

Early learning conditions among lower-income families in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties

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 lower-income families in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties 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 counties 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 lower-income children and families and of child care providers and for making informed decisions about how to build on those strengths and meet those needs for optimal early learning.

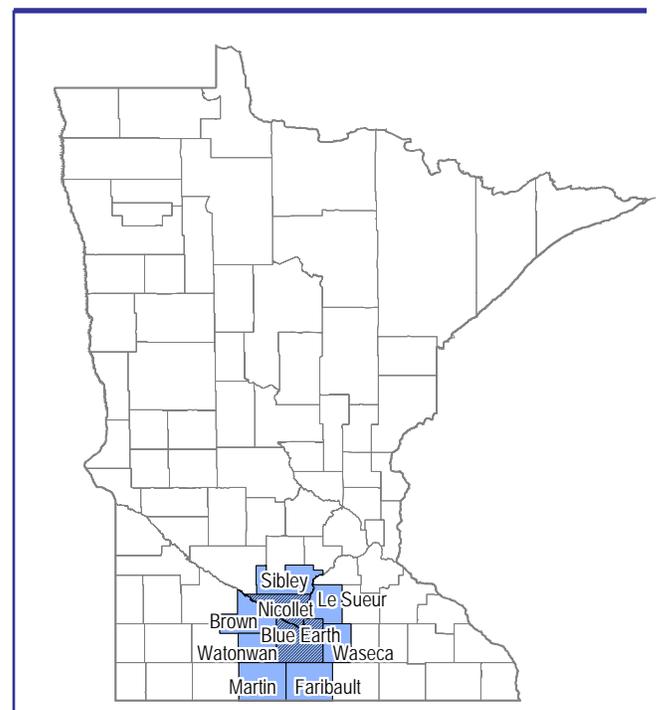
Study groups and locations

The study includes telephone surveys with lower-income parents of children age 5 and younger and not yet in kindergarten, licensed family providers, and directors of child care centers and preschools in

Blue Earth and Nicollet counties. The study also includes those same groups located in a comparison area consisting of the rest of the counties in South Central Minnesota – Sibley, Le Sueur, Waseca, Faribault, Martin, Watonwan, and Brown – and a comparison group of higher-income families in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties.

Key findings

Lower-income parents in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties have many strengths to build upon, including basic and parenting education, stable housing and transportation, and hope for the future of their children. They also feel that they have enough options for getting their children ready to succeed in school, and they support and advance the health and development of their young children to a great extent through such things as regular health check-ups, mealtime and bedtime schedules, and reading to their children.



However, some lower-income parents in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties face challenges of resources, inadequate emotional and social support, and work schedules that may contribute to early learning gaps for their young children. Similar to other parents, lower-income parents in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties consider a number of factors in choosing child care, but trust, perceived quality, convenience of hours or location, and cost are the most common. Consequently, 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 licensed child care for their children age 3 to 5.

Very few center-based programs and licensed family homes are accredited, and the number interested in being accredited is fairly low. Nevertheless, early care and education providers in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties 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, how to effectively communicate with parents, and how to manage children's behavior and special needs.

The following findings suggest that kindergarten readiness efforts in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties should focus on improving the quality of care in all types of family-based settings (parental, FFN, and licensed) as much as in center-based care.

Lower-income families' engagement in children's early learning

Most lower-income parents in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties are on strong footing to engage in their children's early learning.

- Most (respondents and their spouses or partners) have at least a high school education, and more than a third have 4-year college degrees or higher; although lower-income respondents and their spouse or partners (45% and 33%) are less likely than those in higher-income households (66% and 62%) to have 4-year college degrees or higher.

- 53 percent report they have participated in parent education training, classes, or workshops, similar to other parents in this survey and to a statewide survey (57%).
- 88 percent say their housing situation is very stable, and most use the Internet, primarily at home, similar to other parents surveyed.
- Most say they rarely or never have transportation problems that keep them from participating in learning opportunities for children and families; 12 percent of lower-income parent in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties sometimes or frequently have transportation problems.
- 91 percent feel hopeful about their children's future.
- 89 percent say they always or most of the time feel their neighborhood is a great place for young children to grow and thrive, similar to higher-income parents in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties (95%) but higher than lower-income parents in the rural comparison counties (69%).
- 85 percent 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, similar to other rural parents.

In Blue Earth and Nicollet counties, most lower-income parents already support and advance the health and development of their young children.

- Lower-income parents report 84 percent of their children age 5 and younger receive regular well-child health check-ups. That percentage, however, is lower than reported for children in higher-income households in those two counties (94%), yet slightly higher than for children in lower-income households in the rural comparison counties (76%).
- 91 percent rate their children's overall health as excellent or very good, similar to other parents surveyed.
- 27 percent, similar to other parents surveyed, say they took their children to the public library at least weekly in the past 12 months; 22 percent say they did so about monthly. Most parents (85-90%) take home books from the library for their children.

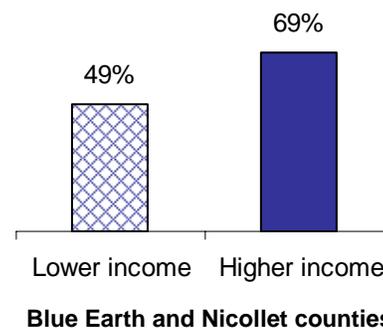
- 90 percent say they read to their children age 2 to 5 every day or most days in a typical week;
- 60 percent have their children read along every day or most days; and 75 percent teach their children letters, words, or numbers every day or most.
- 85 percent say that they usually or always keep a regular mealtime and bedtime schedule for their children.

Some lower-income parents in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties, however, face challenges, such as financial disadvantage, poor emotional health, and inadequate social support, which may interfere with their participation in their children’s early learning.

- 88 percent have a spouse or partner present, less than the higher-income households in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties (100%) and similar to lower-income households in the comparison area.
- 57 percent, the same as the rural comparison area, are currently employed, compared with 76 percent in high-income Blue Earth and Nicollet households. In households with a second parent, about 9 in 10 of these parents are currently employed.
- About a third of respondents and a third of their spouses or partners work evenings, the same as in the rural comparison area, but fewer than respondents (16%) and their spouses or partners (20%) in the higher-income group of Blue Earth and Nicollet counties. Lower-income respondents are also more likely to work weekends and to have work schedules that vary week to week.
- About 10 percent are refugee or immigrant families and may experience language and cultural barriers.
- 21 percent have annual incomes below \$20,000, including 12 percent with incomes under \$15,000, a higher proportion than in the lower-income rural comparison area (4% under \$15,000 annually).
- 19 percent say they at least sometimes feel so sad or hopeless that they are concerned about their ability to cope with personal or family concern, compared with 12 percent for higher-income parents.

- 82 percent say they usually or always have friends and relatives available to listen to their concerns; 76 percent always or usually can count on their friends and relatives to provide helpful advice and information about parenting; and 84 percent always or usually have a friend, relative, or neighbor they can count on when they need help. These results are similar to results for lower-income parents in the rural comparison counties, but lower than the percentages reported by higher-income parents in Blue Earth and Nicollet (92% or above).
- Seventy-two percent say that there are enough resources in their neighborhood for families with children always or most of the time, similar to higher-income families in Blue Earth and Nicollet, compared with 55 percent of lower-income parents in the rural comparison counties.

PERCENT OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH BOTH PARENTS OR THE SINGLE PARENT EMPLOYED



Moreover, some children in lower-income families in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties may have opportunity gaps related to nurturing and learning.

- 58 percent of lower-income parents in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties say they frequently spend time at home working on educational and creative activities with their children; 82 percent at least sometimes take their children to places in the community to learn special things and, at least sometimes, and 60 percent at least sometimes take their children to participate in organized activities or lessons in the community. These percentages are similar to those reported by lower-income parents in other South Central Minnesota counties but lower relative to children in higher-income families in Blue Earth and Nicollet by 10 to 11 percentage points.

- About two-thirds, similar to other lower-income rural parents, compared with 81 percent of higher-income parents in Blue Earth and Nicollet, say their child care arrangement always or usually had a lot of creative activities such as art, music, dance, or drama.

Lower-income parents in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties, 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.

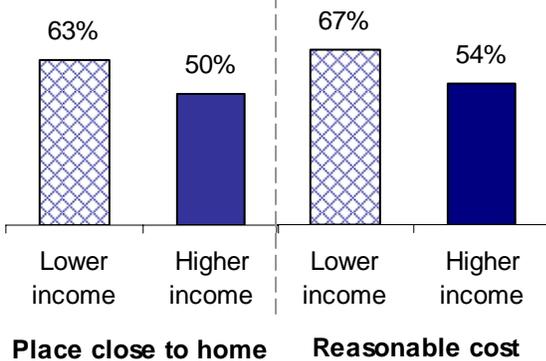
- A place where their child can learn new things and new skills (82% or higher), a caregiver who speaks the family’s native language (72% or higher), and a caregiver who has special training in taking care of children (71% or higher) top the list of very important criteria in choosing child care.
- Lower-income parents in Blue Earth and Nicollet and in the rural comparison counties are more likely than higher-income parents in Blue Earth and Nicollet to say that a place close to home and a reasonable cost are very important.
- Consistent with other studies of child care use, the main reasons for choosing 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).

Also consistent with other studies of child care use, about a quarter of lower-income families say they definitely or mostly feel they had to take whatever primary arrangement they could get, compared with 10 percent for higher-income families in Blue Earth and Nicollet.

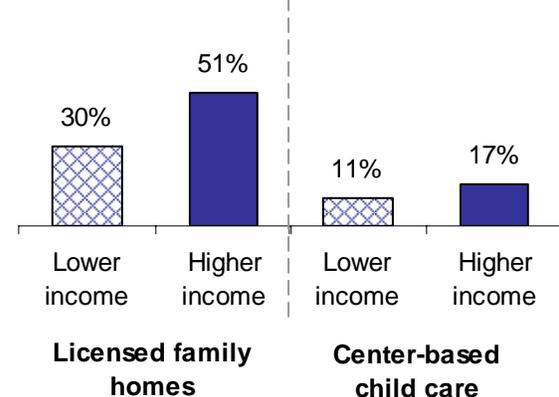
Many lower-income families in Blue Earth and Nicollet use parental care only or informal child care only for their children age 2 and younger.

- 25 percent of children age 2 and younger have parental care only, compared with 8 percent for children in higher-income families.
- 57 percent of children age 2 and younger use family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care, including 37 percent as their only child care, compared with 27 percent for children in higher-income families. Most of these FFN caregivers are grandparents.
- In Blue Earth and Nicollet counties, all children age 2 and younger in licensed child care arrangements are more likely to be in licensed family homes than in center-based programs (30% vs. 11% for children in lower-income families and 51% vs. 17% in higher-income families).
- 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.*).

PERCENT SAYING VERY IMPORTANT IN CHOOSING CHILD CARE



PERCENT OF CHILDREN AGE TWO AND YOUNGER USING EACH ARRANGEMENT



Blue Earth and Nicollet counties

Many lower-income families in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties use licensed child care for their children age 3 to 5.

- 49 percent of children age 3 to 5 are in center-based care, compared with 69 percent for those in higher-income families. Center-based includes licensed child care centers, nursery schools, preschools, pre-kindergarten programs, and school readiness programs. Adding in Head Start, the percentage increases to 63 percent for the lower-income group.
- 26 percent of children age 3 to 5 are in licensed family child care, compared with 49 percent for those in higher-income families.
- 59 percent also use FFN care, similar to their higher-income peers, including 22 percent as their only child care, compared with 8 percent for children in higher-income families.
- For perspective, among Minnesota children age 3 to 5, 21 percent use parental care only, 53 percent center-based care and 7 percent Head Start, and 10 percent licensed family child care (Wilder Research (2004). *Child Care Use in Minnesota.*).

Indicators of quality among rural early education and care providers

Very few programs and licensed family homes in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties are accredited, and the number interested in being accredited is fairly low.

- About 4 percent of the centers and preschools are currently accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or the Council on Accreditation, and 63 percent of centers and preschool directors report they do not intend to seek accreditation.
- Few licensed family child care homes are currently accredited, and about three-quarters do not intend to seek accreditation.
- For perspective, 23 percent of child care centers and 5 percent of preschools are accredited statewide.

Child care centers and preschools, on average, have a desired preschool enrollment of 35 children in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties, with vacancy rates averaging 9 percent. The enrollment is lower and the vacancy about the same in the rural comparison area.

Licensed family child care homes, on average, have a desired preschool enrollment of 4 or 5 children, with preschool vacancy rates averaging 12 percent, fairly typical for South Central Minnesota.

High-education levels among directors and teachers in centers and preschools and the experience level of all types of early learning providers are strengths in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties.

- 59 percent of directors in centers and preschools have bachelor's degrees or higher, nearly all of them child-related degrees, but only 13 percent have director's or administrator's credentials or a director's advanced training certificate.
- 54 percent of teacher-qualified staff (under Rule 3) in centers and preschools, on average, have bachelor's degrees or higher in early childhood education. In addition, on average, 33 percent have a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or AA in early childhood education.
- 62 percent of teacher-qualified staff, on average, have more than five years of early childhood teaching experience.
- 13 percent of licensed family child care providers have child-related bachelor's degrees or higher, and 61 percent have more than five years of early childhood teaching experience.

The average weekly rate for children age 3 to 5 is about \$127 in Blue Earth and Nicollet centers and preschools and \$108 in licensed family homes.

Class size, child- to-adult ratios, and teacher turnover are all signs of quality programs in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties. (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 average about 20 children, about four more, on average, than in the rural comparison centers and preschools.
- For preschoolers, the child to adult ratios, on average, are about 8 to 1 in Blue Earth and Nicollet and 9 to 1 in the rural comparison area.
- The mean turnover rate for child care and preschool teachers is about 11 percent. The average turnover rate is about 2 percentage points higher than in the comparison areas. These are lower than statewide averages of about 20 percent for child care center teachers.

Informal communication with parents in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties is reasonably frequent, but formal communication does not happen quite often enough.

- In 75 percent of centers and preschools, higher than in the rural comparison area (52%), 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 79 percent of licensed family homes, higher than in the rural comparison area (64%), providers almost daily provide informal feedback to families about child development and learning, but rarely give written reports to parents.

Most centers and preschools and some licensed family homes report using curriculum, but few have been approved by Parent Aware (the State's quality rating system).

- About three-quarters of centers and preschools report using curriculums, naming about 25 different curriculums. Homegrown (29%) and creative curriculum (29%) are the most common.
- 30 percent of licensed family child care providers in Blue Earth and Nicollet and 22 percent in the rural comparison area report using a curriculum, with seemingly every provider using a different one. When asked what improvements they would make first if resources were available, curriculum and educational materials top the list.

Some early learning providers use community literacy and parenting resources as part of their care giving.

- 37 percent of the child care centers and preschools in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties and 24 percent in the rural comparison counties visit libraries at least twice a month. Seventeen percent in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties report using the bookmobile at least twice a month.
- 23 percent of the licensed family child care providers in Blue Earth and Nicollet and 24 percent in the rural comparison counties visit libraries at least twice a month. Fifteen percent in Blue Earth and Nicollet report using the bookmobile at least twice a month.
- About 28 percent of the licensed family child care homes in Blue Earth and Nicollet and 16 percent in the rural comparison area 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.

- 17 percent of child care centers and preschools in Blue Earth, Nicollet and the rural comparison counties offer vision and hearing screenings.
- 29 percent in Blue Earth and Nicollet and 21 percent in the rural comparison counties offer developmental screenings.
- Few centers and preschools report offering dental screenings.
- Few licensed family child homes offer vision, hearing, or dental screenings.
- Seven percent in Blue Earth and Nicollet and 8 percent in the rural comparison counties 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 centers and preschools in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties and 79 percent in the rural comparison area report using developmental assessments, naming about 10 different assessments. Homegrown assessments top the list (25%).
- Among licensed family child providers, 40 percent in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties and 45 percent in the rural comparison area report using assessments, naming about 15 different ones. Homegrown assessments and one offered through Provider Choices are used most commonly.

Most centers and preschools provide professional development opportunities for staff.

- Three-quarters of the child care centers and preschools in Blue Earth and Nicollet counties report that they provide training in house by the director or other staff, similar to the rural comparison area.
- Ninety-six percent of centers and preschools 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 which training topics they would seek for themselves and their staff if they had more time and resources. The respondents named a wide variety of training topics.
- The most commonly requested trainings mentioned by center and preschool directors are: curriculum, communication and working with parents, special needs, and managing behavior and discipline.
- For licensed family child providers, the most commonly requested trainings are: managing behavior and discipline, special needs, child development, and communication and working with parents.

Study methods and samples

Study samples

Wilder Research interviewers screened households by telephone for eligibility based on income (under \$50,000 for lower-income) and age of children in the household (age 5 or younger and not yet in kindergarten) and verified addresses. The samples are stratified by county.

Interviewers contacted all of the centers and preschools in the Minnesota CCR&R Network database located in South Central Minnesota. The lists of licensed family providers in Blue Earth, Nicollet and the South Central comparison counties were randomized, and interviewers contacted licensed family homes in that random order until achieving the desired final number of completed surveys. The sample is proportional to the number of providers in each county.

Data collection process

The telephone survey with families using the randomly sampled telephone numbers in each study area was conducted April-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 June-October 2007.

Wilder Research made more than 57,000 phone calls to 17,761 households to complete 314 surveys in the South Central Minnesota study areas. The response rates are quite acceptable for the family samples, ranging from 60 percent to 66 percent, and for the child care provider samples, ranging from 65 percent to 94 percent.

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, St. Paul, and Blue Earth and Nicollet counties*. The report is available at www.wilderresearch.org.

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