



Invest Early Early Childhood Initiative

Year 12 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.

In year 12 (June 2016 through May 2017), 460 children age 5 and younger and 398 families participated in Invest Early. As usual, a majority (69%) of children served were prekindergarten age (4 or older on September 1, 2016). The remaining were about evenly split between infants/toddlers and preschoolers (age 3). This year, Invest Early families had a median income of \$26,000 per year, substantially lower than the county-wide median income of \$56,000.

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 12, participating families' home learning environments improved significantly on 8 of 15 items rated (down from 12 items last year, yet similar to year 10). Items that showed improvement include: children having age/development appropriate books, music, toys, art materials, and outdoor play time; and parent teaching the alphabet, manners and numbers.

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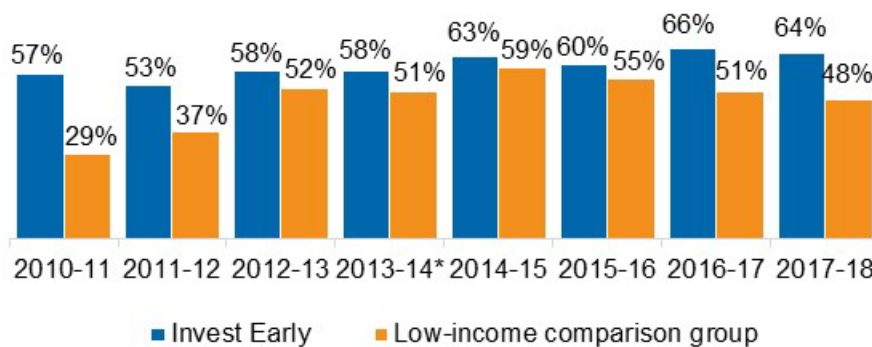
Invest Early children are on target in most developmental domains.

At the end of year 12, 85 percent of children under age 3, 63 percent of 3-year-olds, and 87 percent of children age 4 and older were in the normal range of development on five of the domains measured by Teaching Strategies GOLD.

Two out of three Invest Early students are prepared for kindergarten.

Of the 2017-18 kindergarten class, two-thirds (64%) of Invest Early low-income students demonstrated overall school readiness skills and knowledge based on the Work Sampling Developmental Checklist, compared with less than half (48%) of the low-income comparison group (who were not in Invest Early, School Readiness, or Head Start) and 73 percent of their higher-income classmates who were not in Invest Early.

Kindergarten readiness over time, 2011-2018 school years



Invest Early serves children and families that are facing multiple challenges.

Invest Early students are diverse.

A quarter (24%) of the children served in year 12 are children of color (7%) or indigenous (17%), up from 6 percent in 2006-07. That is a higher proportion than in the general child population of Itasca County (16%).

Invest Early children and families face multiple risk factors.

In addition to being low income, children served by Invest Early have 3-4 other risk factors, on average, which put them at risk for delayed child development. The most common risk factors faced by Invest Early families are similar to past years: experiencing a family stressor in the past year, such as death, divorce, or unemployment (50%); the family being a single-parent household (39%); history or evidence of delays reaching developmental milestones (30%); and the child having no opportunity for socializing with peers (29%).

This year, as in previous years, the youngest children (under age 3) join the program with 2-3 more risk factors, on average, than those age three to five, indicating Invest Early is reaching children with higher needs at a younger age.

Invest Early families experience life stressors.

Two-thirds of parents (69%) report feeling challenged by life's demands at least sometimes. In comparison, staff observed that a quarter (28%) of parents sometimes or frequently seem overwhelmed or stressed; parents may feel more stress than staff are able to observe.

Invest Early is a high quality program.

Quality of Invest Early classrooms is high.

Emotional support is a definite strength of Invest Early classrooms. Of note, all classrooms rated highly on climate. Classroom organization items were also generally rated high quality. While instructional support items rated lowest, they were still rated moderate quality (above 4.0) and saw improvement of half a point from fall to spring. Invest Early classrooms, including KOOTASCA Head Start, averaged higher ratings on all items than Head Start classrooms nationally.

Families are involved in Invest Early.

Two-thirds (64%) of parents reached or exceeded the goal of committing 30 volunteer hours to Invest Early. Similar to previous years, parents most often volunteered for special events and field trips, with the parent/child literacy and math backpacks also high this year.

At the end of the program year, 93 percent of parents (unduplicated) 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 398 families served, 363 (91%) completed the anonymous surveys this year. As in previous years, parents responded positively overall.

- **Program satisfaction:** All responding parents would recommend the program to others, and 99 percent report they are satisfied with the education their child received and the services they received met their expectations.

- **Feedback on staff:** 98-99 percent of parents report that staff communicate with them in a way they understand, staff respect them as an individual, they are working with staff to set goals for their child, and the staff know a lot about children.
- **Child development impacts:** 98-99 percent of parents say their child has made progress in developing language skills and social skills needed for school.
- **Growth in parenting skills:** Particularly high this year, 93-97 percent say they better understand their child’s needs and development and what their child needs to succeed in school, and staff helped them identify their strengths as a parent.

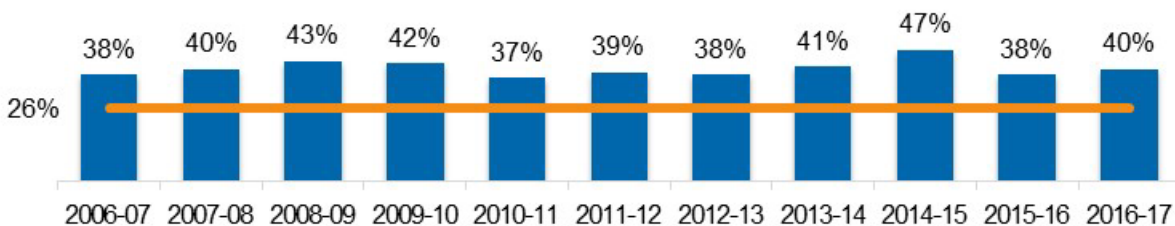
Invest Early is having county-wide impacts for children and families.

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, 40 percent of the early childhood screenings were conducted before age 4. For the last 11 years, since the inaugural year of Invest Early (2006-07), at least 37 percent of children screened have been under age 4.

Children are also being screened earlier across the state. In the 2016-17, 39 percent of all children screened in Minnesota were 3 years old.¹

Percentage of Early Childhood Screenings completed for children under age 4 compared to baseline



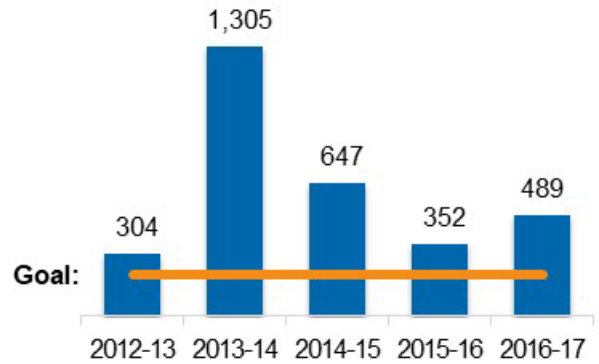
¹ Minnesota Department of Education. Data Analytics. 2017 School Year Early Childhood Screening – Annual Counts. <http://w20.education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Data.jsp>

Early childhood caregivers and teachers are being trained.

In 2016-17, 489 adult caregivers of young children received some type of continuing education and training through 39 trainings, exceeding the Invest Early goal of reaching 200 or more caregivers per year.

Over the 12 years of Invest Early, 49 early childhood educators have earned a two-year early childhood degree, four have earned a bachelor’s, and four have earned a master’s. In addition, 132 have obtained Child Development Certificates.

Number of caregivers trained, years 8-12



Low-income third and fifth graders are outperforming low-income students statewide.

Based on both third and fifth grade MCA reading and math test results in the spring of 2017, Invest Early children are performing similarly to the low-income comparison group 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.

Grade and domain	Low-income, Invest Early	Low-income, no ECE	Statewide, low income
Third grade – reading	53%	45%	38%
Third grade – math	59%	55%	50%
Fifth grade – reading	58%	58%	49%
Fifth grade – math	48%	49%	36%

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.”

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



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For more information

For more information about this report, contact
Richard Chase at Wilder Research, 651-280-2706.

Authors: Richard Chase and Jennifer Valorose

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