- Some of the respondents considered the fundraising a success and an accomplishment in that the scholarship funds are enough to pay the cost of high-quality care for children who otherwise could not access high-quality ECE programs.
- Representatives from the Parent Mentor agencies reported that the scholarship program has impacted the types of families they serve and the way in which they deliver services to 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.

Challenges or barriers to early implementation

The challenges or barriers to implementing the scholarship model were described as of two types: challenges about the conceptualization of the model and challenges about day-to-day administration of the program.

Related to the conceptualization of the model:

- Respondents commented that the competition emphasis in the scholarship model is the opposite of an emphasis on collaboration, which is more widespread and endorsed by early childhood providers. Respondents identified this challenge as a philosophical feature about the scholarship model. The market-based model encourages competition between ECE programs, running counter to several early childhood service delivery tenets—collaboration, partnerships, and integrated and coordinated service delivery. As one respondent put it, a history of collaboration within the early childhood field is based on the fact that there have been limited resources. Therefore, programs and staff have developed cooperative rather than competitive approaches to operate and serve families, particularly low-income families. A competitive model is seen by some individuals as “pitting programs against each other.”
- Respondents expressed concern about whether this pilot project as designed is really a true and

valid test of the market-based scholarship model as intended by the developers. The concern arises mainly because of the length of the pilot project and the anticipated sustainability of scholarship funding. The fact that the funding for the pilot project has been planned to be limited to 4 years may influence how the market will respond. Consider, for example, the following:

- Will ECE programs locate in the pilot community or expand their existing facilities or staff when there is no guarantee that the scholarship funds will continue beyond 2011? A number of ECE providers commented that many programs are not likely to change their staffing patterns or program capacity without guaranteed funding (e.g., Head Start, 3-year pre-K classrooms in public schools).⁴
- Are the planned 4 years for the pilot project long enough for supply to increase?
- Are 4 years long enough for programs to reach 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”?

- The pilot project scheduled start-up of the provision of scholarships and the Parent Aware rating system at roughly the same time period, thereby creating supply and demand problems.

Related to the administration of the model:

- Most respondents noted that there has been a **lack of clarity in many of the operational procedures**. Four issues were highlighted:
 - Outreach strategies and procedures.
 - Communication of program requirements with families.
 - Role of parent mentors and training to implement the scholarship program model.
 - Methods by which ECE programs receive and share funding.

⁴ The time limit also affects credibility of the program. Several of the respondents who work closely with staff to explain the scholarship program to families are anxious about the fact that many of the children in the infant cohorts will not receive a scholarship because the program will end before their child reaches 3 years of age.



- **Limitations in supply** of available ECE programs and slots.
- **Lack of transportation** needed by some families.
- Need for more **collaborative partnership** with program staff participating in the pilot program.

Findings: Part 4—Focus Groups with Parents

Focus groups were held in June 2008 with parents who have enrolled their children in the scholarship program. Parents who speak Karen (from Burma/Myanmar) and Hmong were specifically selected for these initial focus groups because they represent the largest percentages of families enrolled so far. Selected findings are summarized about how parents heard about the program, why they chose to participate, and their early experiences with enrollment, parent mentors, and Parent Aware.

- Parents learned about the scholarship program in several different ways, but most learned about it from a caseworker.
 - Across both groups, 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.
 - Each group of parents described different kinds of support and information they received from parent mentors as being helpful (e.g., health and safety information, parenting information, referrals, locating programs).
 - A few of the Hmong-speaking parents had enrolled their children in ECE programs, and they cited several reasons for their choices, both educational and logistical. None of the Karen-speaking families who attended the focus groups had enrolled their children in ECE programs using the scholarship funds.
- 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 ECE programs.

Summary and Next Steps

This summary describes salient successes and challenges so far and identifies issues for the implementation team and MELF to consider, issues (1) warranting additional examination or attention, (2) requiring a change in implementation procedures or policies, or (3) suggesting the need for monitoring over the next year. Of particular importance are the following questions for consideration:

- Is it necessary to have a shared vision about the goals and expected outcomes about the pilot project, and what are the possible consequences of not having such a shared vision? If needed, how will such a vision be disseminated?
- Is the time-limited nature of MELF, the scholarship program, and the evaluation adversely affecting MELF's ability to adequately test the scholarship model?
- What can the implementation team do to increase the supply of high-quality ECE programs and slots for scholarship-eligible children to attend without interfering with the test of the market-based model upon which the scholarship program model is based?
- As currently implemented, is the parent empowerment feature of the scholarship model happening as intended? Are parents really "choosing" a high-quality ECE program? Are parent mentors doing much of the work of finding potentially suitable programs on behalf of the parents? Does the model intend for ECE program staff to recruit parents and help them complete the applications?