In 2011, Minnesota was awarded RTT-ELC funds. To increase the school readiness of high-needs children by improving access to high-quality Early Learning and Development (ELD) programs, Minnesota is giving some of these funds as RTT-ELC Scholarships to families enrolling children in high-quality ELD programs. Some of the funds are also being given as incentives to school districts to use Title I funds for preschool programs (Title I PreK Incentives). These initiatives are occurring 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.

This brief describes implementation and impacts of the RTT-ELC Scholarships and Title I PreK Incentives in the SPPN in Year 2 of the grant, from September 2013 to September 2014.

Early Childhood in SPPN

The Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood (SPPN) is an area of west-central Saint Paul that includes the Frogtown and Summit-University neighborhoods. This community has close to 2,000 children from low-income families under the age of 6, and relatively few high-quality ELD programs. Early childhood supports in SPPN before the start of the RTT-ELC grant included the following: 10 licensed child care centers, 49 licensed family child care programs, ECFE, 2 School Readiness programs in the Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS), Head Start (2 sites), Early Head Start, the AGAPE school for teens who are pregnant or parenting, the Jeremiah Program for single mothers and their children, and several other activity and enrichment centers.

The SPPN is a community-wide initiative that aims to “provide the academic and social supports children need to succeed in school and in life.” Originating in 2010, SPPN currently provides wraparound supports for children and their families from prenatal through grade 5, centered around three schools located within the
community (Maxfield Elementary, Jackson Elementary, and Saint Paul City School). Approximately 80% of the children living within SPPN are ethnic minorities (with a substantial proportion of immigrants and refugees), and a primary goal of the Promise Neighborhood, consistent with the RTT-ELC grant goals, is to close the educational opportunity gap between these children and their more advantaged peers. Given the high level of diversity, SPPN’s theory of change is centered on culture and increasing the cultural responsiveness of early childhood supports in the community.

**How were RTT-ELC Scholarships implemented?**

SPPN began awarding RTT-ELC Scholarships in early winter 2012–13. The initial strategy for enrolling children was to ask ELD programs in the SPPN to market the RTT-ELC Scholarships to families. ELD programs were encouraged to use the RTT-ELC Scholarships to fill to capacity and serve those on their waiting list. SPPN Community Navigators (staff in the SPPN who work closely with families), public health nurses, and family resource staff were also trained to inform families about RTT-ELC Scholarship availability and help them complete the application.

RTT-ELC Scholarships were awarded on a first-come, first-served basis, but priority for receipt was given to 3- and 4-year-old children. As a result, a higher proportion of children in SPPN aged out into kindergarten in Year 2 relative to other Transformation Zones because they were older at the initial point of award. If a child with an RTT-ELC Scholarship left SPPN before the end of his/her award, those funds follow the child.

In Year 1, RTT-ELC Scholarships could be used in any ELD program that was Parent Aware rated or that was in the process of becoming rated, regardless of actual star rating. SPPN considered this first year to be a grace period for programs, allowing them more time to meet the criteria for a 3- or 4-star rating because of changes made to the rating system after the end of the Parent Aware pilot project. However, the policy was that beginning in January 2014, RTT-ELC Scholarships could be used only in 3- or 4-star-rated programs; 1- and 2-star-rated programs would no longer be eligible for RTT-ELC Scholarship reimbursement. This was necessary to meet the state mandate that RTT-ELC Scholarships provide high-needs children with access to high-quality ELD programming, and it was meant to give programs the incentive to raise their star rating in order to continue to serve children funded through RTT-ELC Scholarships.

**Who received RTT-ELC Scholarships?**

In Years 1 and 2 combined, SPPN awarded RTT-ELC Scholarships to 346 children, 334 of whom (97%) consented to share their information with the RTT-ELC evaluation.
• About two in five children were 4 years or older (43%) when their RTT-ELC Scholarship was awarded, more than one-third were 3 years old (36%), and only 15% of recipients were younger than 3 years old.

• There were slightly more boys (47%) than girls (43%) (10% missing data).

• SPPN RTT-ELC Scholarship recipients were of diverse ethnicities; nearly half the children were African American or of African descent (46%), 13% were biracial, 8% were of Asian descent, and 7% were of Hispanic origin (22% missing data).

• The majority of children receiving RTT-ELC Scholarships spoke English as their primary language (79%). Other languages included Spanish, Hmong, Somali, and Karen.

• Two-fifths of the primary caregivers of the children with RTT-ELC Scholarships had a high school diploma or GED (40%). One-fifth had not completed high school (22%). Almost half were unemployed (43%).

• More than half of the children who received RTT-ELC Scholarships lived in single-parent households (58%).

• Among families receiving RTT-ELC Scholarships, 27% also used CCAP.²

• More than one-third (37%) of families receiving RTT-ELC Scholarships used MFIP.³

How were ELD programs involved?

In Year 2, 16 center-based sites and 40 family child care programs for a total of 56 ELD programs were located in the SPPN.⁴ These 56 ELD programs had 1,499 slots.

• Almost three-fourths of these ELD programs were not yet rated in Parent Aware (71%). Twelve were rated 3 or 4 stars, and four were rated 1 or 2 stars.

• The children with RTT-ELC Scholarships in SPPN were attending 45 ELD programs. The majority of the 45 ELD programs were high quality (84% rated 3- or 4-star) and 4% had a 1- or 2-star rating. One program (2%) was in the process of becoming rated, and the remaining had not yet begun the process of becoming rated.
The RTT-ELC Scholarship Evaluation Survey of ELD Programs

To understand the characteristics of the ELD programs and their participation in the RTT-ELC Scholarship program, online surveys were sent to ELD programs that were either located in the SPPN or served children with RTT-ELC Scholarship funds.

Characteristics of the ELD programs. In Year 2 in SPPN, a total of 88 ELD program surveys were sent and 47 (53%) were completed.

- Half of the teachers in SPPN ELD programs had a Bachelor’s degree or higher (52%).
- Almost all ELD programs in SPPN used a formal written curriculum (91%).
- About one-fourth of Parent Aware-rated ELD programs reported that availability of the RTT-ELC Scholarships had a lot of influence on their decision to become rated (28%).

Improved Access to High-Quality ELD Programs. Similar to Year 1, the 46 ELD programs that reported serving RTT-ELC Scholarship recipients in Year 2 said that the RTT-ELC Scholarships enabled them to provide higher quality programming and more comprehensive services to children.

- The most common way RTT-ELC Scholarships enabled ELD programs to increase services was to provide more continuous care, followed by increasing the number of days each week and increasing the length of day. Less common supplemental services included providing health or developmental screenings, summer programming, parent support and education services, and extended weekend or after-hours care.
- RTT-ELC Scholarships enabled 10 ELD programs to open a total of 126 additional slots to serve more high-needs children.
- These funds also enabled ELD programs 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 RTT-ELC Scholarship recipients reported that the RTT-ELC Scholarships enabled them to serve more families who would otherwise be unable to pay, families with parents who were not working or were homeless, and more children with a disability or special need.

What impacts and successes of the RTT-ELC Scholarships did SPPN staff report?

RTT-ELC Scholarships:

- Increased continuity of care for working families who were struggling to meet ELD program co-payments

“RTT ELC crystallized relationships. We’re now able to see early childhood stakeholders acting in tandem in a way that they might not have without RTT-ELC.”
• Provided necessary economic relief for families, both through tuition assistance and in enabling parents to work
• Enabled children who otherwise would not have had access to attend ELD programs, leading to increased school readiness

**How did school districts use their Title I PreK Incentives?**

In SPPN in Year 2, the Saint Paul Public School (SPPS) District’s Title I PreK Incentives plan included using the funds to

• Hire additional staff, including parent engagement staff in the Title I schools and a part-time data analysis and alignment person
• Provide parent-child classes for parents of children on the SPPS preschool waiting list, as a hybrid of Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) and a preschool program. Parents were in the classroom, with a teacher coaching and modeling interactions with the children for part of the time, and they were in parent education classes for part of the time
• Hold monthly educational evening events for parents in these parent-child classes and other families in the community (e.g., literacy night with the library)
• Implement a summer program that targeted SPPN children entering kindergarten who are also Title I eligible (e.g., low income, dual language learners, have special needs) but had no prior preschool experience
• Create an Early Childhood Network, a forum for ELD program staff serving 4-year-olds (e.g., Family, Friend, and Neighbor care providers, home visitors, child care center staff, principals, and kindergarten teachers) to encourage communication, coordination, and alignment across ELD programs and the schools

**What were the successes of implementation of the Title I PreK Incentives?**

• In Year 2, SPPN’s parent-child classes for children who had no prior preschool program experience served close to 70 families.
• In mid-June through mid-July 2014, more than 400 children were enrolled in the Summer Academy that was created in 2013 using funding from the Title I PreK Incentives. The success of the first Summer Academy led to the program receiving dedicated district Title I funds, and beginning in 2014 it was no longer funded by RTT dollars. Children also benefited from developmental screenings that were conducted as part of these activities.
Another success was the increased communication within SPPS, such as between ECFE and Early Childhood Special Education.

SPPS’s relationship with Think Small (Minnesota’s child care resource and referral agency that administers the RTT-ELC Scholarships in Saint Paul) was also strengthened.

1 Parent Aware is Minnesota’s early learning quality rating system.
2 CCAP = Child Care Assistance Program
3 MFIP = Minnesota Family Investment Program.
4 From the April 2014 data set from the National Association of Child Care Research and Referral Agencies (NACCRRAware).