



# Evaluation of the Minnesota School Readiness Connections Project



This fact sheet presents a summary of findings from the evaluation of the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) School Readiness Connections (SRC) Pilot Project from December 2007 through June 2009. Findings are based on reviews of project documents; interactions between the evaluation team and the implementation team over the past two years; interviews conducted in fall 2008 and spring 2009 by evaluation staff with SRC Project child care program directors and providers, and county and Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) administrative staff; surveys completed by parents participating in the SRC Project and child care program directors and providers; and administrative data provided by the child care programs to DHS.

## What is the School Readiness Connections (SRC) Pilot Project?

Legislation passed during Minnesota's 2007 legislative session established School Readiness Service Agreements that provided funds to pay selected child care providers higher rates than had previously been allowed under the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) Minnesota Statutes, section 119B.13. In order to promote continuity of care with these selected providers, the service agreements allowed the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) to suspend some administrative policies for children being cared for under these agreements. The goal of the School Readiness Connections (SRC) Pilot Project was to create incentives for child care programs with high concentrations of CCAP children to provide services that support school readiness and incentives for families receiving subsidies from the child care assistance program to choose these child care programs for their children.



## What are the evaluation questions?

SRI International evaluated the SRC project. Five major evaluation questions were identified.

1. How were SRC funds used (for how many children and for which children and child care programs)?
2. How did SRC funds interact with other sources of funding?
3. What was the impact of the CCAP SRC project on the quality of care received by participating children and families?
4. What were the school readiness skills and abilities of participating preschool-age children?
5. What program policies, training, and administrative practices should be retained or changed if the program were fully implemented?



The Minnesota Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) provides financial subsidies to help low-income families pay for care so that parents may pursue employment or education leading to employment and children are well cared for and prepared to enter school ready to learn.

## Key differences between the CCAP and the SRC project

Policy	CCAP	SRC
Maximum rates	Charges reimbursed up to county <sup>a</sup> maximums, capped based on legislation.	Charges reimbursed up to 25% higher.
Payment rates	Cannot charge CCAP families more than non-CCAP families.	Higher rates can be charged if SRC services provided are different than services for non-SRC families.
Absent days	Limited to 10 consecutive days, 25 cumulative days per year, except for medical exemption.	Not counted; must attend an average of 25 hours per week.
Care authorized	Number of hours authorized is tied to parent's participation in authorized activity. If parent's hours change, the amount of care authorized may change.	Children authorized for weekly care. If parent has authorized activity at least 35 hours per week and the schedule changes, authorized weekly care with the SRC provider continues as long as the family remains eligible for CCAP.
Child ages	0–12 years, or through age 14 if child has a disability.	0–5 years (or until child enters kindergarten).



<sup>a</sup> The CCAP is administered at the county level and supervised at the state level by the MN DHS. DHS and the State legislature set many of the eligibility requirements for the program within parameters identified in federal regulations.

<sup>b</sup> Weekly authorizations were capped at 12 months during a portion of the pilot (12/7/2007 – 6/30/2009).

## Findings

### Who were the participating families?

- 364 children participated in this project.<sup>1</sup>
- Children's participation ranged from 1 to 80 weeks, with an average of 36 weeks (more than 9 months).
- The average annual household income for participating families was \$18,138.
- A majority of parents (83%) were working at a paid job, and about one-fifth of parents (21%) were attending classes to further their education toward a GED or higher education.

### Who were the participating child care programs?

- Based on available funds and quality selection criteria, 14 early care and education programs located throughout the state (9 licensed child care centers and 5 licensed family child care programs) were selected to receive SRC funds.

### How were the SRC funds used by participating child care programs?

*Costs of the SRC project.* SRC costs were the difference between the cost of providing care for a child under the general CCAP program and the additional costs based on higher rates and more days of child care authorized than a typical CCAP case.

- The SRC Project expended 33%<sup>2</sup> more for the care of participating children than would have been authorized if the children were only receiving CCAP. During the SRC project:
  - On average, the cost of child care per week for children receiving CCAP through the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) Child Care Funds (62% of children) was \$242. This was \$56 more than they would have been authorized for under CCAP.
  - On average, the cost of child care per week for children receiving CCAP through Basic Sliding Fee (BSF) Child Care Funds (41% of children) was \$215. This was \$54 more than they would have been authorized for under CCAP.
- The majority of child care programs reported receiving funding from other sources, including the Child and Adult Care Food Program, Head Start, Department of Education, grants or foundations.

<sup>1</sup> Based on data from the 1/7/08 – 6/30/09 reporting period.

<sup>2</sup> Based on data from the 2/1/08 – 7/31/08 reporting period.

*Care Authorized.* 13%<sup>3</sup> of children received more hours of child care than they would have under the general CCAP program. For some children, the care differential was significant (up to 342 hours); other children received no more than one hour of additional care.

*Referrals for children and families.* Providers were required to refer families to appropriate community resources and facilitate referrals as needed. Child care programs referred 55 families. About half of the children (49%) were referred for developmental screening. Additional referrals included both parent- and family-focused, and other child-focused referrals.

*Quality improvement activities by child care programs.* All the child care programs (100%) used some SRC funds for promoting **family partnerships** and improving **teaching materials and strategies**. Three-fourths (71%) used SRC funds for **teacher training and education**, and two-thirds (64%) to **monitor or assess children's learning**. Most programs (93%) also used SRC funds for **other activities** (e.g., substitute teachers, additional staff hours, and other quality improvements).

*Child assessment and progress monitoring.* Providers were required to use the Work Sampling System ® (WSS) as a tool to assess and monitor progress of SRC children ages 3-5. Providers noted that the WSS helped the teachers to:

- Observe the children more effectively.
- Evaluate children's progress on developmental milestones.
- Communicate this information to the parents.
- Create customized goals for the child.
- Integrate the WSS results into the daily activities in the classroom and playground.
- Offer parents opportunities to help foster their children's development at home.

### **What were the school readiness skills of participating children at the end of the SRC project?**

A total of 50 children were assessed with the P4 version<sup>4</sup> of the WSS either 3 or 6 months prior to kindergarten entry, at the end of the SRC project.

- Almost all of the 4-year-old children (92%) were rated as proficient in the physical development and health domain.
- About four-fifths of the 4-year-old children were rated as proficient in the personal and social development domain (82%), and in the language and literacy domain (78%).
- About three-fourths of the 4-year-old children (72%) were rated as proficient in the mathematical thinking domain.



<sup>3</sup> Based on data from the 2/1/08 – 7/31/08 reporting period

<sup>4</sup> The P4 version of the WSS measures the progress of children in the year prior to entering kindergarten.

## What were families' experiences and satisfaction with the SRC project and their child care providers?

- Overall, parents were very pleased with the SRC project because it provided a safe and educational place for their children to be while they needed to work, go to school, or take care of daily needs.
- Almost all of the parents reported that it was easy (97%) to understand the SRC project information given to them at the beginning of the project.
- The most common responses for how the full week of child care helped parents include:
  - The parent was able to go to work (45%)
  - The children received good quality child care and education (38%)
- Overall, most parents felt that their children had a good provider who cared for them and who provided a variety of educational opportunities for their children.



## How was the SRC Project administered and implemented?

- Seventeen counties and one administering agency worked with the providers and DHS to verify children's eligibility and facilitate payment for services provided and to provide other administrative support, with DHS leveraging existing CCAP authorization and payment processes.
- Participating counties and child care programs were satisfied with the administrative support they received.

## Summary

The results of the evaluation indicate that the SRC project was successful in meeting its goals. Benefits cited by parents and child care program directors and providers included:

- Children were able to continue attending the child care program even if the parents' schedule of authorized activity changed as long as the child continued to attend the child care program at least 25 hours per week.
- Through the WSS assessment process, teachers more effectively observed children and provided families with more information in an easy-to-understand way so that parents were more informed and were encouraged to become more involved in their children's education and program.
- Teachers and child care program staff appeared to be more observant of the needs of children and families, effectively providing referral and resource information when needed and helping to facilitate the referral process.
- Children appeared to have a greater variety of learning opportunities available to them in their child care programs, and parents were highly satisfied with the quality of the child's learning in their child care programs.



## Next Steps

- The evaluation report contains recommendations and additional questions for DHS to explore in any continuation or expansion of the SRC project.
- In 2009, legislation passed to extend the SRC project for two years and requires that SRC programs to participate in Parent Aware and obtain a 3- or 4-star rating (i.e., ratings indicating a high quality program).