

# Early learning conditions among lower-income families in Minneapolis and Saint Paul

## *Introduction*

### Study purposes

Funded by the McKnight Foundation and the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF), this study provides objective and accurate baseline information about early learning conditions for low-income families in selected low-income neighborhoods in North Minneapolis and Saint Paul prior to MELF pilot projects. It documents and assesses repeatable measures of:

- The types and levels of family engagement in the education of children age 5 and younger in families with low incomes;
- The use of early care and education and participation in early learning opportunities among low-income families with children age 5 and younger; and
- The quality of existing licensed child care centers, preschools, and family child care homes.

This study serves as the baseline of early learning conditions before MELF-funded activities in these neighborhoods and could be repeated to examine changes in these early learning measures following MELF-funded activities. The study also provides information to private and public funders and community leaders for understanding the early learning strengths and needs of children, families, and child care providers in low-income neighborhoods and for making informed decisions about how to invest in low-income neighborhoods in order to build on those strengths and meet those needs for optimal early learning.

### Study groups and locations

The study includes telephone surveys with low-income families with children age 5 and younger and not yet in kindergarten, licensed family providers, child care centers, and preschools in:

- District 6 (North End) and District 7 (Thomas-Dale), the Saint Paul pilot area for the Early Childhood Scholarship and Parent Mentoring Program.
- The North Minneapolis pilot area for the 500 Under 5 project, a community-based research project.
- An urban comparison area consisting of the urban core neighborhoods in Minneapolis and Saint Paul.

## *Key findings*

The North Minneapolis and Saint Paul pilot areas are very poor economically and richly diverse. Half of the families have poverty-level incomes. In the North Minneapolis pilot area, parents primarily self-identify as African American (42%), Latino (28%), and White (16%). In the Saint Paul pilot area, they primarily self-identify as Asian (30%, mostly Hmong), African American (28%), White (28%), and Latino (15%).

Low-income parents in the North Minneapolis and Saint Paul pilot areas, similar to other parents, consider a number of factors in choosing child care, but trust, perceived quality, convenience of hours or location, and cost are the most common. They tend to use parental care only or family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) informal child care only for their children age 2 and younger and center-based child care for their children age 3 to 5, although center-based use rates are still relatively low for children age 3 to 5.

Many low-income families in the North Minneapolis and Saint Paul pilot areas have stable and enriching homes, where the parents provide their children ample early learning opportunities and are hopeful about their future. Nevertheless, too many low-income parents, along with the early learning providers and agencies aiming to help them, face daunting challenges and potential barriers for achieving school readiness. High rates of poverty, low rates of parental educational attainment, inadequate emotional and social support, English literacy issues for the many immigrant and refugee families, limited access to organized activities for children, and unsafe neighborhoods require comprehensive community and family-strengthening approaches, not simply easing the access to early care and education, to fully support and advance the health and development of all children.

While some early care and education programs and a few licensed family homes are accredited, for the most part, the number interested in being accredited is fairly low. Nevertheless, the early care and education providers have a strong foundation of early childhood education, experience, professional development opportunities, informal communication with parents, and program activities such as use of curriculum and developmental assessments. They could enhance the development of children by adopting more systematic approaches, and by being trained on standards-based curriculum use, on how to effectively communicate with parents, and on how to manage children’s behavior and special needs.

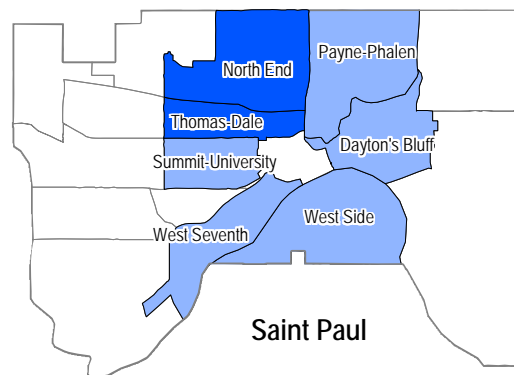
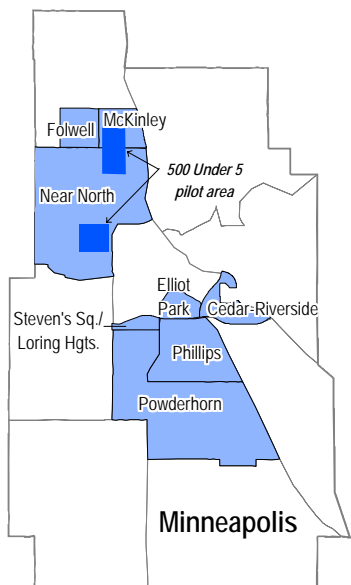
The following findings suggest that kindergarten readiness efforts in North Minneapolis and Saint Paul should focus on improving the economic and social well-being of families, on supporting and encouraging providers within various cultural communities, and on ensuring the competence of early care and education teachers and providers to nurture and teach children from families in poverty and from diverse cultural and immigrant communities as much as on ensuring access to high-quality early care and education.

#### Lower-income families’ engagement in children’s early learning

***Many low-income parents in North Minneapolis and Saint Paul report financial disadvantages, poor overall and emotional health, and inadequate social support that may interfere with their participation in their children’s early learning.***

- About 7 in 10 respondents live with a spouse or partner.
- About half are immigrants or refugees and may experience language and cultural barriers.
- English is the primary language for about half, followed by Spanish (28%) and Somali (19%) in the North Minneapolis pilot area; Hmong (27%) and Spanish (13%) in the Saint Paul pilot area; and Spanish (23%), Hmong (14%), and Somali (12%) in the urban comparison area.

Study locations



- About half are currently employed, and about a third are at home full time. In households with a second parent, about 7 in 10 of these parents are currently employed, and about 15 percent are home full time. About a quarter of the employed respondents and a third of the employed spouse or partners work evenings from about 6:00 p.m. to midnight.
  - About half have annual household incomes below \$20,000, including about a third with annual incomes below \$15,000. For perspective, 12 percent of families with children under age 5 in the Twin Cities metropolitan area had 2006 incomes at or below \$20,650, the federal poverty threshold for a family of four (American Community Survey, Census Bureau).
  - 39 percent in the North Minneapolis pilot area and 36 percent in the Saint Paul pilot area have not graduated from high school. For two-parent households, the second parents' educational histories are similar.
  - 65 percent in the North Minneapolis pilot area and 54 percent in the Saint Paul pilot rate their overall health as excellent or very good.
  - 26 percent in the North Minneapolis pilot area and 38 percent in the Saint Paul pilot area say they at least sometimes feel so sad or hopeless that they are concerned about their ability to cope with personal or family concerns.
  - In the North Minneapolis pilot area, 72 percent say they usually or always have friends and relatives available to listen to their concerns; 60 percent always or usually can count on their friends and relatives to provide helpful advice and information about parenting; and 60 percent always or usually have a friend, relative, or neighbor they can count on when they need help.
  - The frequency of support is lower in the Saint Paul pilot area, where 53 percent say they usually or always have friends and relatives available to listen to their concerns; 54 percent always or usually can count on their friends and relatives to provide helpful advice and information about parenting; and 54 percent always or usually have a friend, relative, or neighbor they can count on when they need help.
  - 22 percent in the North Minneapolis pilot area and 14 percent in the Saint Paul pilot area say they frequently have transportation problems that keep them from participating in learning opportunities for children and families; 22 percent sometimes have transportation problems.
  - In the North Minneapolis pilot area, 40 percent of respondents report they do not use the Internet; 29 percent typically use it someplace other than at home, and 30 percent use the Internet at home. In the Saint Paul pilot area, 36 percent of respondents report they do not really use the Internet; 23 percent typically use it someplace other than at home, and 42 percent use the Internet at home.
  - About half always or most of the time feel that organizations, agencies, and schools in their neighborhood are “family-friendly” and support families who have young children, and less than half say that there are always or most of the time enough resources in their neighborhood for families with children.
  - 29 percent in the North Minneapolis pilot area and 38 percent in the Saint Paul pilot area say they always or most of the time feel their neighborhood is a great place for young children to grow and thrive.
- Moreover, many low-income parents report they do not provide regular structure or nurturing and learning opportunities for their young children.***
- 55 percent in the North Minneapolis pilot area and 50 percent in the Saint Paul pilot area say they always keep a regular mealtime and bedtime schedule for their children; 19 percent in Minneapolis and 33 percent in Saint Paul say they usually do.
  - 15 percent in the North Minneapolis pilot area and 17 percent in the Saint Paul pilot area say they frequently take their children to participate in organized activities or lessons in the community; 38 percent in Minneapolis and 25 percent in Saint Paul say they sometimes do.
  - About 30 percent report they have participated in parent education training, classes, or workshops, a lower percentage than parents in the urban comparison area (40%) and than parents of young children statewide (57%).

- 18 percent in the North Minneapolis pilot area and 24 percent in the Saint Paul pilot area say they took their children to the public library at least weekly in the past 12 months; 18 percent in Minneapolis and 21 percent in Saint Paul say they did so about monthly.

***On the other hand, many low-income parents report providing stable and enriching homes and activities that support and advance the health and development of their young children.***

- A little more than half describe their living situation as very stable, and about a quarter as somewhat stable.
- 73 percent in the North Minneapolis pilot area and 63 percent in the Saint Paul pilot area say they frequently spend time at home working on educational and creative activities with their children; 23 percent in Minneapolis and 30 percent in Saint Paul say they sometimes do.
- About three-quarters say they at least sometimes take their children to places in the community to learn special things; 47 percent sometimes do.
- 80 percent in the North Minneapolis pilot area and 68 percent in the Saint Paul pilot area report teaching their children age 2 to 5 letters, words, or numbers every day or most days.
- About two-thirds with children age 2 to 5 say they read to them every day or most days in a typical week. For perspective, 50 percent of children age 3 to 5 in families below poverty were read to every day, compared with 65 percent for higher-income parents. (2006 *National Household Education Survey*).
- 86 percent in the North Minneapolis pilot area 83 percent in the Saint Paul pilot area feel hopeful about their children's future.
- 67 percent in the North Minneapolis pilot area and 60 percent in the Saint Paul pilot area say they always or most of the time feel they have enough options for supporting their children's development and for getting them ready to succeed in school.
- In the North Minneapolis pilot area, 74 percent say their four-year old knows all or most of the alphabet, and 44 percent can count up to 20 or higher. In the Saint Paul pilot area, 62 percent say their four-year old knows all or most of the alphabet, and

45 percent can count up to 20 or higher. In the urban comparison area, 46 percent say their four-year old knows all or most of the alphabet, and 41 percent can count up to 20 or higher.

***Lower-income parents in Minneapolis and Saint Paul consider a number of factors in choosing child care, but, trust, perceived quality, convenience of hours or location, and cost are the most common.***

- From a list of factors, respondents most commonly rate the following as very important in choosing child care: A place where their child can learn new things and new skills (90% or higher), a caregiver who has special training in taking care of children (84% or higher), and a reasonable cost (81% or higher).
- Consistent with other studies of child care use, respondents report the main reasons they choose their primary child care arrangements are trust or preferring care by a family member (especially for children age 2 and younger), perceived quality, convenience of hours or location, and cost (especially for FFN care).

***Many lower-income families in Minneapolis and Saint Paul use parental care only or family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) informal child care only for their children age 2 and younger.***

- 42 percent of children age 2 and younger in lower-income families in the North Minneapolis pilot area and 39 percent in the Saint Paul pilot area use parental care only, compared with 34 percent for children in the urban comparison.
- About half of children age 2 and younger use FFN care, including nearly 4 in 10 as their only child care. Most FFN caregivers are grandparents or other relatives such as an aunt or cousin.
- In the North Minneapolis pilot area, 11 percent of children age 2 and younger are in center-based care, and 10 percent are in licensed family homes. In the Saint Paul pilot area, 7 percent are in center-based care and 17 percent in licensed family homes.
- For perspective, among Minnesota children age 2 and younger, 26 percent use parental care only, 31 percent center-based care, and 15 percent licensed family child care (Wilder Research (2004). *Child Care Use in Minnesota*.)

***More families use center-based care for their children age 3 to 5 in low-income families in Minneapolis and Saint Paul, but use rates are still relatively low.***

- Among children age 3 to 5, 28 percent in the North Minneapolis pilot area, 19 percent in the Saint Paul pilot area, and 27 percent in the urban comparison area attend Head Start.
- Among children age 4 or 5 and not yet in kindergarten, 13 to 16 percent attend Project Early Kindergarten or High Five.
- Combining use of Head Start or the use of other center-based programs for children age 3 to 5 and not yet in kindergarten, 38 percent in the North Minneapolis pilot area, 43 percent in the Saint Paul pilot area, and 50 percent in the urban comparison area attend one or more of them. The other center-based programs include child care centers, preschools, school readiness, and school-based early kindergarten.
- 32 percent of children age 3 to 5 in the North Minneapolis pilot area and 26 percent in the Saint Paul pilot area use parental care only.
- 42 percent of children age 3 to 5 in the North Minneapolis pilot area use FFN care, including 28 percent who use FFN only. In the Saint Paul area, 49 percent use FFN care, including 21 percent who use FFN only.
- 5 percent of children age 3 to 5 in the North Minneapolis pilot area and 15 percent in the Saint Paul pilot area use licensed family homes.
- For perspective, among Minnesota children age 3 to 5, 21 percent use parental care only; 53 percent use center-based care; 7 percent use Head Start, and 10 percent use licensed family child care (Wilder Research (2004). *Child Care Use in Minnesota*).

Indicators of quality among urban early education and care providers

***Some programs and few licensed family homes are accredited, and the number interested in being accredited is fairly low.***

- About a quarter of the centers and preschools in the North Minneapolis and Saint Paul pilot and comparison areas are currently accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or the Council on Accreditation. Nine percent in the pilot areas and 30 percent in the comparison area are seeking or plan to seek accreditation in the future.
- Few licensed family child care homes are currently accredited, and more than half in Minneapolis and Saint Paul pilot and comparison areas have no intentions to become accredited.
- For perspective, 23 percent of child care centers and 5 percent of preschools are accredited statewide.

***The education of directors and teachers in centers and preschools and the experience level of all types of early learning providers in the North Minneapolis and Saint Paul pilot areas are strengths.***

- 64 percent center and preschool directors report having bachelor's degrees or higher, all of them child-related degrees.
- 49 percent of teacher-qualified staff, on average, have bachelor's degrees or higher in early childhood education. In addition, on average, 37 percent have a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or AA in early childhood education.

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*Child care centers and preschools, on average, have a desired preschool enrollment of 33 children in the Minneapolis and Saint Paul pilot areas, higher than the desired preschool enrollment of the comparison area. The preschool vacancy rates average 18 percent in the Minneapolis and Saint Paul pilot areas, lower than the average in the urban comparison area (27%).*

*Licensed family child care homes, on average, have a desired preschool enrollment of 4 or 5 children, with preschool vacancy rates averaging 32 percent, higher than the average in the urban comparison area (25%).*

- 69 percent of teacher-qualified staff, on average, have more than five years of early childhood teaching experience.
- 10 percent of licensed family child care providers have child-related bachelor's degrees or higher, and 67 percent have more than five years of early childhood teaching experience.
- For perspective, statewide, 34 percent of center-based teachers and 68 percent in preschools report having child-related bachelor's degrees or higher, and 18 percent of center teachers and 10 percent of preschool teachers report having CDAs. In addition, 10 percent of licensed family child care providers statewide have a child-related bachelor's degrees or higher and average 14.5 years of child care work experience. (Wilder Research (2007). *Child Care Workforce in Minnesota*).
- 30 percent of centers and preschools translate materials in languages other than English, compared with 36 percent in the urban comparison area.
- About 10 percent of licensed family providers translate materials in languages other than English.
- Among the licensed family child providers in the Minneapolis and Saint Paul pilot areas, 34 percent are African American, 34 percent White, and 20 percent Hmong. These percentages are similar to those in the urban comparison area.

***Informal communication with parents in the North Minneapolis and Saint Paul pilot areas is reasonably frequent, but formal communication does not happen quite often enough.***

***Class size, child- to-adult ratios, and teacher turnover are all signs of quality programs in the North Minneapolis and Saint Paul pilot areas.***

(Generally, for preschoolers, quality programs have group sizes of 20 or fewer children and children per adult ratios of 10 to 1.)

- The maximum number of preschoolers per classroom is about 16, two fewer, on average, than in the urban comparison centers and preschools. For preschoolers, the children to adult ratios, on average, are about 7 to 1.
- The mean turnover rates for child care and preschool teachers is about 15 percent, about 3 percentage points higher than in the comparison area. These are lower than statewide averages of about 20 percent for child care center teachers.

- In 55 percent of centers and preschools, lower than in the urban comparison area (71%), staff almost daily provide informal feedback to families about child development and learning. Most centers and preschools provide written reports to parents about child development and learning at least about twice a year.
- In 64 percent of licensed family homes, lower than in the urban comparison area (71%), providers almost daily provide informal feedback to families about child development and learning. About two-thirds at least occasionally give written reports to parents about child development and learning.

***Most centers and preschools and some licensed family homes in the North Minneapolis and Saint Paul pilot areas report using curriculum, but few have been approved by Parent Aware (the State's quality rating system).***

***Some programs and providers in the pilot areas are able to communicate with parents in their home language***

- Staff speak Spanish in 25 percent of centers and preschools in the pilot areas and in 43 percent in the urban comparison area.
- 22 percent of licensed family child care providers speak Hmong, similar to the comparison areas.

- About three-quarters of the directors of centers and preschools report using curriculums, naming about 25 different curriculums, with none standing out as most common.
- 38 percent of licensed family child providers report using curriculums, naming about 40 different curriculums. Homegrown curriculum and Creative Curriculum stand out as most common.

***Some early learning providers' homes in the North Minneapolis and Saint Paul pilot areas use community literacy and parenting resources as part of their care giving.***

- 36 percent of the child care centers and preschools and 28 percent of the licensed family child care providers visit libraries at least twice a month.
- 10 percent of licensed family homes participate in early education or parenting activities in the community at least twice a month, such as through Head Start or ECFE.

***Some centers and preschools, but few licensed family child care providers, offer various types of health screenings.***

- Vision and hearing screenings are the most common types of screening, offered by 73 percent of the child care centers and preschools in the North Minneapolis and Saint Paul pilot area and about half in the urban comparison area.
- 64 percent in the pilot areas and half in the urban comparison area offer developmental screenings.
- Few licensed family child homes offer vision, hearing, or dental screenings.
- 12 percent in the pilot areas and 14 percent in the urban comparison area offer developmental screenings.

***Most centers and preschools and some licensed family homes report using developmental assessments, but few have been approved by Parent Aware.***

- About 90 percent of the directors of centers and preschools report using developmental assessments, naming about 20 different assessments. In the North Minneapolis and Saint Paul pilot areas, homegrown assessments (18%), Ages and Stages (18%), and IGDIs (18%) top the list, similar to the urban comparison area.

- 55 percent of licensed family child providers report using assessments, naming about 20 different ones. Homegrown assessments and one offered through Provider Choices are used most commonly.

***Most centers and preschools in the urban pilot and comparison areas provide professional development opportunities for staff.***

- All child care centers and preschools report they provide training in house by the director or other staff.
- 82 percent pay for training or reimburse staff for tuition.

***With more resources, early care and education teachers and providers would commonly seek training on curriculum use, communication and working with parents, managing behavior and discipline and special needs.***

- Respondents were asked what improvements they would make first if resources were available. Enlarging and remodeling their spaces top the list for centers and preschools. Curriculum and educational materials top the list for family child care providers.
- Providers named a wide variety of training topics they would seek for themselves and their staff if they had more time and resources.
- Training topics most commonly mentioned by center and preschool directors are: curriculum, communication and working with parents, special needs, and managing behavior and discipline.
- Training topics most commonly mentioned by licensed family child providers are: managing behavior and discipline, special needs, child development, and communication and working with parents.

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***On average, centers and preschools in the Minneapolis and Saint Paul pilot areas charge weekly rates for preschoolers of about \$163, lower than the average of about \$200 per week charged by those in the urban comparison neighborhoods.***

***On average, licensed family child care homes in the Minneapolis and Saint Paul pilot areas charge weekly rates for preschoolers of about \$134, about the same as the average of about \$140 per week charged by those in the urban comparison neighborhoods.***

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## Study methods and samples

### Study samples

To obtain a sample of families in each study location, Wilder Research purchased listed phone numbers from Survey Sampling, Inc. with addresses located within the defined study pilot and comparison areas. Interviewers screened households for eligibility based on income (less than \$50,000) and age of children in the household (age 5 or younger and not yet in kindergarten) and verified addresses.

Using the same random selection and screening process used in the target areas, the sample in the comparison area is stratified by Minneapolis and Saint Paul, and the number of completed surveys is roughly proportional to the neighborhood populations in urban comparison area.

The Minnesota CCR&R Network provided Wilder Research a data file with all the current licensed family child care providers, child care centers, and preschool sites including names, addresses, and phone numbers. The lists were geo-coded to identify providers located within the study areas. Wilder Research contacted all of the providers, centers, and preschools in the CCR&R database.

### Data collection process

Wilder Research conducted the telephone survey with families using randomly sampled telephone numbers from April through December 2007. Surveys were conducted in English, Hmong, Somali and Spanish. The telephone survey with licensed family providers and center and preschool directors was conducted from June through October 2007. Surveys with licensed family providers were conducted in English and Hmong.

Wilder Research made more than 50,000 phone calls to 12,089 households to complete 512 surveys in the Minneapolis and Saint Paul study areas. The response rates are quite acceptable, ranging from 64 percent to 88 percent for families and ranging from 78 percent to 100 percent for the child care providers. Some program and demographic characteristics, and the experience and training levels of family child care providers, were obtained from CCR&R administrative data and were merged with the survey data.



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### For more information

This summary presents highlights of *Early learning conditions among low-income families in Minneapolis, Saint Paul, and Blue Earth and Nicollet counties*. The report is available at [www.wilderresearch.org](http://www.wilderresearch.org).

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