

CARES Early Childhood Initiative

Introduction

When COVID-19 restrictions were implemented in March 2020 many schools and childcare centers were closed and early childhood programming was put on hold. While some schools and programs have since reopened, many remain closed leaving many parents without access to any form of early childhood education for their children.

The Early Childhood Initiative was designed to support pre-kindergarten children (ages 0-5) who were impacted by daycare and early childhood education center closures due to COVID-19. The program was funded through the CARES grant and the purpose was to support early childhood education for 1,300 pre-kindergarten children by providing parents a \$300 voucher to Lakeshore Learning. Lakeshore Learning is a toy store that specializes in developmentally- and age-appropriate toys with a focus on encouraging child development through play. The vouchers could be used to purchase educational resources and activities to enhance their child's learning and development.

The target populations were prioritized according to need. First priority families were those residing in family emergency and domestic violence shelters. The second priority were families receiving cash benefits from the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) and employment counseling from Workforce Solutions, particularly targeted at parents ages 24 and younger and under 200% of the Federal Poverty Guideline (FPG).

Evaluation Description

Overall, Ramsey County measures the effectiveness of CARES-funded projects against two overarching questions: (1) Are Ramsey County residents better off as a result of CARES programming? and (2) Did the project achieve the outcomes the community was seeking? These two overarching questions will be applied to the Early Childhood Initiative through the application of the following questions:

- Do parents believe their pre-K children are better off because of the voucher they received?
- What proportion of Lakeshore Learning vouchers was used by families from the BIPOC community?

In order to answer these questions, parents/caregivers were sent an online survey to complete after redeeming their Lakeshore Learning voucher. The survey asked about the number and age of the children in the household, how they were impacted by the early childhood and daycare closures, and the impact of the program on their children. Demographic data was collected from families through the application process address the questions regarding the populations served by the initiative.

The full report on this project is available the [CARES Evaluation Page](#).

What We Learned

Parents and caregivers overwhelmingly reported they think their child/children are better off because of the early childhood resource voucher they received (98%). In addition to the survey question asking this directly, respondents also provided many comments thanking Ramsey County for the resource and reporting they think the resources helped with their child/children's educational development during this time. Although parents appreciated the vouchers provided by the program, they also reported the need

for additional learning resources, as well as the need for in-person learning opportunities for their children.

Two-thirds of parents (67%) reported the overall impact of COVID-19 on their child/children's educational development was very or somewhat negative. The three types of early childhood programming parents reported their child/children participated in prior to COVID-19 restrictions were daycare/childcare (39%), Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) (27%), and pre-school (24%). The closure of these programs impacted thousands of families with pre-kindergarten children.

One of the goals of the initiative was to reach families in the BIPOC community. Seventy-eight percent of parents/caregivers served identified themselves as BIPOC. Nearly one-third (30%) identified as Asian and 25% as Black. Five percent or fewer indicated they were Latino/Hispanic (6%), Multi-racial (5%), African Immigrant (4%), American Indian (2%), Hawaiian or other.