

Invest Early: 15 Years of Impacts

Evaluation Results

Prepared for Itasca Area Schools Collaborative by:
Jennifer Valorose and Richard Chase



JANUARY 2020

451 Lexington Parkway North | Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104
651-280-2700 | www.wilderresearch.org

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Key findings

With support from the Blandin Foundation, Invest Early is a comprehensive early childhood collaborative in Itasca County, Minnesota, that serves young children and their families with risk factors that may impede school success. After 15 years, the Leadership Team determined they were interested in learning more about: 1) The demographic, social, and economic trends in Itasca County since Invest Early’s inception; 2) The state of early childhood programming nationally, and 3) What makes Invest Early successful, and what improvements are needed.

As such, in 2019, Wilder Research conducted the following research activities: 1) A literature review; 2) A review of indicators of child and family characteristics and well-being, 3) Qualitative interviews with 22 current and former Invest Early parents; 4) An analysis of key evaluation data; and 5) A facilitated discussion with 38 community partners. Key findings are summarized here.

Invest Early prepares children for school, academically and social-emotionally.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Invest Early models key research-based best practices that contribute to success, including small group size and teacher-student ratios, strong parent-teacher relationships, a quality curriculum, engaging families in goal setting, and linking them to needed services through referrals.✓ 81% of Invest Early children over the last five years have been proficient or close to proficient on kindergarten readiness objectives.✓ Interviewed parents shared that Invest Early helped develop their child holistically in preparation for kindergarten. Children developed social-emotional skills, made academic progress, and became comfortable in a classroom/school setting.
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Invest Early supports parents and helps identify developmental delays early.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Interviewed parents reported they get parenting tips and support from teachers and other parents to help navigate parenting challenges, behavior management, and understanding developmental milestones.✓ Stakeholders believe that embedding mental health and special education providers in the classroom helps identify concerns before they become bigger issues and reduces the stigma of accessing these services.✓ Extending training to parents on social-emotional development of their children can help extend the program success factors to the home environment.
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Home visits are an important component that could be expanded.

- ✓ Research has found that “high quality child care associated with home visits appears to be an effective package of services” (Melhuish et al., 2015).
- ✓ Most interviewed parents shared how their home visits helped build relationships between families and teachers.
- ✓ Invest Early could consider expanding home visits to monthly and starting prenatally, which could help improve maternal health care access and poor birth outcomes in Itasca County.

Invest Early is contributing to the Itasca County economy.

- ✓ Invest Early is the only child care option for some families. Some interviewed parents said that although Invest Early was their only option, they were very happy with it.
- ✓ Invest Early is open five days a week, including extended day and summer hours. Parents are able to work knowing their children are in a safe place.
- ✓ Invest Early employs over 100 people and is building the child care industry in Itasca County through partnerships with colleges and career agencies.

Recommendations for future evaluations

- ✓ Continue annual evaluation to track kindergarten readiness of Invest Early and comparison group students.
 - ✓ Implement revised Family Needs Assessments and Parent Feedback Questionnaire, determine if they provide useful data and qualitative responses, and adjust as needed.
 - ✓ Plan on in-depth interviews, group discussions, and quantitative analysis every five years to keep well-informed of changing conditions and factors that promote or inhibit successful results. Pay particular attention to trends in maternal health care access, including supports for pregnancy and childbirth care coordination.
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Contents

Introduction.....	1
Trends in the school-readiness context in Itasca County.....	3
Demographic profile	3
Safe and stable families	4
Safe and caring communities	6
Best practices in early childhood development	8
Areas of strength	8
Areas of potential growth.....	8
Factors contributing to school readiness among Invest Early students	9
Parent perspectives of the impacts of Invest Early	12
Community members’ perspectives on the impacts of Invest Early.....	18
Direct, intended impacts	18
Community impacts	20
System changes	21
Recommendations for ongoing evaluation	22
References.....	23

Figures

1. Proportion of white residents in Itasca County, 2000-2018	3
2. Children under age five living in poverty and median household income.	3
3. Itasca County births paid for by Medicaid, 2003-2018	4
4. Itasca County births with adequate or better prenatal care, 2003-2018.....	4
5. Itasca County births to teens, 2003-2018.....	5
6. Number of children under age 6 in out of home placements, 2011-2018.....	5
7. Itasca County high school students with a parent or guardian currently or previously in prison	5
8. Proportion of Itasca County high school students graduating on time, 2012-2018....	6
9. Suicide and drug overdose deaths per 10,000 population, Itasca County	7
10. Invest Early students’ kindergarten proficiency by key characteristics, 2013-2018 combined.....	9

Introduction

With support from the Blandin Foundation, Invest Early is a comprehensive early childhood collaborative in Itasca County, Minnesota, that serves young children and their families with risk factors that may impede school success. The core services consist of early childhood education, parent education, health services, and extended-day child care, as well as a variety of support services based on their need or interest, including family development, home visits, mental health support, and transportation. The collaborative, seamless nature of the project promotes service integration across agencies and school districts throughout the county and professional development to all Invest Early staff and others interested in early childhood care and education (parents, grandparents, and child care providers).

The Leadership Team describes the “magic” of Invest Early’s success steaming from the beginning, when the Blandin Foundation had the foresight to see that providers needed to break out of the silos. True collaboration needed to be a full integration of services, and over the years the project has been able to braid multiple funding streams, including: Federal Head Start, School District, Blandin Foundation, State Scholarship and Child Care Assistance dollars, to provide seamless programming and support services for families. In addition to funding, true integration has been achieved within the classrooms. Staff who work for, and are paid by various partners, work as teaching teams that are trained together and are held to the same standards for quality. Children within those classrooms are integrated in a way that is seamless to parents and staff alike.

When Invest Early started, leaders partnered with Wilder Research to develop and implement a longitudinal evaluation plan that tracked a comparison group of students who entered Itasca County schools in the year prior to Invest Early’s inaugural year. Data were collected on both the comparison group and the Invest Early students at various intervals over time for 13 years. This year, however, the Leadership Team determined they were also interested in learning more about:

- The demographic, social, and economic trends in Itasca County since Invest Early’s inception
- The state of early childhood programming nationally
- What makes Invest Early successful, and what improvements are needed

As such, in 2019, Wilder Research conducted the following research activities to supplement the quantitative evaluation data collected annually:

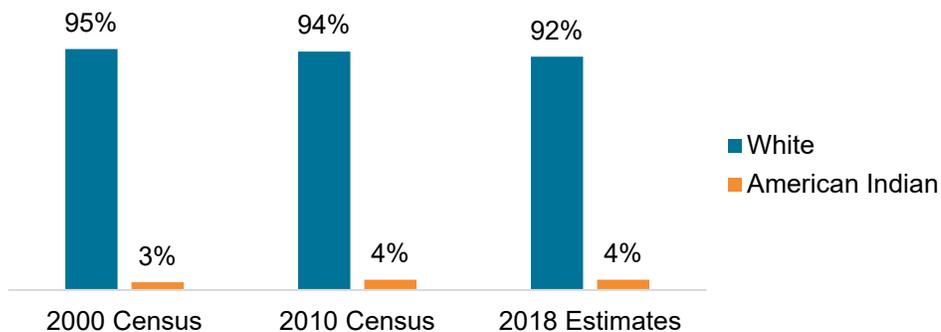
- A literature review of current research and trends in the early childhood field
- A review of indicators of child and family characteristics and well-being, primarily Census data, for Itasca County over the last 15 years
- Qualitative interviews with a selected group of 22 current and former Invest Early parents
- An analysis of key evaluation data points from Invest Early from the last five years
- A facilitated discussion with 38 community partners on the ripple impacts of Invest Early on the community

Trends in the school-readiness context in Itasca County

Demographic profile

Itasca County has about 45,000 residents. While Minnesota has gotten more racially and ethnically diverse over the last two decades, 92% of Itasca County residents identify as white, only a slight change from the 2000 Census when 95% of residents identified as white (Figure 1). The next most common identified race or ethnicity is American Indian, about 4%. In comparison, about 17% of Invest Early students identify as American Indian.

1. Proportion of white residents in Itasca County, 2000-2018



Source: Decennial Census (2000 & 2010); Annual Population Estimates (2018), Census Bureau, Itasca County

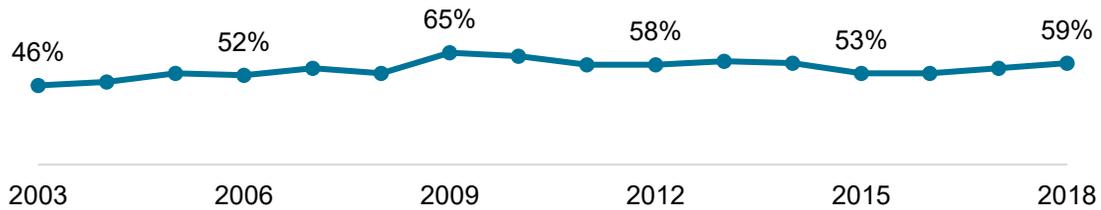
There are about 2,400 children under age five in Itasca County. About one in four (or 477 children) are living below the poverty line, a proportion that has remained constant. In comparison, 15% of young children in Minnesota overall are living in poverty (Figure 2). The median household income is about \$60,000 for Itasca County households with children. In comparison, the median household income for Invest Early families was \$34,886 in 2018. Over the last 15 years, the proportion of births paid for by Medicaid, an indicator of the low-income status of birthing mothers, has trended upward (Figure 3).

2. Children under age five living in poverty and median household income.

	Itasca County	
	2008-12	2013-17
Percentage of children under age five living in poverty (for which poverty status is determined)	19% (+/-) 4%	20% (+/-) 7%
Median household income for households with children	\$56,228 (+/-) \$3,065	\$60,078 (+/-) \$6,517

Source: American Community Survey, Census Bureau

3. Itasca County births paid for by Medicaid, 2003-2018



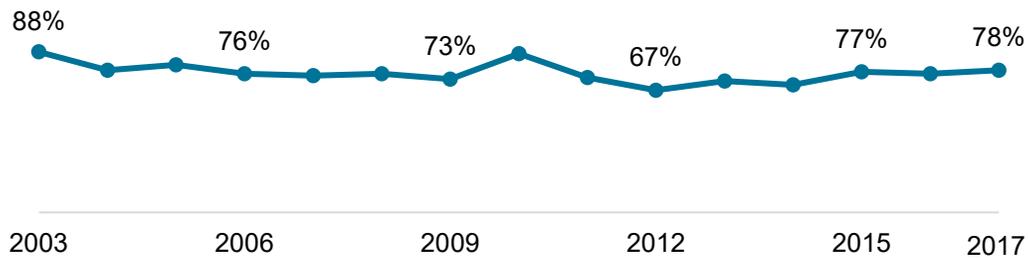
Source: Minnesota Department of Health, Center for Health Statistics, Itasca County

Safe and stable families

In county-by-county comparisons of factors that pertain to healthy child development, Itasca County falls in the moderate to high-risk category, along with 18 other counties in 2015 and 29 other counties in 2018. Low birth weight is the factor rated at highest risk (Minnesota Early Childhood Risk, Reach, and Resilience, 2018); 7% of Itasca County babies are born at a low birth weight, up from 4% in 2013.

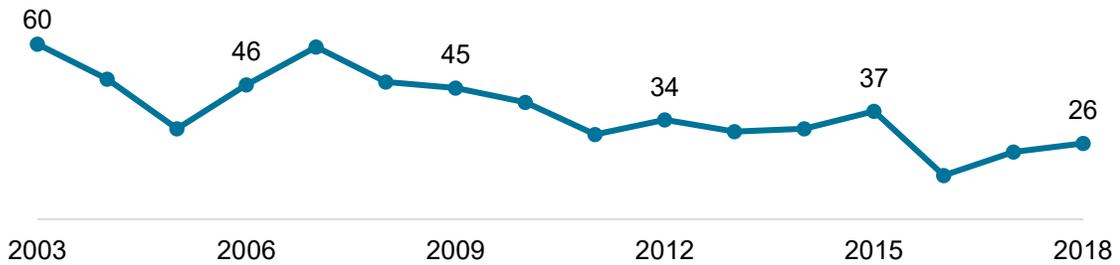
Other factors rated at moderate risk relative to other counties are, fortunately, trending positively. Three of four mothers are getting adequate or better prenatal care, an increase over the last five years (Figure 4). In addition, the number of babies born to teen mothers is trending downward (Figure 5).

4. Itasca County births with adequate or better prenatal care, 2003-2018



Source: Minnesota Department of Health, Center for Health Statistics, Itasca County

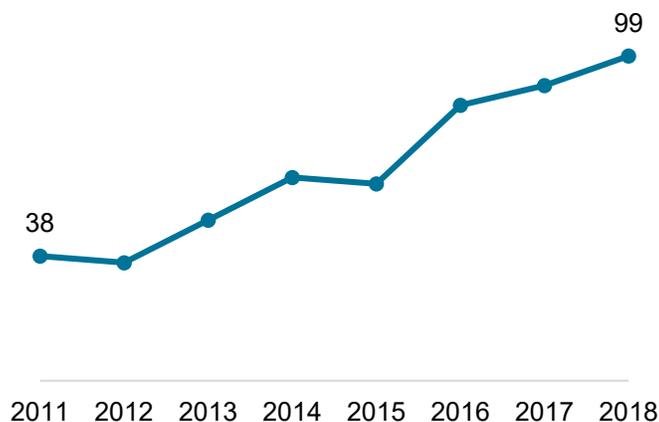
5. Itasca County births to teens, 2003-2018



Source: Minnesota Department of Health, Center for Health Statistics, Itasca County

Child maltreatment is another factor for which Itasca County is rated moderate to high risk. The number of children under age 6 in out of home placements has almost tripled since 2011 (Figure 6).

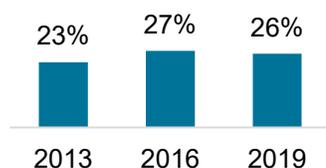
6. Number of children under age 6 in out of home placements, 2011-2018



Source: Minnesota Department of Human Services, Out-of-Home Placement Reports

Children of all ages also face risks when a parent is incarcerated. A quarter of Itasca County high school students report that a parent or guardian previously or currently in prison, a rate that has remained relatively constant over the last six years (Figure 7).

7. Itasca County high school students with a parent or guardian currently or previously in prison



Source: SUMN.org, Minnesota Student Survey, 2013, 2016, and 2019

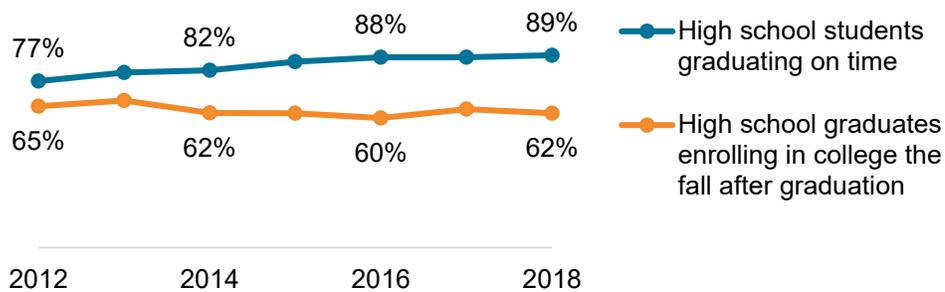
Despite the higher risk rating, in county-by-county comparisons of the reach of health, human service and education programs, Itasca County falls in the moderate to high-reach category. Of note, among eligible families, 66% are accessing WIC, 45% are in MFIP, and 49% are in Head Start or Early Head Start (Minnesota Early Childhood Risk, Reach, and Resilience, 2018).

Safe and caring communities

Educational attainment is increasing.

The rate of high school students graduating has increased in Itasca County over the last seven years, from 77% in 2012 to 89% in 2018 (Figure 8). The proportion of high school graduates matriculating to college the fall after graduation has remained relatively constant between 60-68%. High school students graduating in one of the four Itasca County school districts primarily attend public community colleges immediately following graduation.

8. Proportion of Itasca County high school students graduating on time, 2012-2018

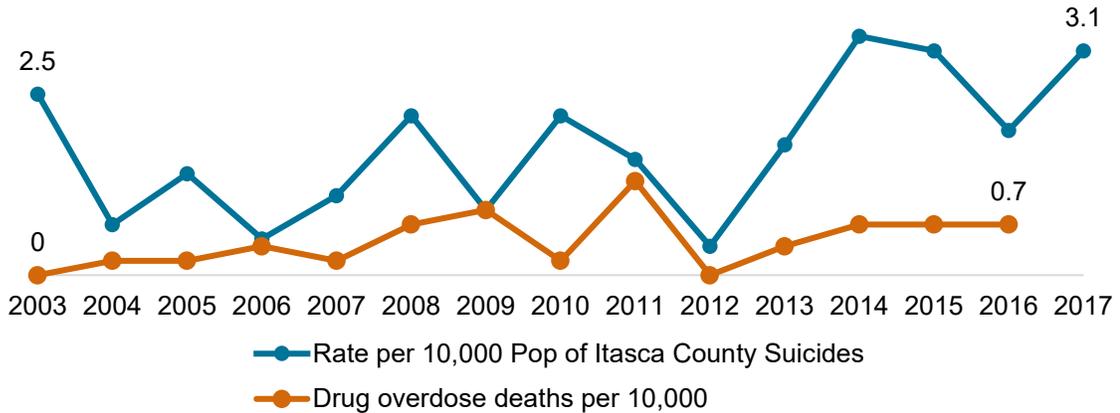


Source: Minnesota Department of Education. <https://education.mn.gov/MDE/Data/> and Statewide Longitudinal Education Data System (SLEDS)

Suicide and overdose rates appear to be increasing.

Rates of suicide and drug overdoses in Itasca County have varied widely over the last 15 years (Figure 9), in part because the county is relatively small, so one person's death has a large impact on the rates. However, rates over the last four years appear to have trended upward, mirroring statewide trends. Statewide data indicate that suicide and overdose victims are more likely to be men ages 25-34 or women ages 35-55, with much higher rates among American Indians than white residents.

9. Suicide and drug overdose deaths per 10,000 population, Itasca County



Source: SUMN.org and Minnesota Department of Health's report: Drug Overdose Deaths among Minnesota Residents, 2000 – 2017.

Summary of trends in Itasca County

The trends with regard to fewer births to teens and improved high school graduation rates point to a future in which preparing young children for school success may be less challenging. In the near term, however, high rates of poverty, low birth weights, child maltreatment reports, and suicide and drug overdose deaths indicate that Invest Early's approach to identifying and serving children and families with multiple risk factors is vitally needed and faces tough headwinds to achieve higher rates of school readiness.

Best practices in early childhood development

Wilder Research presented findings from a literature review to the Invest Early leadership team and prepared a separate literature review document in 2019, based primarily on research from the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University and Oxford University's CARE Project. Wilder found that Invest Early is a strong program that continues to be aligned with early childhood best practices, as indicated by both the literature review and the ongoing evaluations conducted for the last 14 years. Key areas of strength and growth are noted here.

Areas of strength

- Group size and ratios in the preschool and pre-kindergarten classrooms are lower than the licensing requirements.
- The curricula, Creative Curriculum and Incredible Years, and the CLASS assessment tool in all classrooms support ongoing quality and continuous quality improvement.
- Evaluations demonstrate the strong relationships parents have with teachers and staff.
- Through Head Start, goal setting is done with each family to increase their family stability, and referrals are provided through Invest Early's network of partners to help family's address a multitude of challenges, including unemployment, lack of adequate housing, and medical or dental needs, among others.

Areas of potential growth

- Increasing home visits to monthly from twice a year would increase family support and learning at home.
- Starting home visits prenatally would address family and child health and development needs earlier.
- Video coaching and training for parent management trainings to address specific behavior issues and co-locating mental health services would improve access to mental health support without parents going to another site.

All these growth areas are resource intensive and will need to be balanced with the costs of the existing program elements.

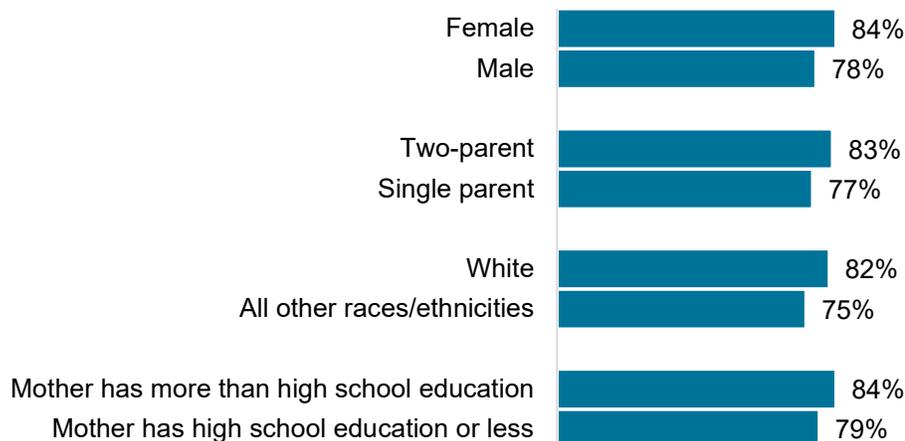
Factors contributing to school readiness among Invest Early students

Over the last five years (2013-2018), 1,335 Invest Early students started Kindergarten in one of the four collaborative school districts. Based on assessments done by Kindergarten teachers within the first month of school, 1,078 (81%) of these Invest Early students are “proficient” or “in process high” on the Work Sampling Minnesota Kindergarten Checklist. Given all these students had exposure to high quality, early childhood program through Invest Early, what factors indicate that some students are “ready,” whereas others are not? An analysis of the last five years indicates that those who are “ready” for kindergarten are more likely to (Figure 10):

81% of Invest Early students are “proficient” or “in process high” on the Work Sampling Minnesota Kindergarten Checklist.

- Be white and/or female
- Live in two-parent families
- Have more highly educated parents (more than a high school diploma)
- Have working parents
- Have parents involved in their child’s education
- Have not experienced family stress in the past year
- Have fewer than two additional risk factors, in addition to low-income

10. Invest Early students’ kindergarten proficiency by key characteristics, 2013-2018 combined



These results support greater attention to a two-generational approach. Children do better when their parents are educated, employed, and involved, even though they may have low incomes.

50 Invest Early students graduated in spring 2019.

Invest Early offered services to the first cohort of pre-kindergarten students in 2005-06. Fourteen years later, 50 of these students graduated from high school in Itasca County. Children are exposed to many different life experiences from pre-kindergarten through high school graduation, both at home and in the school environment. Thus, knowing the effect a quality pre-kindergarten experience has on high school graduation is a challenge. However, several longitudinal research studies show that a quality early learning experience helps put children on the right path for long-term school success.

What does this mean in terms of program effectiveness? Graduation data can be examined two ways to determine whether Invest Early students graduate at higher rates than their peers. We can track students who were in the cohort to see where they are now, and can look at the graduating class to see which students were in Invest Early. In both cases, described below, Invest Early students appear to be graduating at slightly higher rates than low-income peers, however, the status of many students remains unknown.

The 2006-07 kindergarten class

In the fall of 2006, 470 children started kindergarten in one of the four districts (83 of whom attended Invest Early), and barring moving, transfers or being held back, these students would be eligible for high school graduation in spring 2019. Of those who stayed in the Itasca County schools, 91% of Invest Early students graduated this year, and, of the five remaining, four are still in school. Only one is known to have dropped out. In comparison, 88% of comparison group children, who were identified as being low-income (eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch in kindergarten), graduated. Among other children, who were not eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch, 96% graduated.

Kindergarten class of 2006, N=470	Status unknown	Graduated in 2019	Cumulative GPA	Dropped out	Still in school
Attended Invest Early (83)	28	50 (91%)	3.02	1	4
Comparison group (FRL in K) (88)	39	43 (88%)	2.62	2	4
All other kids (299)	87	203 (96%)	3.16	4	5

The 2019 senior class

In 2018-19, 580 seniors were in one of the four districts. Fifty-five seniors attended Invest Early, 91% of whom were graduating. In comparison, 86% of low-income seniors graduated. Ninety percent of all other seniors graduated (those that did not get free or reduced-priced lunch during their senior year).

Senior class of 2019, N=580	Moved/ transfer	Graduated	Cumulative GPA	Dropped out	Still in school
Attended Invest Early (55)	0	50 (91%)	3.02	1	4
Low-income (FRL) seniors (172)	5	148 (86%)	2.81	9	10
All other seniors (353)	6	320 (90%)	3.04	14	13

Parent perspectives of the impacts of Invest Early

Invest Early classrooms prepare children holistically for kindergarten.

Parents were asked about their child’s classroom experience as well as how they thought the program prepared their child for kindergarten. In response to both questions, parents overwhelmingly noted how the classroom experience helped develop their child holistically.

Most importantly, parents reported on the numerous social-emotional skills their children gained in the program. Among them, children learned how to interact with other children, share, and be respectful to peers and adults. They gained familiarity with school routines, such as eating in a lunchroom, going to the bathroom at school, riding the bus, sitting in a group or at tables, as well as with a school schedule.

My importance is behavior. I feel like they've worked with us on making sure he's able to sit in a classroom, be nice to his friends, keep his hands to himself. Focusing more on those behavioral, social developmental areas are more important, so he's prepared for the classroom, and I feel like they're doing that....Then his academic skills, he already knows how to write his name and his numbers. So his academic stuff has really improved as well.

Parents also acknowledged the academic skills their child learned in the classroom – counting, the alphabet, shapes, and writing their name – that puts them ahead of other children entering kindergarteners.

While the classroom education was a primary driver in building children’s development, home visits, parent communication, and other support services helped parents support this development at home. When specifically asked about the classrooms, parents said they appreciated classroom routine, variety of activities, small class sizes, play-based learning, and individualized attention.

Many parents are referred to Invest Early; others chose it because of the full-time schedule or the high-quality programming.

Some interviewed parents reported being referred to Invest Early from ECFE parent educators, special education, or foster care social workers. Others were looking for a program that was all day, every day, even over the summer. They needed a full-time program to allow them to work or, in the case of teen parents, continue going to school. Several had heard good things about the program and the teachers and sought it out. Finally, a few acknowledged that although they originally came to Invest Early because they lacked other options (either they could not afford anything else or there were no other openings), they had come to really appreciate Invest Early for its quality.

I was looking for somewhere for my son to attend daycare with school in the summer. I just did a Google search and [Invest Early] came up. I contacted the program but they were full. In the fall, I re-contacted the program to see if there were any openings and there was so, so we proceeded with the application process. My son was previously going to school [elsewhere] but they didn't offer 5 days a week services so we drive . . . 50 minutes. Mostly for the five days a week service. That was important.

The program helps parents navigate parenting challenges.

Many parents did not recall participating in any specific classes or “parent education,” yet acknowledge the numerous other ways they were supported with parenting challenges and questions.

First, getting information about children’s developmental milestones was helpful. Parents, especially new parents, found it helpful to see how their child’s abilities compared to average and helped them know what concerns to be alert to.

Second, parents relied heavily on teachers for parenting help, from toilet training tips, to behavior management at home, to information about children’s growing brains. Often this happened casually during drop-off or pick-up times, or via texts; other times teachers would meet individually with parents to address a specific parenting concern. Many parents stressed how non-judgmental staff were regardless of how sensitive the question.

Finally, parents supported each other through challenging parenting situations. Parents got help or advice from other parents during community events, or got to know parents through drop off and pick up who they could talk to about challenges they were experiencing.

Home visits build relationships between families and teachers.

Overall, parents really appreciated the home visits for building stronger relationships between parent and teacher, and teacher and child. Through the visits, the teacher is able to see the home environment and better understand the family and child’s circumstances so they can better meet the child’s needs at school. Children enjoy showing teachers their rooms, and their favorite toys or books. Doing the visits before the school year starts also helps the child have familiarity with the teacher before entering the classroom. Several parents said the teachers were “non-judgmental,” and provided information and referrals that were helpful for parents. A few parents did not see the home visits as particularly helpful, or felt they were redundant to other services they were receiving from other providers.

You get to meet the teacher at your home; it's a more personal level. [We] didn't have to travel. I got to know [the teachers]. When my kids were [preschool age], they thought it was exciting when the teacher came. The teacher would bring different things, hands-on material, educating to see different techniques. [It's] to see the interaction between your kid and the teacher

Free family events are fun and provide opportunities for children to “show off” and for parents to connect.

Parents that attended the family events overwhelmingly said they were fun. The communities that families live in have limited opportunities for free family activities; Invest Early fills this gap. The fact that events are free and include a meal or snack makes them particularly accessible.

During these events, the children enjoy showing their families their classrooms and friends. Parents are also able to connect and get to know each other, either to get support around parenting issues or arrange play dates for their children. In some cases, connecting with other parents in Invest Early might be the only social support parents have. Finally, parents also noted the family events provided a good opportunity to engage with teachers.

The family events are amazing. We would go sometimes if my husband was working. It was just nice to be there. Usually they serve food and then they would do activities.... It's nice to have something you can do with your child. It was free. Just nice to get the community involved, and families can come and relax and kids can have those opportunities.

The older you get the harder it is to make friends; with Invest Early knowing kids have grown up together. If you're at an event you're not nervous about talking to parents, and talking to parents about [the] program, what you think of it, is an ice breaker, and makes it easier to interact with other parents.

The handful of parents that did not engage in family events either lived too far away or were full-time working parents, often working evening shift, and felt they did not have the time.

In addition to connecting with other parents through family events, parents also connected through pick up and drop off.

Staff supports families through the myriad of celebrations and challenges they face.

When asked how Invest Early helped them achieve or deal with a major life change, parents had a variety of responses. While a few felt they hadn't had any major life changes during their time the program, a majority acknowledge the various transitions they had gone through and how Invest Early supported them and their children through those changes, including:

- Adopting a child
- Becoming a foster parent
- Navigating a death in the family (child or parent)
- Obtaining health care without insurance
- Addressing needs of a special needs child (physical or learning disability)

- Obtaining a diploma, degree, or job
- Moving to the area and making connections in Itasca County
- Divorcing and establishing new routines in two households
- Providing a stable place for children (so parents can work or manage other challenge)
- Stabilizing income (once parents have child care)

In many cases, staff provided assistance in linking families to community resources to address these life challenges. This included:

- Getting items for a new home or energy assistance
- Linking families with Habitat for Humanity and helping them arrange volunteer hours
- Connecting parents to community college
- Connecting families to professionals related to special needs
- Many parents also felt emotionally supported through these life changes.

The family support person has so many resources and I've actually referred [other] families there that have grown up in Invest Early and maybe now they're in the school district and not sure where to turn for heating assistance or anything like that. They're always still willing to help even outside the parameters if that makes sense. Like yes the child was in preschool but they never stopped caring or providing information that can help people.

A few parents did not access community resources because they either didn't need them or felt those resources offered would not meet their needs.

For parents who need it, health service referrals make a critical difference.

Several parents did not recall getting any health services through Invest Early, though many appreciated getting reminders about well-child visits, vaccines, dental visits, and early childhood screening. Parents have a lot going on and felt that having another person helping them remember to make these important appointments was very helpful.

For other parents, who lacked insurance or whose child had additional needs, Invest Early helped them access appropriate care such as more extensive dental care, mental health services, or a pediatric optometrist. One parent said they had a bad experience with a clinic where Invest Early referred them, which points to the challenge of maintaining a network of high quality referral sites.

It's helpful for children's mental health. We can see the improvement from start to end of year. Some kids get overwhelmed, they don't do well with busyness of the classroom, and it's nice when a professional can take them out and work [with them] one-on-one, and give them a break. For myself, it's nice to send dental reminders, and check-ups; it helps keep me on track.

The best part of being involved with Invest Early varies.

When asked the “best part about being involved with Invest Early,” parents reiterated many of the qualities they had already mentioned:

- building relationships with other families and teachers who are “wonderful and outstanding individuals”
- seeing your child develop and their excitement for school and learning
- volunteering in the classroom
- knowing your child is in a safe place with quality education that you can trust, full-time, five days a week
- their child interacting with other children
- being supported and provided with educational resources
- have access to full-time care

Invest Early is providing a service to the community that is not otherwise available.

When asked how Invest Early is making a difference for the Itasca County community, many parents talked about how structured, research-based, full-time, quality preschool programs are limited in the county, especially for families that cannot afford high-priced, for-profit centers. Invest Early is filling a niche.

[The best part of Invest Early is] knowing my kids were in a place I could trust, the quality education, and teachers staying connected with me. [T]rust is huge, if I didn't feel comfortable I wouldn't have sent them and I wouldn't have been able to work. Child care is low in availability in our community, [which] can be hard with working families. It was huge for me to be able to go there. I'm on my feet now, and I don't know if I would have been on my feet without Invest Early. They help families that are struggling to get on their feet and raise their children.

The very best thing is just how excited they get the kids, before their first year of school the fact my preschooler is excited to go to school, that's a big deal because school plays a big role in life, fantastic job implementing such an excitement for school and education.

It's the most amazing program, I'm not sure how to answer. It's changed a lot of how we parent. My partner has other kids. He's like "I've never seen a program like this." The fact that I could shoot a text to someone and get an answer "talk to this program," it's been wonderful. Last year, I was driving [my son] to go to another location 10 miles out of my way, it didn't make me mad because he loved go there, he would try to take the seat belt off himself, to see your kids that excited to go to school, they make learning fun.

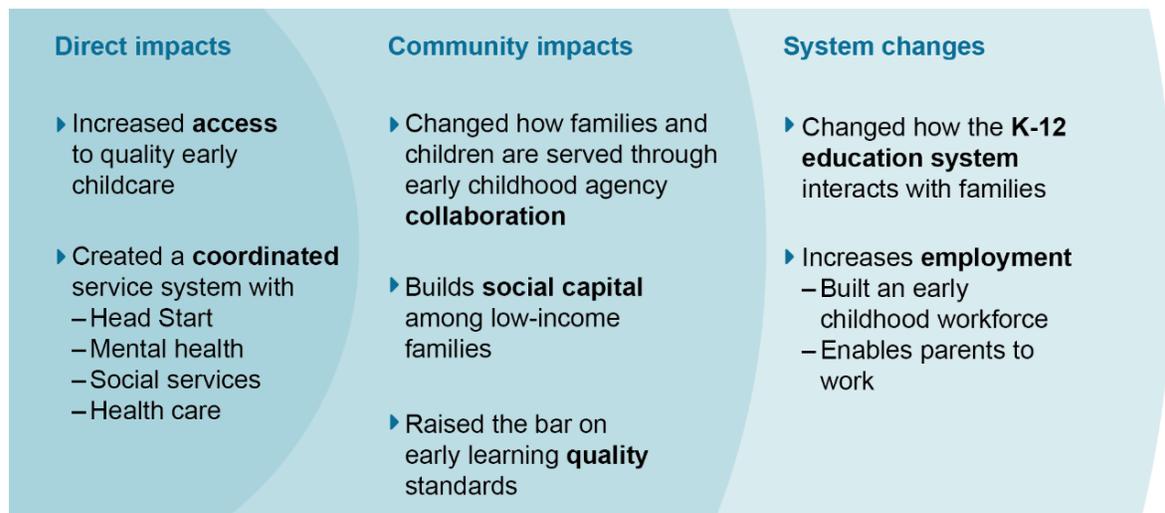
The program is also preparing families to make a smooth transition into kindergarten. As one parent said, “it’s a feeder program into the schools.” Children are more academically, socially and emotionally prepared, and parents are more engaged in their child’s learning throughout their childhood.

While not all families are facing extremely difficult circumstances, children that do have very difficult home lives, such as extreme poverty or an incarcerated parent, have better resiliency when they are in the consistent, caring setting that is Invest Early.

Finally, full-time child care allows parents to work, providing an economic benefit for their families as well as to the community as a whole.

Community members' perspectives on the impacts of Invest Early

In October, Invest Early brought together a group of 38 stakeholders to discuss the impacts (direct and indirect) of Invest Early on families, children and the community. This included Invest Early teachers and staff, elementary teachers and administrators, community partners, and Blandin Foundation representatives. Through a two-hour facilitated session with Wilder Research, stakeholders identified the following program impacts. Details are provided below.



Direct, intended impacts

Invest Early has increased access to quality early child care.

The number one impact on the community is that because of Invest Early, low-income families have access to affordable, quality child care that they would not otherwise have. Invest Early has increased the number of children and families able to access child care, particularly in pre-kindergarten. As one stakeholder said, Invest Early has “creativity to serve the underserved.”

Families are also served in a comprehensive way. The program is improving children’s school readiness, while also addressing families’ other needs.

Invest Early has created a coordinated service system.

Invest Early formalized collaboration with partner organization to create a coordinated services system with:

- **Head Start.** Invest Early embraces the comprehensive service model that Head Start is required to provide in order to maintain the partnerships. This collaboration has changed how Head Start trains and hires staff, as well as how children are placed in classrooms.
- **Special Education.** Invest Early partners with Early Childhood Special Education to train staff. They also co-locate so Special Education staff are familiar to families and have ongoing conversations about potential developmental delays. Children with disabilities are better integrated into general education.
- **Health care.** Invest Early staff refer families to clinics for preventative and medical care. Parents establish primary care providers for their children and children are up-to-date on well-child visits and immunizations.
- **Mental health.** Mental health providers are right in the classroom and can address mental health concerns with parents immediately. Providers are familiar faces, which increases parents' readiness to accept support. Mental health concerns are being addressed for both parents and children before they become bigger issues.

This climate of collaboration did not exist before; especially now, all partners are focused on doing what is best for families and children instead of focusing on their own organizations. The collaboration has become second nature and is so entrenched in how staff work. Stakeholders noted that when staff members move to another county, they sometimes struggle to work in more traditional systems (and vice versa).

Invest Early has brought many organizations and school districts together to support families and children to reach their hopes and dreams and succeed!

A challenge of this coordinated system is offering competitive wages in all agencies within the system. Invest Early is able to pay higher wages because of Blandin Foundation's grant support. Other agencies within the partnership cannot pay staff the same wage.

This has been a particular challenge for Head Start, which is hiring teachers for similar positions but cannot pay the same rate as Invest Early.

Collaboration is hard and takes time and effort. The partner organizations are invested. However, occasionally stakeholders noted that new staff members will not want to put forth the extra effort and, thus, some county positions see high rates of turnover as staff move to neighboring counties where they do not have to do the hard work of collaboration.

Community impacts

Invest Early has changed how families and children are served through early childhood agency collaboration.

The coordinated system that Invest Early created has changed how families and children are served. Parents are more likely to accept mental health and special education support because providers are familiar faces, which is reducing the stigma of accessing these mental health services. Health care, dental care, and immunizations have become normalized as both access and encouragement to use these external services has increased.

Child protection makes automatic referrals to Invest Early when children enter foster care. Invest Early responds quickly to stabilize the child and family.

Invest Early builds social capital among low-income families.

Through Invest Early, parents have developed social connections with staff and other parents. Parents have openness and trust with staff, and share success and challenges. Staff know what families are going through and are able to provide resources to help them. By co-locating Invest Early in some elementary schools, families develop bonds with the school community early. Parents also socialize and support each other.

Invest Early has raised the bar on early learning quality standards.

Because of Invest Early, there is a “new normal” around what is expected of early childhood services. As one stakeholder noted, Invest Early has “influenced the quality and standards for early learning programs.” Early childhood matters in the county in a way it did not before. Parents expect programs to have high quality and to offer increased duration and intensity (e.g., full-day, year-round programming). Parents also expect services to be collaborative and integrated. Parents experience increased communication about their children and then come to expect frequent communication.

The drawback of this impact is that private child care centers are losing families to Invest Early, making it more difficult for them to stay in business. In addition, middle-income families similarly want high-quality, full-time child care yet can’t always afford it, or it is not available to them. Invest Early also has limited 1-3 year-old spots, so parents of toddlers and younger preschoolers can sometimes feel left out. This varies within the county. For example, in some communities within the county, a large majority of children are served by Invest Early; however, in Grand Rapids, a smaller proportion has access to the program.

System changes

Invest Early has changed how the K-12 education system interacts with families.

Invest Early families are now at all levels of the K-12 system. Parents transition from Invest Early having high expectations for communication and involvement. Trust is built between parent, school, and the community much earlier than in other school districts. Parents are more familiar with the expectations and curriculum. This has led to high schools and middle schools increasing the frequency of their conferences and seeing higher turnout at conferences.

Invest Early has increased employment.

Invest Early has created over 100 jobs in Itasca County over the last 15 years. The strong partnership with the colleges has led to students partnering with Invest Early for experiential learning. Students get in the classroom right away and are experiencing early childhood education to see if it's the right environment for them. Those who find it is not the right fit spend less money investing in a long program. Students also benefit the program by bringing ideas, substitute teaching, and creating a pipeline for future employees.

In addition, parents are able to work and maintain their jobs because they know they have consistent, full-time child care. Those who started without jobs are able to reengage in the workforce, or attend school with consistency. Families don't have to piece together child care, risk losing their job if their child care falls through, or face losing their child care if their income goes up. Stakeholders believe that parents are more productive at work because they are not worrying about their child. One stakeholder said parents "breathe a sigh of relief" when their child is at Invest Early.

Recommendations for ongoing evaluation

Wilder Research recommends continuing the annual evaluation using the revised instruments, determining if they provide useful data and qualitative responses, and adjusting them as needed. The annual evaluation could include:

- The longitudinal tracking of kindergarten readiness using the **kindergarten work sampling** and **parent kindergarten survey**
- Tracking family conditions, including social support, through the **family needs assessment visit forms** (1, 2, and 3, revised in 2019)
- **Administrative tracking** of Invest Early participation, including characteristics of families, attendance, risk factors, and other programmatic information
- The **parent feedback survey** with the additional qualitative questions
- Comparison of Invest Early students' **MCA Test Scores** with their peers at 3rd, 5th, 8th and 11th grades.

By continuing these ongoing evaluation activities, Invest Early is able to track progress over time. Even though results are often similar year to year, that consistency indicates ongoing quality programming. While CLASS may be required by Head Start, those results do not necessarily need to be part of Wilder's analysis.

In addition, the annual report could include one special focus area each year around a specific topic, such as: the collaboration, high quality early childhood education, children with special needs or start Invest Early significantly behind, foster or adopted children, families receiving mental health services, economic return on investment, and/or culturally adaptability of services. Data would vary depending on the special focus each year, but could include case studies with parent and teacher interviews.

This report is the second "special" report completed by Wilder, with an in-depth look at additional information (the first was done in 2014). Wilder recommends planning for an in-depth analysis every five years when new census estimates are available. The in-depth analysis could include:

- Examining trends in **community indicators** to keep well-informed of changing conditions and factors that promote or inhibit successful results.
- Paying particular attention to **trends in maternal health care access**, including supports for pregnancy and childbirth care coordination, to monitor changes in Itasca County.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to the following organizations and people for their cooperation in the data collection and analysis necessary for this evaluation:

Invest Early staff and Leadership Team

Darla Beaver, Invest Early Project
Lauri Camilli, Invest Early Project
Kelly Chandler, Itasca County Health & Human Services
Melanie DeBay, Itasca Area Community
Matt Grose, Deer River Schools
Karen Haatvedt, Invest Early Project
Sue Hoeft, Greenway Public Schools
Mary Kosak, Community Representative
Sonja Merrild, Blandin Foundation
Chris Mutchler, Itasca Community College
Katrina O'Brien, Invest Early Project
Jan Reindl, Invest Early Project
Maureen Rosato, KOOTASCA Community Action, Inc.

Wilder Research staff:

Mark Anton
Jenny Bohlke
Walker Bosch
Jackie Campeau
Jen Collins
Marilyn Conrad
Phil Cooper
Amanda Eggers
Justin Hollis
Ryan McArdle

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451 Lexington Parkway North
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104
651-280-2700 | www.wilderresearch.org

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