LENA Start is implemented in Minnesota by a consortium involving the University of Minnesota and community-based partners, including: Think Small, Minneapolis Public Schools, Wayzata Public Schools, and Anoka-Hennepin Public Schools. Over the course of the first phase on implementation, over 150 families and child care providers will participate in LENA Start across the metro.

For more information about closing the Word Gap in Minnesota, visit www.mntalks.com
“Literacy is a part of our family’s routine now!”
-LENA Start Parent Participant

LENA Start is a program for parents AND their young children. When implemented in Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE), parents come together after a shared activity to learn about ways to engage their child and talk more every day. While parents attend the LENA class, the children spend time reading, singing, and completing art projects connected to the weekly lesson.
LENA Start in Minnesota: Annual Report

This report describes the first complete year of implementing LENA Start in Minnesota. LENA Start is a parent education program designed specifically to help parents engage their young children in ways that support positive interactions and promote development of early language. While this is new to Minnesota, it’s an effort that has a strong historical foundation, broad initial support, and a promising future.

Historically, this work is grounded in over 20 years of research, starting with Betty Hart and Todd Risley’s groundbreaking *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Lives of Young American Children*, to better understand and reduce early differences in the language development of young children in our communities. It builds on Minnesota’s 40-year tradition of early childhood family education, where classes and activities are provided to all parents through their local school district. This work also rests on a long and rich arc of collaboration between University of Minnesota faculty, students, and staff, school districts, and nongovernmental organizations whose missions reflect attention to young children and families. Finally, the work reflects shared traditions of local foundations and University leaders to support early-stage work that has promise for both demonstrating effective practices, and for scaling up these practices to the benefit of others.

Initial support for this work was similarly varied and impressive. The LENA Research Foundation made an early and brave commitment to support implementation of this work in Minnesota. Elected officials – most notably, Minneapolis Mayor Betsy Hodges – identified interventions like these as critical components of their broader civic agenda. University administrators, including President Eric Kaler and College of Education and Human Development Associate Dean Frank Symons, lent both intellectual and financial support. And leaders of a large variety of organizations – Dianne Haulcey and Barb Yates at Think Small, Jonathan May and RT Rybak at Minneapolis’s Generation Next, and school leaders like Maureen Seiwert and Elizabeth Fields in Minneapolis Public Schools, Gerri Fisher in Wayzata Public Schools, and Mary Washburn in Anoka Hennepin Schools – helped find the resources needed to meet families where they live.

Any effort like this always represents the good and caring effort of many. In particular, we are grateful to Steve Hannon, Beth Dresser, Traci Martin, and Jess Simons of the LENA Research Foundation; to Anne Larson, Erin Lease, and Liza Finestack at the University of Minnesota; and to the teachers, parents, and children who have shared their time and energy for this work!

All this history and early support makes for a very promising future! The work described here fits into, and extends, initiatives across the country, state, and cities. This focus on positive ways to support young children and families animates research at the University, and is sparking efforts to extend to even more children and communities. In short, the work described here is just a beginning – but a strong one at that!

Scott McConnell
Professor, University of Minnesota
LENA Start is a standardized parent education program that was developed by the LENA Research Foundation. Over the course of the 13-week program, parents meet as a group with a parent educator and record their child’s language environment. LENA Start leverages innovative technology to close the Word Gap for young children by using a small recording device in a specialized vest, which provides a summary of the total number of words and conversations that a child heard that day. After each recording, parents receive reports of their progress and learn strategies for promoting positive language interactions with their child.

With funding from the LENA Research Foundation, the Bush Foundation, and the University, we have launched a local effort to support programs to implement and help us evaluate the program. The University of Minnesota is providing “hub” services - housing the technology, materials, and training capacity to support community partners implementing the model. We committed to serve 150 families in the first two years, and help establish LENA Start as a recurring resource within services provided by Twin Cities community agencies.

**LENAP SYSTEM**
Automatically monitors the quantity of words and conversations in a young child’s language environment

**LENA START CURRICULUM**
A turnkey package delivered by parent educators to parents and family child care providers across a 13-week program

**WEB-BASED DATA SYSTEM**
Allows parent educators and administrators to track individual and group progress towards language goals

**TEXT REMINDERS**
Reinforces motivation and behavior change by providing parents with reminders about the program’s core elements
LENA START IN MINNESOTA

Minnesota offers LENA Start to parents and family child care providers across the Twin Cities.

Families in Minnesota can participate in LENA Start at local school districts through Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE). A collaboration with Think Small also offers the program to family child care providers.

**Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE):** ECFE is a state- and locally-funded universal public school program for families with young children. Parents gather weekly with a parent educator while their children engage in school readiness activities with an early childhood teacher. LENA Start fits well into the ECFE model of providing a universal parenting resource to families with young children across the state.

**Think Small’s Family Child Care Adaptation:** Think Small provides LENA Start to family child care providers. As part of a catalog of professional development opportunities, family child care providers can partner with parents to build quality language interactions with the children in their care.

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**THINK SMALL - TWIN CITIES**

By creating partnerships with parents and family child care providers, Think Small is working to build young children’s language environments across school and home.

**MINNEAPOLIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Minneapolis offered LENA Start groups in English and Spanish in 2016. In 2017, they plan to expand the program to offer the class as part of their teen parenting curriculum as well.

**WAYZATA PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Wayzata Public Schools offered the first LENA Start class in Minnesota through a partnership with Interfaith Outreach and Community Partners. Their work was featured in the Star Tribune.

**ANOKA HENNEPIN PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Through a partnership with School Readiness and ECFE, Anoka-Hennepin Public Schools has joined the LENA Start team in Minnesota. They will offer 4 groups this spring.
Early language development has been shown to be critical to school readiness skills and later academic success. Parents and family child care providers can improve the quality of language environments by increasing the amount that adults talk to children and the amount that they engage in “give and take” conversations. By talking, reading, and singing, caregivers can close disparities in a child’s exposure to language and promote skills that are critical for later success in school.

Data collected through LENA Start not only allows parents to track and monitor their own progress, but allows programs to monitor group progress as well. In Minnesota, we have a lot to celebrate! In addition to recording over 4.8 million words and 160,000 conversations - LENA Start participants increased both the number of words they spoke to their children and the number of conversations they had with them. Based on the LENA Snapshot, parents reported 5 months of language growth in their children over the course of 3 months.
CELEBRATING OUTCOMES

Preliminary data from the first year of implementation of LENA Start in Minnesota show caregivers are talking more with their children.

+34% increase in adult words

+13% increase in adult-child conversations

LENA Start Participant Growth Target Group

5 months of language growth in 3 months

86% graduation rate
CELEBRATING SUCCESSES

In addition to understanding the impact of LENA Start on children’s language environments, we are also exploring how the program fits within existing contexts, how participants perceive the program, and how LENA Start can be adapted to better fit within Minnesota - including different cultural groups and with family child care providers.

After each cohort of LENA Start, parent educators that coordinate and lead the groups gather to discuss successes and challenges and refine implementation to best meet the needs of families and achieve the maximum benefit of the program. Parent educators brainstorm how to best align the early childhood component of ECFE to the LENA Start curriculum, how to reach families that are not served in other programs, and how to sustain the gains that participants achieve after the program ends. Parent educators collaborate to meet the diverse needs of children, families, and child care providers in the state.

Minnesota’s commitment to our youngest learners and their caregivers offers an opportunity to provide high-quality services that promote development and set children up for later success in school. LENA Start provides a flexible way to meet that need.
PARTICIPANTS TALK!

We also assess the feasibility implementing LENA Start based on what our participants say about the program... and participants are talking!

“We talk more. We hold conversations. Even though she can't talk, she understands what we're talking about... The more we talk, the more they learn.”
- LENA Start Parent, quoted in MinnPost

“Parents and daycare professionals create partnerships that have enormous power in the lives of children. We're excited to provide valuable feedback to these partnerships so they can create the types of language-rich environments that set our youngest learners up for success.”
- LENA Start Coordinator

“Estaría muy bien que hagan más programas como este en más ciudades.”
“It would be really nice if there were more programs like this in more cities.”
- LENA Start Parent

“We learned so much in this class and I can tell that I'm talking so much more with my daughter than I have in the past. I've also been watching a friend's baby a couple days a week and I've been talking to her a lot more than I ever talked to any of my girls at that age!”
- LENA Start Parent

“We knew talking was important, but the class really helped us focus on strategies to build conversations - the back and forth - with the children in our center.”
- LENA Start Family Child Care Provider
Before the end of 2017, we expect to provide LENA Start to at least 150 parents and family care providers of young children. Perhaps even more importantly, we expect to develop ways to sustain this effort so that parents and providers can continue to benefit, to adapt the program so that more families and communities can communicate, and to evaluate and continuously improve program outcomes. We look forward to working with parents, program providers, administrators, and others to make this happen!
PRIORITY FOR 2017

Preliminary findings and testimonials from participants and administrators provide early evidence that LENA Start may directly affect child language environments in a way that can be broadly implemented across ECFE and with child care providers. We’re looking forward to continuing this progress in 2017.

IMPLEMENTATION

Fidelity of implementation is central to achieving the maximum impact of an intervention. Combining internal mechanisms to monitor fidelity of implementation, the University also monitors implementation to ensure faithful adherence to the program.

EVALUATION

In addition to the measures collected through the LENA Start web-based system, the University of Minnesota is also conducting an evaluation of the program’s implementation and efficacy. A final report will be released after the pilot phase of implementation in early 2018.

SUSTAINABILITY

Each participating district and organization has contributed their own funds in addition to grant contributions to increase the likelihood that financially sustainable systems are in place to cover the ongoing costs of implementation.

EXPANSION

Parent educators agree that LENA Start fits well into an ECFE model. Our goal is to scale these resources for families so they are available elsewhere across the state. In 2016, 33 families participated across 5 groups. In the first half of 2017, we expect that number to triple.

PRESS

Want to hear more? Check out these local news articles:

**MINNPOST**

*Boosting Early Language Learning One Recording at a Time*
by: Erin Heinrichs

**StarTribune**

*West Metro Program Helps Parents Build Babies’ and Toddlers’ Vocabularies*
by: Beena Raghavendran
PARTNERS
Thanks to our partners and all of our families who have participated and shared their expertise!

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INTERESTED IN CLOSING THE WORD GAP IN MINNESOTA?

Get in touch with us! You can sign up for our newsletter to receive periodic updates on LENA Start and other initiatives targeted towards closing the Word Gap locally and nationally.

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