


Invest Early, Early Childhood Initiative

Year 11 Evaluation Summary

Introduction



Invest Early is a comprehensive early childhood collaborative of four school districts in Itasca County, Minnesota, that serves young children and their families with risk factors that may impede school success. Wilder Research, in conjunction with the Invest Early leadership team and staff, is conducting a longitudinal evaluation of the program. Annual reports document the implementation and assessment of Invest Early and outcomes for the service system, families, and children. Year 11 (2015-16) is defined as May 21, 2015, through May 19, 2016.

In year 11, 464 children age 5 and younger and 398 families participated in Invest Early. Of the children served, 17 percent were infants or toddlers (age 2 or younger), 18 percent were preschool age (age 3), and 65 percent were prekindergarten (age 4 or older on September 1, 2015). This year, Invest Early families had a median income of \$23,982 per year.

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 11, participating families' home learning environments improved significantly on 12 of 15 items rated (up from 8 items last year). Items that showed improvement include: child has developmentally appropriate books and art supplies; child has opportunities to play and explore outside; parent talks with child; parent is a positive role model; and parent teaches the alphabet, numbers, and verbal manners.

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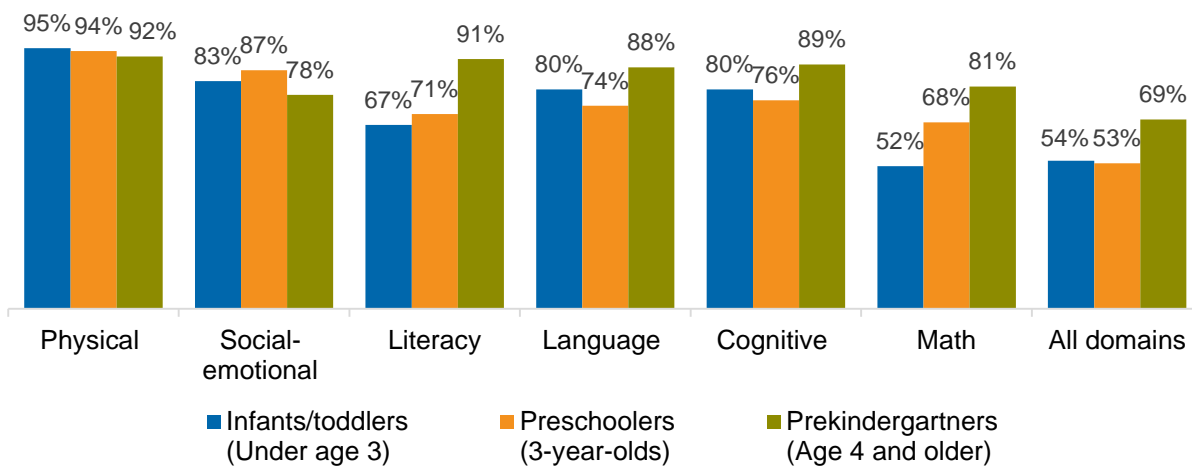
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Invest Early children are on target in most developmental domains.

At the end of year 11, 54 percent of children under age 3, 53 percent of 3-year-olds, and 69 percent of children age 4 and older were in the normal range of development on all six of the domains measured by Teaching Strategies GOLD. Almost all children (90% or more) across all ages were on target for physical development. A high percentage of infants/toddlers and preschoolers (80% or more) were also on target in social-emotional development. While fewer infants/toddlers and preschoolers were on target in literacy and math, almost all (91%) of prekindergartners were on target in the literacy domain, a key skill needed for kindergarten.

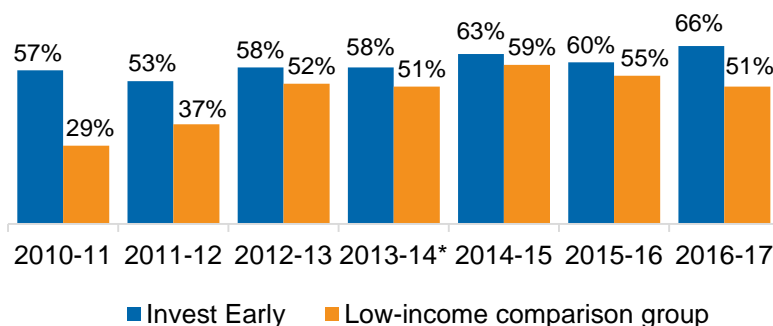
Percentage of children on target in developmental areas, spring 2016



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

Of the 2016-17 kindergarten class, two-thirds of Invest Early low-income students demonstrated overall school readiness skills and knowledge based on the Work Sampling Developmental Checklist, compared with half of the low-income comparison group (who were not in Invest Early, School Readiness, or Head Start) and 63 percent of their higher-income classmates who were not in Invest Early.

Kindergarten readiness over time, 2011-2017 school years



The upward trajectory in kindergarten proficiency among Invest Early students continued this year, with the highest percentage yet of Invest Early students demonstrating kindergarten readiness. In addition, Invest Early students, compared with their low-income peers without Invest Early, tended to be less likely to have the lowest rating of readiness of “not yet” overall (1% vs. 8%).

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

Invest Early students are diverse.

About 20 percent of the children served in year 11 are children of color (6%) or indigenous (14%), up from 6 percent in 2006-07. That is a higher proportion than in the general child population of Itasca County (15%).

Invest Early children and families face multiple risk factors.

In addition to being low income, children served by Invest Early have 3-4 other risk factors, on average, which put them at risk for delayed child development. The most common risk factors in year 11 are similar to past years: experiencing a family stressor in the past year, such as death, divorce, or unemployment (52%); the family being a single-parent household (41%); the child having no opportunity for socializing with peers (32%); and history or evidence of delays reaching developmental milestones (30%).

This year, as in previous years, the youngest children (under age 3) have 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.

Staff observed that a third (31%) of parents sometimes or frequently seem overwhelmed or stressed and have difficulties coping with personal or family matters; moreover, two-thirds (67%) of parents report feeling challenged by life’s demands at least sometimes.

Invest Early is a high quality program.

Quality of Invest Early classrooms is high.

Based on classroom observations, Invest Early classrooms were rated of higher quality on the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), on average, than national Head Start classrooms, similar to previous years.

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, field trips, and reading to children.

At the end of the program year, nearly all parents (95%, 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 494 families served, 325 (70%) completed the anonymous surveys this year. As in previous years, parents responded positively overall.

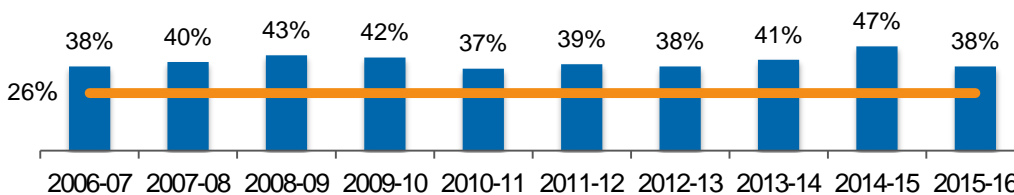
- **Program satisfaction:** 97-99 percent would recommend the program to others, are satisfied with the education their child received, and say the services they received met their expectations.
- **Feedback on staff:** All parents report that staff communicate with them in a way they understand, and 99 percent say staff respect them as an individual. Additionally, 98 percent of parents say they are working with staff to set goals for their child and the staff know a lot about children.
- **Child development impacts:** 97-98 percent of parents say their child has made progress in developing language skills and social skills needed for school.
- **Growth in parenting skills:** 89 percent say they better understand their child’s needs and development and what their child needs to succeed in school. In addition, 82 percent say involvement in the program helped them to improve their parenting skills, 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.

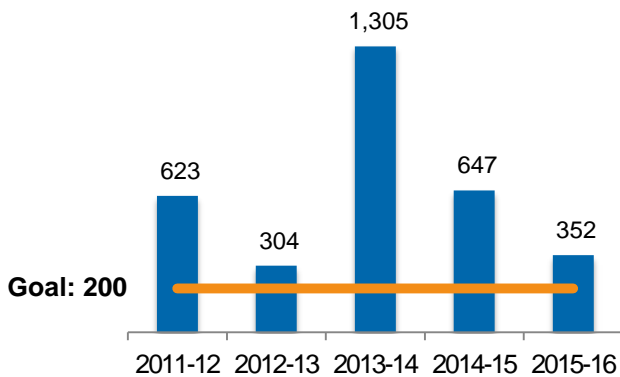
Invest Early children are screened within 45 days of enrollment in the program. County-wide, children are being screened significantly earlier than before Invest Early. This year, 38 percent of the early childhood screenings were conducted before age 4. Though this is down from the all-time high last year (47%), it is considerably more than the 26 percent before Invest Early.

Trend in Early Childhood Screenings in Itasca County, percent screened before age 4 compared to baseline



Early childhood caregivers and teachers are being trained.

Number of caregivers trained the last four years



In 2015-16, 352 caregivers received some type of early childhood training, exceeding the goal of reaching at least 200 caregivers per year.

Over the 11 years of Invest Early, 49 early childhood educators have earned a two-year early childhood degree, three have earned a bachelor's, and three have earned a master's. In addition, 132 have obtained Child Development Certificates.

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

Based on both 3rd- and 5th-grade MCA reading and math test results in the spring of 2016, Invest Early children are performing similarly to the low-income comparison groups in both grades. However, both groups (the Invest Early and comparison groups) are outperforming the achievement levels of low-income students statewide, indicating potential county-wide impacts of Invest Early. In addition, on the 3rd-grade math test, the Invest Early students, the low-income comparison students, and the higher-income comparison students have similar test scores.

In 3rd-grade reading, 52 percent of low-income Invest Early students and 46 percent of low-income comparison children meet or exceed standards on the MCA tests, compared to 41 percent of low-income students statewide. In 3rd-grade math, 69 percent of low-income children meet or exceed standards, compared to 53 percent of low-income students statewide. In 5th-grade reading, over half (56-58%) of low-income children meet or exceed standards, compared to 49 percent of low-income students statewide. And, in 5th-grade math, half (47-48%) of low-income children meet or exceed standards in reading, compared to 40 percent of low-income students statewide.

Evaluation methods

Kindergarten readiness assessment

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

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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March 2017