



Invest Early, Early Childhood Initiative

Year 10 Evaluation Summary

Introduction

Invest Early is a comprehensive early childhood collaborative of four school districts in Itasca County, Minnesota, that serves young children and their families with risk factors that may impede school success. Wilder Research, in conjunction with the Invest Early leadership team and staff, is conducting a longitudinal evaluation of the program. Annual reports document the implementation and assessment of Invest Early and outcomes for the service system, families, and children. Year 10 (2014-15) is defined as May 21, 2014 through May 20, 2015.

In year 10, 494 children age 5 and younger and 426 families participated in Invest Early. Of the children served, 16 percent were infants or toddlers (age 2 or younger), 19 percent were preschool age (age 3), and 65 percent were prekindergarten (age 4 or older on September 1, 2014). Most (78%) are white. Invest Early families had a median income of \$22,073 per year this year. Over a third (38%) of children live in single-parent households.

Invest Early is effective in preparing low-income students with multiple risk factors for school success.

Home learning environments improve over the course of the program year.

In year 10, participating families' home learning environments improved significantly in 8 of 15 items rated. Notable improvements include having developmentally age-appropriate books and art supplies, children exploring outside, and parents talking to children, being a positive role model, and teaching the alphabet, numbers, and verbal manners.

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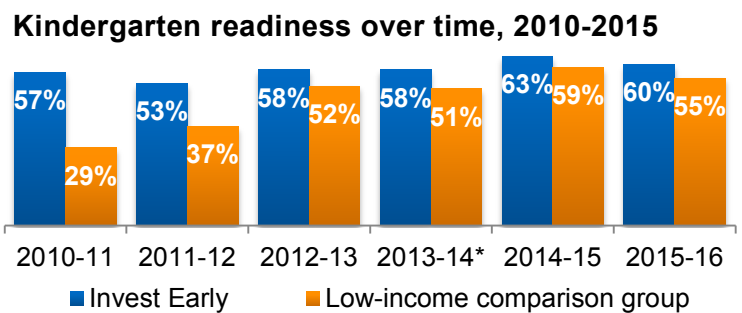
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Invest Early children and families show progress during their participation.

At the end of year 10, 89 percent of the children under age 3, 74 percent of 3 year-olds, and 83 percent of 4-5 year-olds were in the normal range of development on all seven of the domains measured by Teaching Strategies GOLD. This is an increase from 41 percent, 39 percent, and 32 percent, respectively, at the beginning of the program year. Across all ages, the greatest area of growth was in math (32% improved to the normal range), whereas physical development was already an area of strength for many students at the beginning of the year (82% started and remained within the normal range).

Most Invest Early students are prepared for kindergarten.

Of the 2015-16 kindergarten class, 60 percent of the Invest Early low-income students demonstrated school readiness skills and knowledge, compared with 55 percent of the low-income comparison group without Invest Early, School Readiness, or Head Start experience, and 76 percent of their higher-income classmates who were not in Invest Early.



* 2013-14 is adjusted for two of the four districts.

The upward trajectory in kindergarten proficiency among Invest Early students continued this year (60%). In addition, Invest Early students, compared with their low-income peers without Invest Early, tended to be less likely to have the lowest rating of readiness of “not yet” overall (3% vs. 13%).

The kindergarten readiness rate for Invest Early students was 14 percentage points higher than the rate for a subset of the low-income comparison group without Invest Early who have similar risk profiles to Invest Early students (60% vs. 46%).

Invest Early serves higher-risk and underserved populations.

Invest Early students are diverse.

About 22 percent of the children served in year 10 are children-of-color (5%) or indigenous (17%), up from 6 percent in 2006-07. That is a higher proportion than in the general child population of Itasca County (15%).

Invest Early children and families face multiple risk factors.

In addition to being low income, children served by Invest Early have two other risk factors, on average, which put them at risk for delayed child development. The most common risk factors in year 10 are similar to past years: experiencing a family stressor in the past year, such as death, divorce, or unemployment (49%); the family being a single-parent household (37%); the child having no opportunity for socializing with peers (28%); and history or evidence of delays reaching developmental milestones (24%).

This year, as in previous years, the youngest children (under age 3) have two more risk factors, on average, than those age three to five, indicating Invest Early is reaching children with higher needs at a younger age.

Overall, while the percentage of students with multiple risk factors declined for many years, reaching a low point in 2012-13, risk rates have trended upward since then.

Invest Early families experience life stressors.

Staff observed that a third (32%) of parents sometimes or frequently seem overwhelmed or stressed and have difficulties coping with personal or family matters; moreover, over two-thirds (68%) of parents report feeling challenged by life's demands at least sometimes.

Invest Early is a high quality program.

Quality of Invest Early classrooms is high.

Based on classroom observations, Invest Early classrooms were rated of higher quality on the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), on average, than national Head Start and 4-star Parent Aware classrooms. This is similar to previous years.

Families are involved in Invest Early.

Two-thirds (66%) of parents reached or exceeded the goal of committing 30 volunteer hours to Invest Early, the highest proportion yet. Similar to previous years, parents most often volunteered for special events, field trips, and reading to children.

At the end of the program year, nearly all parents (94%) say they frequently communicate in some way with their child's teachers, with the frequency increasing over the course of the year.

Parents rate their experience and satisfaction with Invest Early positively.

Parents were asked to rate their experience and satisfaction with the Invest Early program and staff. Of the 494 families served, 405 (82%) completed the anonymous surveys this year. As in previous years, parents responded positively overall.

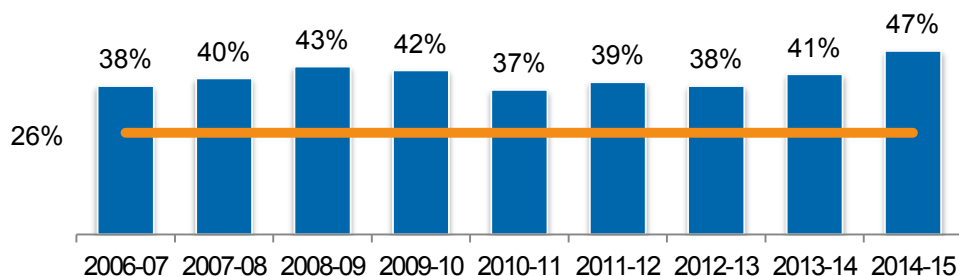
- **Program satisfaction:** 98 percent would recommend the program to others, are satisfied with the education their child received, and say the services they received met their expectations.
- **Feedback on staff:** 98 percent of parents say the staff know a lot about children and how to teach them, respect the parent as an individual, and communicate with them in a way they understand. In addition, 95 percent say staff give parents useful suggestions, recommendations, and advice; and 92 percent say staff are sensitive to their family and cultural issues.
- **Child development impacts:** 97-98 percent of parents say their child has made progress in developing language skills and social skills needed for school.
- **Growth in parenting skills:** 84-85 percent say they better understand their child's needs and development and what their child needs to succeed in school. In addition, 81 percent say involvement in the program helped them to improve their parenting skills; and 77 percent say staff helped them identify their strengths as a parent.

Invest Early is having county-wide impacts for children and families.

Early childhood screenings are happening earlier.

Invest Early children are screened within 45 days of enrollment in the program. County-wide, children are being screened significantly earlier than before Invest Early. This year almost half (47%) of the early childhood screenings were conducted before age 4, compared with 41 percent last year and 26 percent prior to Invest Early. This is the highest percentage since Invest Early's inception. This may be due, in part, to the Invest Early staff referring and successfully linking families to early childhood screening.

Early childhood screening across time, percent screened before age 4 compared to baseline



Early childhood caregivers and teachers are being trained.

In 2014-15, 647 caregivers received some type of early childhood training, far exceeding the goal of reaching at least 200 caregivers per year.

As of year 10, since the start of Invest Year 49 early childhood educators have earned a two-year early childhood degree, three have earned a bachelor's, and three have earned a master's. In addition, 132 have obtained Child Development Certificates.

Kindergarten readiness scores are improving across all low-income students.

Prior to 2012, with regard to kindergarten readiness, Invest Early students outperformed the low-income comparison group by 16-28 percentage points. Beginning in 2012, among low-income students entering kindergarten, the gap between those with and without Invest Early dropped to 5-7 percentage points. This may indicate that Invest Early's service integration across agencies and school districts throughout the county and its professional development strategies are having county-wide positive child development effects.

Low-income 3rd and 5th graders are outperforming low-income students statewide.

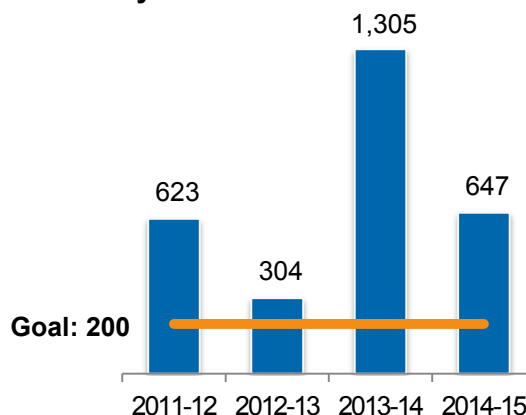
Based on both 3rd and 5th grade MCA test results in the spring of 2015, Invest Early children are performing similarly to the low-income comparison groups in both grades. However, both groups (the Invest Early and comparison groups) are outperforming the achievement levels of low-income students statewide, indicating potential county-wide impacts of Invest Early. In 3rd-grade reading, about half of low-income children meet or exceed standards, compared to 40 percent of low-income students statewide. In 3rd-grade math, over 60 percent of low-income children meet or exceed standards, compared to 53 percent of low-income students statewide. In 5th-grade reading, over half (56-57%) of low-income children meet or exceed standards in reading, compared to 48 percent of low-income students statewide.

Evaluation methods

Kindergarten readiness assessment

Invest Early uses the Minnesota Work Sampling System Kindergarten Entry Developmental Checklist^{®2} developed by the Minnesota Department of Education to assess kindergarten readiness. The checklist is completed by kindergarten teachers during the first couple months after kindergarten entry on five domains: personal and social development, language and literacy, mathematical thinking, the arts, and physical development and health. Each domain is measured by a set of indicators. Students' performance on each indicator is rated: "not yet," "in process," or "proficient."

Number of caregivers trained the last four years



Home learning environments

Invest Early staff members visit participating children's homes to talk with parents about the benefits of providing an educational learning environment at home. Based on their observations and discussions, staff rate participants' home learning environment in terms of the amount of access children have to learning materials and how frequently parents engage in learning activities with their children. Ratings were conducted at the beginning and end of the program year to determine if improvements occurred over time.

Children's growth and development during the program

To assess participants' developmental status and growth, Invest Early staff used the Teaching Strategies GOLD, an observation-based assessment that measures 64 dimensions of 36 objectives in nine developmental areas along a 10 level continuum ("not yet" to level nine). The expectations for each age overlap to acknowledge that children develop in stages at various rates.

Staff also assess preschool children (age 3 through 5) on emergent math and literacy skills using the Individual Growth and Development Indicators (IGDI).

Classroom environments

Invest Early assesses all classrooms on the quality of classroom learning environments using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS).

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For more information

This summary presents highlights of the *Invest Early, Early Childhood Initiative, year 10 evaluation*. For more information about this report, contact Richard Chase at Wilder Research, 651-280-2706.

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