Findings for White Earth Nation: Evaluation of Minnesota’s Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Access Strategies: Scholarships and Title I PreK Incentives for Years 1–3

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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 the White Earth Transformation Zone 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).¹

**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 White Earth Transformation Zone?**

The White Earth Transformation Zone included all of the White Earth Indian Reservation. The White Earth Reservation is located in northwestern Minnesota and encompasses three Minnesota counties—all of Mahnomen, almost all of the northern half of Becker, and the southwest corner of Clearwater. Enrollment for the White Earth Nation is approximately 19,000 members. According to the U.S. Census, the reservation’s total population was 9,251 in 2010, with 4,250 American Indians (45.9%); however, many tribal members live in cities adjacent to reservation borders and are served by tribal programs, so a more accurate representation of the Native American population in the area was 10,039 in 2012, as served by the White Earth Indian Health Service.

The White Earth Child Care/Early Childhood Program (WECC/ECP) administered the RTT-ELC Scholarships for the White Earth Transformation Zone and also serves as a resource hub for many of the early childhood initiatives active on the reservation. WECC/ECP is under the auspices of the tribal government’s Education Division and has been in existence since 1993, when the White Earth Reservation received the Child Care Development Block Grant from the Office of Child Care. WECC/ECP is responsible for administering child care assistance to eligible families and providing
licensing assistance to eligible individuals to become licensed for child care through the White Earth Reservation. A White Earth Reservation Transformation Zone (WERTZ) Advisory Committee, which had representation from ELD programs, school districts, Head Start/Early Head Start, parents, elders, Tribal Council Administration, Indian Child Welfare, and others, was formed to provide guidance to the staff overseeing the RTT-ELC grant.

White Earth had a number of resources in place supporting early childhood development before the start of the RTT-ELC grant. These included a number of tribally licensed child care centers and family child care programs, county-licensed family child care programs, a parent mentor program, literacy mentors, nurse home visitors, two Head Start programs (White Earth and Mahube Head Start), Early Head Start, parenting workshops, a Bemidji Regional Interdistrict Council (BRIC) special education program, and various events and resource guides available to the community.

Despite these existing resources, families in White Earth had unmet needs. Data from a study conducted in 2009–2011 by Minnesota State University-Moorhead indicated that 795 children were under age 5 on the reservation (data from 2006–2010). About one-third of them (34%) were living at or below the poverty level, and only about 60% of 3- to 4-year-olds on the reservation were participating in an ELD program. Additionally, White Earth had—and continues to have—a limited supply of high-quality ELD programs. The university researchers estimated that approximately 492 spaces were available in ELD programs (of all quality levels) across the reservation. Of these slots, 287 spaces were dedicated to 4-year-olds. RTT-ELC Scholarships were seen as means both to give ELD programs the incentive to become Parent Aware rated and to assist families in paying for high-quality ELD programs. Children (both enrolled tribal members and nonmembers) living on the White Earth Reservation, as well as in areas immediately bordering the reservation, were eligible to apply for RTT-ELC Scholarships.


Three of those districts (Bagley, Fosston, and Waubun-Ogema-White Earth) applied for and received Title I PreK Incentive “planning and preparation” grants from MDE in the 2012–2013 school year. These small grants were offered exclusively to White
Earth districts on a one-time basis to build capacity and encourage participation in the Title I PreK Incentives program. In the 2013–2014 and 2014–2015 school years, these three districts plus Detroit Lakes School District applied and were approved for funding.  

**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 White Earth?

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.

White Earth signed its RTT-ELC contract in September 2012, and the White Earth Child Care/Early Childhood Program began awarding RTT-ELC Scholarships in November 2012. To empower parents and build capacity among families, White Earth RTT-ELC Scholarship use was linked with parent education. To receive RTT-ELC Scholarships, parents agreed to work with a parent mentor, who visited their home, and attend two parent trainings on child development per year. When funding for two of White Earth’s four parent mentors ended in Year 2, WECC asked child care providers to offer more parent mentoring. Interview respondents found that this was largely sufficient since many families worked and were not available for home visits during the day.

White Earth prioritized awarding RTT-ELC Scholarships to young children (age 2 or younger), leaving fewer funds to enroll new families in subsequent years. This low turnover meant that many children received more than 1 year of continuous care, and only a small number of new slots opened in Year 2 and Year 3 when some children exited the RTT-ELC Scholarships program to enter kindergarten. These were rapidly filled using the established wait list. In Year 1, White Earth established a ranking system to select the highest-needs families to receive the RTT-ELC Scholarships. Interviewees reported that the risk ranking system, which was used in the following years as well, prioritized nonworking families. However, because these families were harder to enroll, most families that received RTT-ELC Scholarships were working families. The RTT-ELC Scholarship amounts awarded varied from family to family, since they were based on the availability of other funding sources. For children already receiving funds from the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), those funds were used first. For those who were CCAP eligible and on the wait list, the RTT-ELC Scholarship was used first, since they were not yet receiving CCAP funds. Because the RTT-ELC Scholarships lack the parental work requirements of CCAP, the scholarships enabled WECC to provide the highest-needs families in the community with access to high-quality early learning programming.

“Because we have scheduling flexibility, that gives parents some options to put their child into the programming where they think their child will do the best.”
Who used RTT-ELC Scholarships in White Earth?

According to RTT-ELC Scholarship application data, White Earth awarded 186 RTT-ELC Scholarships to children over the course of the 3-year evaluation, all of whom had parents who consented to share their information with the RTT-ELC evaluation team. Information from this sample is summarized below.

- White Earth awarded 121 RTT-ELC Scholarships in Year 1, an additional 23 were added in Year 2 for a total of 144, and 42 were added in Year 3 for a cumulative total of 186.8
- More than half (62%) of the children using RTT-ELC Scholarships were under age 3 when their funds were awarded. Two-thirds (66%) were American Indian or Alaska Native, about one-fifth (21%) were biracial, 13% were White, and all (100%) spoke English as their primary language. Nearly half (49%) were female.
- One third (33%) of children were still using RTT-ELC Scholarships as of October 1, 2015, and 15% of children had received funding for an unknown duration. Few children (2%) used less than 4 months of RTT-ELC Scholarship funding. Fifteen percent used between 4 and 8 months, and 12% used between 8 and 12 months. Almost one-fourth (22%) used a year or more of RTT-ELC Scholarship funding.
- More than half (55%) of the primary caregivers of the children using RTT-ELC Scholarships had attended some college classes or had an associate’s degree. Two-thirds (67%) of parents/guardians were employed full-time or part-time.
- More than half (55%) of the children who used RTT-ELC Scholarships lived in single-parent households. Almost one-fourth (22%) of the children lived with other relatives or foster families.
- Among families using RTT-ELC Scholarship funds, more families used CCAP funds than used Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) funds (32% compared with 24%).

![Age of Children with RTT-ELC Scholarships in White Earth](image)
How did the supply of ELD programs change over time in White Earth?

According to data from NACCRRAware:

- The supply of ELD programs in White Earth increased over time. In April 2013 (Year 1), White Earth had 31 ELD programs. By April 2015 (Year 3), the supply of ELD programs had increased to 40, representing a 29% increase from Year 1 to Year 3.
  - Of the 31 ELD programs in Year 1, 7 were center-based sites and 24 were family child care programs (FCCs).
  - Of the 40 ELD programs in Year 3, 12 were center-based sites and 28 were family child care programs.

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

According to data from the Parent Aware website:

- The number of programs participating in Parent Aware increased over time. In July 2013 (Year 1), 15 sites were rated in Parent Aware, representing a 48% participation rate. By July 2015 (Year 3), 18 sites were rated in Parent Aware, representing a 45% participation rate.

- The number of 3- and 4-star-rated programs increased over time. In July 2013 (Year 1), 14 Parent Aware–rated sites were rated 3 or 4 stars, representing 45% of all existing ELD programs. By July 2015 (Year 3), 18 sites were rated 3 or 4 stars, representing 45% of all existing programs.

What else did we learn about ELD programs?

What did the ELD programs in White Earth report on their surveys?

To further understand the characteristics of the ELD programs in White Earth 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), 39 ELD program surveys were sent in White Earth and 12 (31%) were completed. Of these 12 programs, 2 were center based and 10 were family child care programs. In addition, 7 were Parent Aware rated and 3 had no plans to become rated, with missing data for 2 programs. Findings should be interpreted with caution; because of the low response rate, findings may not be representative of all ELD programs in White Earth. 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.11

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

- More than half (58%) of White Earth programs that returned the ELD surveys in Year 3 used a formal curriculum.

- More than half (58%) of the programs in White Earth that returned ELD surveys were either already rated or in the process of becoming rated in Parent Aware, and 43% 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 of programs (90%) 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.

- One-fourth (25%) of teachers working in White Earth ELD programs that returned the surveys had bachelor’s degrees. More teachers in center-based programs (30%) than in family child care programs (20%) had bachelor’s degrees.

- One-fourth (25%) of program directors in White Earth ELD programs that returned the surveys had bachelor’s degrees. Most (80%) of the program directors were White and female; 20% identified as Native American. Almost all (99%) were female. The average age was 40.

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

According to self-reported data from ELD surveys, 7 of the 12 surveys completed were from programs that reported serving RTT-ELC Scholarship recipients.12 Responses from these programs indicated that the RTT-ELC Scholarships enabled roughly half (3 of 7, or 43%) of programs to provide higher-quality programming and more comprehensive services to children.

- RTT-ELC Scholarships enabled programs to increase services by increasing the number of days of service each week, providing parent support or education services, and providing summer programming.

- RTT-ELC Scholarship funds enabled 3 ELD programs to open 10 additional slots to serve more high-needs children and/or improve the quality of their ELD programs.
• 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 otherwise would be 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 White Earth?**

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

• RTT-ELC Scholarships increased access to high-quality early childhood programming for high-needs children in the community. Many families that previously had little access to ELD programming, including foster families and families headed by grandparent caretakers, could now enroll their children in Parent Aware–rated family child care programs and child care centers.

• Linking RTT-ELC Scholarships with parent mentoring and workshop attendance enabled parents to learn what constituted high-quality child care and how to seek it.

• The quality of ELD programming in the community continued to improve because ELD programs had undergone the Parent Aware rating process. The availability of RTT-ELC Scholarships acted as a direct incentive for ELD programs to achieve 3- or 4-star status.

• Tying RTT-ELC Scholarship eligibility to Parent Aware participation resulted in more children’s receiving developmental assessments.

• Many ELD programs in White Earth used Teaching Strategies GOLD® to meet Parent Aware requirements, and this information was used to improve instruction as well as inform parents of their children’s progress.

“I got comments from Kindergarten teachers that it is so nice to start the year with kids understanding classroom behavior—they can tell when students have been in the [RTT-ELC Scholarship funded] PreK program.”
What did White Earth parents say were the impacts of the RTT-ELC Scholarship?

Knowing that our child was in a good child care program that provided many skills to our child helped ease our worry about our child’s safety and wellbeing.

I was not making much money at the time. It was hard to keep up on bills and having the scholarship helped me not to have to worry about how I would pay for childcare.

I am a grandmother raising my grandchildren and also working full time. This scholarship greatly assisted me in providing transportation to and from the Head Start. I am very thankful for the help I received.

I feel that as a family we have been able to provide our children with a better and financially stable home and expert childcare where they can learn and grow.

If I did not receive the scholarship, I would not have been able to work.

[The RTT-ELC Scholarship] helped us ensure that our child could go to a quality daycare.

Across all four Zones and in White Earth, 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.

In White Earth, respondents noted some unique challenges:

- In the first year of implementation, interviewees noted some initial difficulties because, as a sovereign nation, White Earth needed to be treated as another agent entirely. Interviewees believed it needed to be involved in early planning meetings along with MDE, the state Departments of Human Services and Health, and others. However, the relationship between MDE and other agencies improved over the grant’s implementation.

- The lack of dedicated planning time was especially challenging in White Earth because, unlike some other Zones, it did not have prior experience implementing other similar scholarship programs.

- The White Earth Transformation Zone struggled to build workforce capacity. White Earth is a sovereign nation, and interviewees noted that local families were often distrustful of non-community members. However, the rural setting and low population density meant that the supply of potential service providers within the community was relatively low.

### Findings about Title I PreK Incentives

**How did White Earth’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.

Four school districts in White Earth used RTT-ELC Title I PreK Incentives during the course of the grant: Bagley School District, Detroit Lakes School District, Fosston School District, and Waubun-Ogema-White Earth School District. In general, the districts in White Earth used funds to enhance program quality and increase program length in hours per day, days per week, or weeks per year. The districts in White Earth generally continued to use funds in Year 2 and Year 3 as planned and implemented in Year 1. Uses of Title I PreK Incentive funds over the years included, but were not limited to:
- In the Bagley School District, the funds enabled the district to expand its small school-based early childhood program by opening additional slots and providing longer days while reducing class size.

- In the Detroit Lakes School District, the funds were used to enhance program quality by adding a defined preschool curriculum and by supporting additional training for teachers and an ongoing assessment program, and they enabled the district to increase the length of each day. Detroit Lakes also hired a part-time licensed preschool teacher to provide additional support for students.

- In the Fosston School District, the funds were used to implement a math assessment program, provide a monthly parent newsletter and parent education sessions, provide support time for preschool staff to meet with K–6 staff to discuss alignment, and increase the length of the preschool year.

- In the Waubun-Ogema-White Earth School District, the funds supported program quality enhancements including the hiring of an Ojibwe language and culture specialist and a paraprofessional to support the preschool teacher.

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

**White Earth Reservation Border Schools’ Use of Title I PreK Incentives: Increased and Flexible PreK Programming**

**Brianna and Teresa Get Ready for Kindergarten**

The Fosston School District, which borders the White Earth Reservation, used Title I PreK Incentives to fund additional preschool days and provide alternate schedules to better serve families as illustrated by two examples. The story of Brianna, a young child from a low-income, single-parent family, illustrates the impact additional preschool days can have on a child. Brianna’s home environment provided limited opportunities for learning, and she entered her preschool program with low scores on preliteracy assessments. By the end of this extended school year, her scores had improved dramatically. The additional days of programming helped Brianna to succeed in meeting all the kindergarten benchmarks the following year when she entered kindergarten.

Similarly, Teresa’s family benefited from the Fosston School District’s alternative schedule to meet individual family needs for full-time programming. Teresa’s parents were unable to pick her up or drop her off in the middle of the day, so she could not attend the original half-day programming that the district typically provides. The provision of an alternative, full-day preschool schedule enabled Teresa to attend preschool and have the opportunity to gain valuable school experience before starting kindergarten. Although Teresa was withdrawn and hesitant to participate in learning activities when she entered the preschool program, her participation and full engagement increased as she became actively involved in activities that helped her develop the skills necessary for kindergarten success. Once she entered kindergarten, her teachers noted that Teresa showed great confidence and displayed a positive attitude toward school and learning.
White Earth’s Use of Title I PreK Incentives: Additional Preschool Slots
Jeanette Makes New Friends

Four-year-old Jeanette’s father lost his job about a year ago, so her mother started a daycare in their home as a source of income. Jeanette had some difficulty adjusting to her mother’s needing to give attention to the other children, especially the younger infants and toddlers, so her parents hoped to send her to a preschool program where she could socialize with other children her age. Living in rural Bagley, the only center-based preschool program available was the one at Bagley School (the next nearest program with openings being 25 miles away in Bemidji). Fortunately for Jeanette and her family, the Bagley School District had recently been able to increase enrollment because of an infusion of funding from both the Title I PreK Incentives and Pathway II Minnesota State Early Learning Scholarships. With the increase in available preschool program slots, Jeanette was able to enroll in the program. Her attendance was further supported through the provision of transportation services, part of the program’s expansion from a half-day to a full-day program. With the district-paid bus transportation, Jeanette’s parents did not need to worry about dropping her off or picking her up from school in the middle of the day, allowing her mother to continue operating the daycare and her father to pursue employment opportunities.

Jeanette was able to participate in a classroom setting with peers her age and gain both academic and social skills. As the year went on, her teacher watched her successfully make friends and learn to work cooperatively with them. Being in the classroom, instead at home with her mother always nearby, Jeanette was able to establish noncompetitive relationships with her peers and practice important social skills, such as sharing. Both her teacher and her parents felt that as a result of this preschool experience, she was more ready to start kindergarten, and her relationships at home had improved as well.

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

Over the three years of the evaluation, White Earth 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:

- Strengthen the partnership between K–12 and early childhood programs in school districts, and motivate preschool and kindergarten teachers to work together to define school readiness in detail and align their teaching.

- Improve children’s access to high-quality preschool programming by increasing the number of classes and creating longer days or a longer school year. More hours enable teachers to spend more time on content areas.

- Provide more flexible program options for families, with a combination of full- and half-day sections in 2-day and 4-day programs.

- Define a standard preschool curriculum and align with kindergarten.

- Add training for teachers and support assessment systems that enable teachers to use data better to inform their instruction.
What did Zone staff say were the challenges of implementing the Title I PreK Incentives in White Earth?

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 White Earth 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 White Earth respondents included:

- Interviewees noted that the application process for Title I PreK Incentives was difficult, was time consuming, and had to be repeated yearly.
- Some program administrators (e.g., Detroit Lakes School District) struggled to find classroom space to accommodate increases in programming.
- Overcoming the perception of PreK as separate from the K–12 education system was difficult in some districts (e.g., Fosston). At the start of the grant period, many in the education community viewed early childhood as being in direct competition with K–12 for funding. Some respondents noted that the improved relationships in the broader education community could be sustainable only if the district committed to dedicating Title I dollars to preschool programming.
- Scheduling challenges made building close relationships between the broader early childhood community and local family child care providers difficult.

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.

“The working relationships forged under RTT-ELC will likely remain once it ends.”
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 relationship 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 The Circle of Life School is a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) school located on the reservation that receives Title I funds through the BIA, so it was unclear whether it was eligible to receive Title I PreK Incentives.

3 Because of differences in readiness levels, school districts in the other three Transformation Zones (Itasca, NAZ, and SPPN) had applied for and received Title I PreK Incentive grants 1 year earlier, for use in the 2012–2013 school year. Because the White Earth districts were delayed in receiving full implementation grants, the evaluation team conducted initial interviews with district staff in November 2013, rather than April/May 2013 as was done in the other Zones. Information from these interviews was provided to MDE as a supplement to the first Annual Report, submitted in November 2013.

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

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

10 From the April 2014 dataset from Child Care Aware of America (NACCRRAware).


12 There is some discrepancy between RTT-ELC Scholarship Application data and the self-reported ELD survey about the number of programs that served RTT-ELC Scholarship recipients. Although 7 ELD survey respondents self-reported serving RTT-ELC Scholarship recipients, data exported from the Scholarship Application database in Year 3 indicate that only 6 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 and Year 3 exports of Scholarship Application data so that the program was not represented in the export data.

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

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