

# Keys to successfully implementing Early Learning Scholarships in combination with Parent Aware

*Prepared for the Minnesota Office of Early Learning by the Minnesota BUILD Initiative*

The 2012 rollout of Early Learning Scholarships and the Parent Aware quality rating and improvement system in Minnesota worked well in some areas but encountered issues with timing, paperwork, perceived relevance and resistance to new requirements. This report does not document and assess all the implementation challenges and success, which are part of other larger evaluations of Parent Aware and Minnesota's Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant. This report simply highlights some examples of where, how and why implementation worked well in the first year among family child care homes, centers, school-based programs and Head Start, according to child care providers and program directors.

## Overview of success factors

Based on personal interviews with seven providers and program directors in Duluth, Itasca County, Minneapolis, and Willmar, four factors emerged that account for successful use of the Early Learning Scholarships in combination with Parent Aware:

- Bank on established early childhood networks
- Recruit families from within
- Use and combine dollars resourcefully
- Emphasize benefits to children and families

### Bank on established early childhood networks

Communities with established public-private early childhood networks or partnerships, such as those facilitated by the Minnesota Initiative Foundations' Early Childhood Initiative, found ways for families, providers and school-based programs to take advantage of the early learning scholarships. Having a supportive school district partner was also helpful.

Willmar Public Schools, for example, expanded its programming for children using Early Learning Scholarships, not by adding classrooms, but by adding satellite sites—a child care center and a licensed family

home—from within its network. The school district provided the training and early learning resources the private providers required for a three star ratings by Parent Aware.

Strengthening early childhood networks and improving the quality of early learning throughout the community helps families access quality early childhood services that meet their needs in their choice of setting. It also enables providers with no student openings to feel comfortable directing families to other quality programs in their network.

*Through our Early Childhood Initiative in Willmar, we have done a lot of work with our early childhood partners... We [the school district] have these satellite [center and licensed home] sites, sharing curriculum and resources. That has opened up another level of communication and trust and respect within the early childhood community. We are able to do more joint professional development. We are truly able to team... It's not a competition. If I have students, I have referred them to the [satellite sites]. That relationship that we have has gone to a new level, which is important to early childhood as a whole.*

## Goal for Parent Aware

Parent Aware, Minnesota's voluntary quality rating and improvement system for early learning providers and programs, is intended to encourage providers and programs to use school readiness best practices and to help all parents find higher-quality early learning via the Parent Aware website. Parent Aware, in combination with Early Learning Scholarships, is a vehicle to ensure access to high-quality care for low-income and high-need children.

Parent Aware's statewide expansion of the full rating process for licensed child care providers kicked off in 2012 in eight Minnesota counties and expanded to 14 additional counties in 2013. Full implementation in all 87 counties is expected by 2015. In addition, all accredited child care providers, Head Start programs, and school-based pre-kindergarten programs statewide are eligible for a streamlined pathway to a Parent Aware rating. Details on the counties and information on the rating process is available on the Parent Aware website, <http://www.parentawareratings.org/>.

Parent Aware is led by the Minnesota Department of Human Services in coordination with the Minnesota Office of Early Learning. Child Care Aware of Minnesota, the state's child care resource & referral network, coordinates local-level implementation. Parent Aware is also supported by a partnership with community leaders through Parent Aware for School Readiness and Greater Twin Cities United Way. Contact Nara Topp at the Minnesota Department of Human Services at [nara.topp@state.mn.us](mailto:nara.topp@state.mn.us) or 651-431-4880 for more information.

## Recruit families from within

The most common way to implement the use of Early Learning Scholarships was through in-reach, recruiting families already enrolled in school-based pre-kindergarten programs, Head Start, centers, and licensed homes. In this way, scholarship dollars were often used to extend a child's time from half day to full day, to fill co-payment gaps, and to ensure continuity of care and to pay for care when families lost their child care assistance.

When children who received scholarships left the program, staff filled the vacancies quickly by using scholarships to recruit families from within strong early childhood networks.

*We have a very full center (Duluth YWCA), so we just focused on sharing the [scholarship] information internally... Parents...are just glad they don't have to pay copays anymore... When we educated parents on the true cost of child care, they were shocked, and then when they heard our center served 70 percent of children on assistance, they were excited to hear that they had the opportunity to help us reach that full cost. And they felt proud! So that has been a really cool part.*

*I knew about Parent Aware and I didn't know about the scholarships. Even without the scholarships, I felt Parent Aware would be good for my [family child care] business, and I felt it would give me more knowledge. The more I got to know about the scholarships, the more information I got, I helped parents in ways I never would have thought... I already had my business where I wanted it. So I wanted to help the people that I already had in it. I will have three going off to school this year, and I have already filled those openings. I have a good business going on. And I didn't think these scholarships would help me because I am already established, but it is great to help these families who have been paying me for years.*

*Video of Kim Foss, licensed family child care provider, Itasca County.*

## Use and combine dollars resourcefully

Even when school-based pre-kindergarten programs and Head Start programs were already at capacity, staff was reluctant to use scholarship funds to open additional classrooms. Staff wanted more assurances the funding would be consistent and ongoing.

However, a few schools, such as Pine City, expanded their pre-k programs. The Kootasca Head Start program, moreover, used scholarship money to open a 10-week summer enrichment program for 17 children headed to kindergarten in the fall. This time-limited, targeted program allowed the program to support children who needed additional help before they were ready for kindergarten without having to rely on a continuing funding stream.

## Emphasize benefits to children and families

Finally, providers and programs that successfully implemented Early Learning Scholarships linked to Parent Aware focused on how the ratings and scholarships benefitted families as much or more than the how they benefitted the programs. They aimed communication to focus on enhancing the early learning experience for children and families more than on the rewards associated with quality ratings to themselves.

*The family child care providers took a while to realize how the ratings would benefit them... They are saying now how much it can help families. Before they were thinking about how it was going to help them. Now they see how it can help their families.*

*I just have the philosophy that we should try anything that could benefit families... We know how hard it is for our parents to make ends meet. We are always searching for a way to keep children here [in center-based care in Duluth] even if they lose their child care assistance. We know when the kids aren't here, they fall behind... My message to other centers is that this is a whole new kind of system, but if we are doing this work for children and families, why wouldn't we do it?*

[Video](#) of Lynn Henderson, Director of YWCA Early Childhood Center, Duluth.

## Funding for Early Learning Scholarships

The Office of Early Learning coordinates state and federally funded early learning scholarships, which can be used to serve additional children, increase a child's time in a program, support continuity of care, and cover parent co-pays, rates not covered by the Child Care Assistance Program, and other fees, including transportation.

State-funded scholarships up to \$4,000 per child were first established in 2011 by the Minnesota Legislature for children ages three to kindergarten entry with an initial appropriation of \$4 million. The 2013 Minnesota Legislature increased the per child scholarships to \$5,000 and the total funding to \$40 million. To receive scholarships, early care and education programs must be involved with Parent Aware.

Federally funded scholarships through the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant are available to low-income families who live on the White Earth Reservation or in Itasca County, St Paul's Promise Neighborhood, or Minneapolis' Northside Achievement Zone. Leaders in these communities determine program eligibility requirements and the maximum scholarship amounts.

For more information about Early Learning Scholarships, contact Lisa Cariveau at the Minnesota Department of Education, 651-582-8332 or [lisa.cariveau@state.mn.us](mailto:lisa.cariveau@state.mn.us)

On a community level, successful use of the Early Learning Scholarships stemmed from prior working-relationships among early childhood professionals and a common vision to create consistent, high-quality early learning environments throughout the community, regardless of where children receive their care. These providers took a broader, cooperative-community approach versus a market-based, competitive approach.

*It is thinking about what is best for your own program and what is going to affect the community as a whole. It isn't just our school-based program in Willmar, but how can we help support others and build that quality within our community... We're looking at the possibility of adding additional satellite sites, continuing to work with other [centers and family providers], ... and trying to connect the community as a whole and not make it a competition, so that across the board, we have a common curriculum so if Susie starts out at a daycare and transfers to a center, what she is getting is similar because they've had common professional development. We're trying to bring the community together as a whole.*

## **BUILD Initiative**

The BUILD Initiative works with early childhood public and private leaders in Minnesota, within nine other states and nationally, to develop comprehensive state-based systems of early childhood policies, programs, and services. BUILD works to ensure access to early learning, health, and family support resources that prepare young children to thrive and succeed. The BUILD Initiative was created in 2002 by the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative as a catalyst for change and as a national resource on early childhood development and policy.

This report is part of an annual evaluation in each BUILD state to highlight progress and share lessons in system development across states.

More information about the BUILD Initiative is online at [www.buildinitiative.org](http://www.buildinitiative.org)

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