

Alberta Darling

Wisconsin State Senator

Co-Chair, Joint Committee on Finance

Senate Committee on Education

Senate Bill 595
January 28, 2020

Thank you Chairman Olsen, and committee members for holding a public hearing today on Senate Bill 595

Recently, the Department of Public Instruction released updated standardized test scores and according to the most recent report cards, over 60% of Wisconsin students are not proficient in reading or math. If one thing is clear, it is that we must make sure everything is done to ensure every child in Wisconsin is getting the best education possible.

Research consistently shows that making sure our youngest children arrive in kindergarten ready to learn is a tremendous indicator of future success. Senate Bill 595 creates a grant program to contract with an online-early learning program for some of our most vulnerable children.

Since 2009, the UPSTART project, developed by the nonprofit Waterford Institute, is a proven, home-based kindergarten readiness program that has helped more than 60,000 children in 15 states get a life-changing early-learning opportunity. What makes the program advantageous is each student's family is assigned a "coach."

This coach monitors the child's usage of the program and checks in with the parent or caregiver on a weekly basis to ensure benchmarks are being met and to help problem solve as needed.

Due to the success of the UPSTART program in other states, SB 595 will establish a three-year UPSTART pilot program in Wisconsin funded at \$500,000 a year. DPI will select three urban and three rural school districts to participate in the program, and only children who qualify for free and reduced lunch would be eligible.

Each year, a report would be filed with DPI that will include assessment results, participation rate of students, and parental feedback. The bill also would require the provider who won the contract for the pilot to contribute \$500,000 of its own money over the course of the pilot.

I want to thank Chairmen Thiesfeldt for his leadership on this bill, and committee members for taking the time today to hear Senate Bill 595. I hope I can count on your support for this much needed assistance for early learning.

Senate Education Committee
January 28, 2020

**Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
Statement in Support of 2019 Senate Bill 595**

Background

Senate Bill 595 (SB 595) requires the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to award a three-year contract to a service provider to administer an online early learning program to low-income children who reside in three urban and three rural school districts selected by DPI.

SB 595 directs DPI to use a competitive request-for-proposal process to award a contract to a service provider to administer an online early learning program to eligible children. The bill defines an eligible child as a child who satisfies the income eligibility criteria for a free or reduced-price lunch under 42 USC 1758 (b) (1) and resides in one of the urban or rural school districts selected by the department. The contract shall require the service provider to administer the online early learning program from July 1, 2020, to June 30, 2023.

The bill creates an annual \$500,000 GPR appropriation for the 2020-21, 2021-22, and 2022-23 school years. Over the course of the three-year pilot program, the service provider must contribute a total of \$500,000 in matching funds. The appropriation sunsets on July 2023.

Under the bill, a service provider is a nonprofit organization that has successfully conducted an online early learning program in the past and can demonstrate its past success using independent evaluations. A qualified online early learning program under this bill must satisfy the following criteria:

- The program provides computer-based instruction to children on a home computer and includes content in reading, math, and science.
- The program is designed to improve a child's transition to five-year-old kindergarten and aligned with nationally recognized early learning standards.
- The program requires parental engagement and involvement that includes interaction with a learning coach.
- The program evaluates a child's growth over the course of the program.
- The program provides a participating low-income family with access to a computer and Internet service in the family's home at no cost.

Under the bill, the service provided awarded a contract is required to submit an annual report to the DPI.



Analysis

Pilot programs offer an opportunity to study methods to improve instructional outcomes. This particular program is focused on closing achievement gaps by focusing efforts on low-income children and will provide additional resources to enable low-income families without computers or internet access the ability to participate in this early learning program.

While the department initially expressed concerns about screen time for young children, it became clear during the Assembly committee hearing on this legislation that programs like this utilize the learning software in the home for 15-20 minutes a day, five days a week. This limited daily screen time falls well within the recommended guidelines by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). The AAP suggests limiting screen use for preschool children, ages 2 to 5, to just 1 hour a day of high-quality programming¹

The DPI also appreciated the changes made in the Assembly on the companion bill (AB 662) authored by Representative Thiesfeldt. The department would like to thank both Representative Thiesfeldt and Representative LaKeshia Myers for reaching out to DPI in a bi-partisan manner to amend the bill and incorporate feedback from DPI. As a result, the bill provides some needed clarification regarding the selection criteria of school districts and procurement.

As a result of what we learned regarding screen time and the changes made to the bill, the Department is changing its position. While we provided testimony for information in the Assembly, we will now be supporting this legislation. We look forward to the feedback it will provide as we look to improve early learning opportunities across the state.

¹ Children and Media Tips, American Academy of Pediatrics, May, 1, 2018 <https://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/news-features-and-safety-tips/Pages/Children-and-Media-Tips.aspx>



Claudia Miner, PhD
Executive Director and Cofounder of Waterford UPSTART

Senate Bill 595
PUBLIC HEARING
Committee on Education
January 28, 2020

Good morning.

Chairman Olsen and members of the Committee on Education. Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today about Senate Bill 595 and the Waterford UPSTART program. I very much appreciate your holding this hearing today.

My name is Claudia Miner and I am the Executive Director and Cofounder of Waterford UPSTART. Twelve years ago, I joined Waterford.org after I heard about the organization's mission of serving children. It spoke to me in a way no other work had. Working with great people, we charted a course to serve children in the home to get them ready for school. This was a radical move – especially since we were putting our faith in parents – but it fit my beliefs and has become my passion. Parents have proven they are up to the task. Knowing I have a role in helping children set the stage for success in life gets me up in the morning with a great and powerful purpose.

About Waterford UPSTART

Waterford UPSTART is an in-home kindergarten readiness program that was launched by your counterparts in the Utah State Legislature in 2009 and has since been implemented in 19 other states and served 60,000 children. The program is implemented by Waterford.org and helps children develop the foundational academic and cognitive skills they need for school success.

- Preschool-age children use Waterford UPSTART software in the home for 15-20 minutes a day, five days a week.
- Children receive a personalized curriculum in reading, math and science with an emphasis on reading.
- Each family is assigned a coach called a Family Education Liaison to ensure strong parental engagement. Waterford UPSTART forms a partnership with parents and caregivers to ensure all children obtain the education necessary for success in school. Support for parents is provided in whatever language a family may require, with Family Education Liaisons capable of providing support in English or Spanish directly. Should a family need support in another language, Waterford UPSTART uses interpreter services and has provided support in 28 languages besides English.

- Social-emotional learning is modeled in the software learning sequence and developed by parents through off-line activities.
- Computers and internet service are provided if the home does not have them.
- Waterford UPSTART is aligned to the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards; Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework; NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards; CASEL Social and Emotional Learning Competencies; and endorsed by the Council of Administrators of Special Education.

Waterford UPSTART is comprised of two software programs:

- Waterford Early Learning delivers individualized instruction in reading, math, and science that adapts to each child's learning trajectory. The program includes: 360 digital books; 330 animated songs; thousands of activities and lessons; and hundreds of instructional hours that meet national, state, and professional standards and guidelines.



- The Waterford Assessments of Core Skills (WACS) is a fundamental testing breakthrough for assessing very young children who do not know how to read. WACS is a computerized adaptive test of early literacy for students in pre-kindergarten through second grade with initial content validity established against state and national standards. All items were calibrated for item response theory to determine item difficulty. To establish concurrent validity and predictive validity, student performance on WACS was compared to performance on five commonly-used standardized tests also measuring reading skills: Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), Texas Primary Reading Indicator (TPRI), Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI), Iowa Tests of Basis Skills (ITBS), and Stanford Achievement Test Series (SAT 100). All correlations between tests are highly significant.

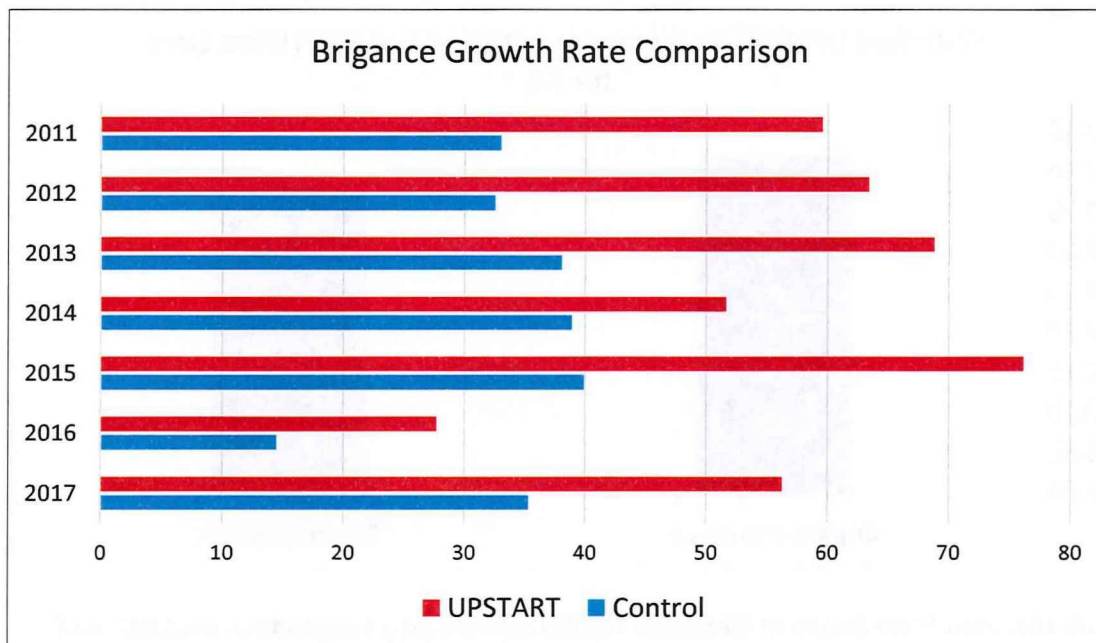
I would note that WACS and the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS), that is used in Wisconsin, both assess alphabet knowledge and beginning sound.

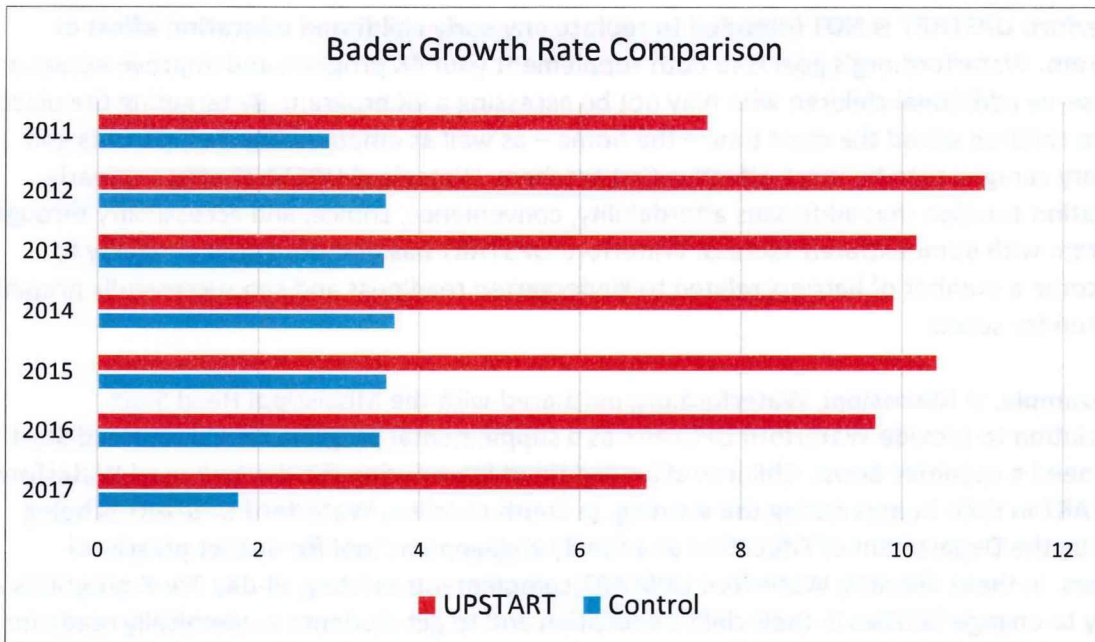
Waterford UPSTART is NOT intended to replace any early childhood education effort or program. Waterford.org’s goal is to both supplement your 4K program and improve access and help serve additional children who may not be accessing a 4K program. By targeting the place where children spend the most time – the home – as well as empowering their parents and primary caregivers to be more effective first teachers, Waterford UPSTART offers an early education solution that addresses affordability, convenience, choice, and accessibility through a program with demonstrated success. Waterford UPSTART has demonstrated an ability to overcome a number of barriers related to kindergarten readiness and can successfully prepare children for school.

For example, in Mississippi, Waterford.org partnered with the Mississippi Head Start Association to provide Waterford UPSTART as a supplemental program for kids in Head Start who need a cognitive boost. Children attended Head Start during the day and used Waterford UPSTART in their homes during the evening. In South Carolina, Waterford UPSTART is being used by the Department of Education as a family engagement tool for district preschool centers. In these districts, Waterford UPSTART complements existing all-day Pre-K programs as a way to engage families in their child's education and to get students academically ready for school.

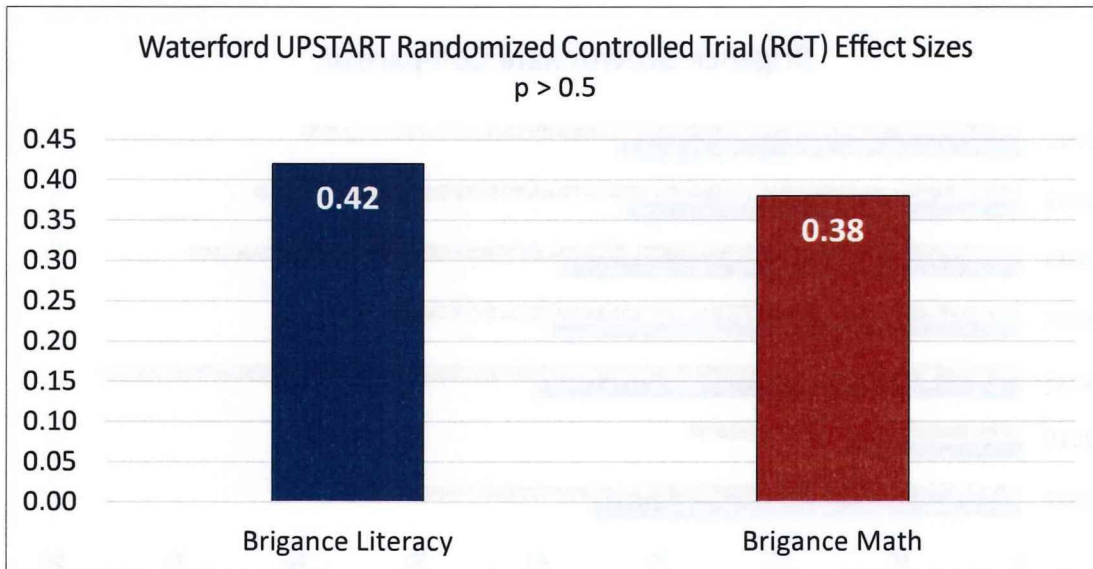
Waterford UPSTART Evaluation

Third party evaluations (as required under the Utah statute) show Waterford UPSTART children have significantly higher learning gains than children from control groups – as measured over a number of years by the Brigance Inventory of Early Development and the Bader Reading and Language Inventory.



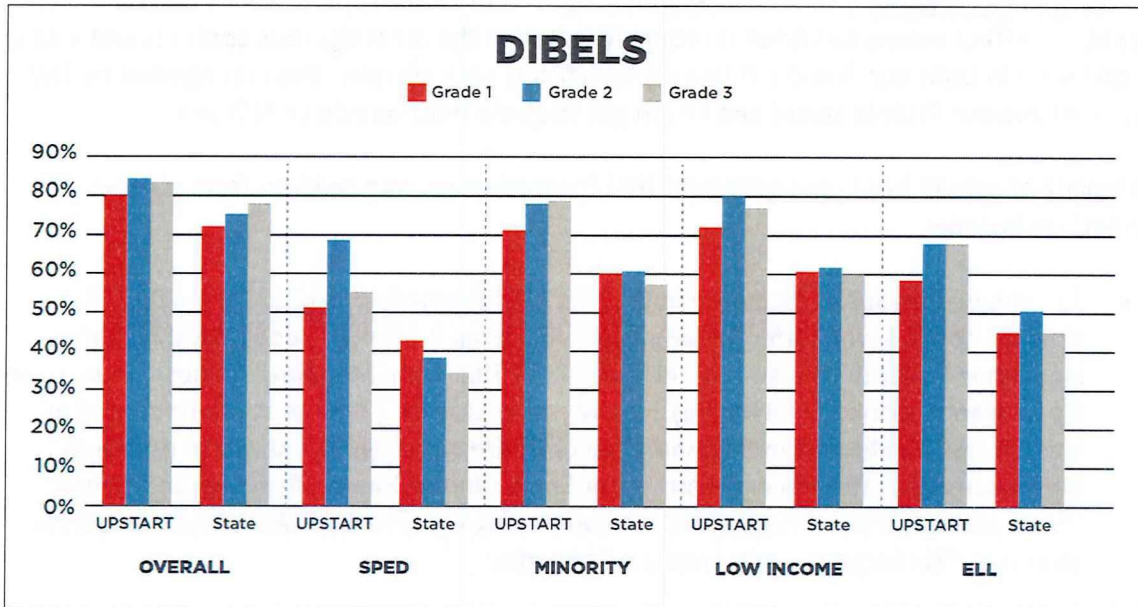


In 2013, Waterford.org was awarded an Investing in Innovation (i3) Validation Grant by the U.S. Department of Education that provided Waterford UPSTART to Utah’s 18 most rural school districts. That grant was used to administer a Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) that showed, Waterford UPSTART has a substantial impact on improving student growth and closing achievement gaps for early learners. According to the What Works Clearinghouse at Institute of Education Services (IES), effect sizes of 0.25 standard deviations or larger are considered to be substantively important.



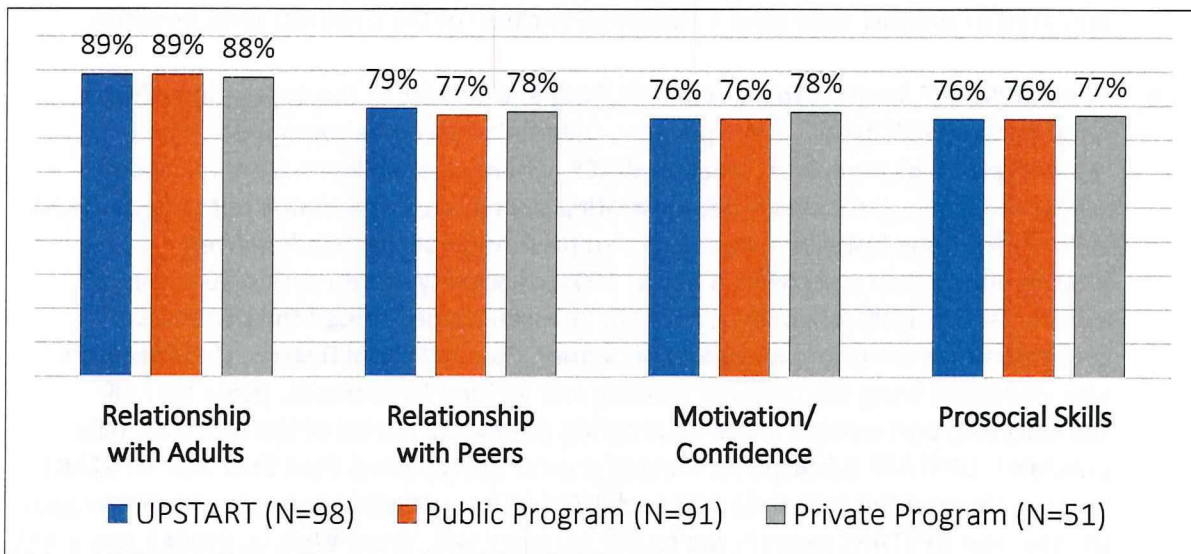
In 2016, the Utah State Board of Education (USBE) conducted a longitudinal evaluation of UPSTART outcomes in Utah that found:

- UPSTART students continually outperform state averages compared to their non-UPSTART peers on state standardized tests in grades first through third.
- Significantly, these gains were even greater across important subgroups, including special education, minority, low-income, and English learner populations.



In 2018, Waterford UPSTART was evaluated as part of Utah’s High-Quality School Readiness (HQSQR) Grant. A review of social-emotional development skills by program group showed comparable social-emotional outcomes for UPSTARS when compared to both public and private preschool programs.

Social-Emotional Development Skills by Program Group



Because of the successful implementation of our i3 Validation Grant, Waterford.org was awarded an Education Innovation and Research (EIR) Expansion Grant by the U.S. Department of Education in 2018 to implement Waterford UPSTART pilots in five Great Plains states (Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming).

With [38 studies completed](#) that include pilot programs in 19 states, Waterford UPSTART's evidence of effectiveness has been thoroughly vetted in the most rigorous contexts and was a critical factor in both our i3 and EIR Grants. Earlier this year we were even recognized by TED with an Audacious Project award and I even got to give a mini version of TED talk.

A sampling of results from pilot programs that focused on serving children from diverse populations include:

- 23 refugee families participated in [the UPSTART Pennsylvania pilot 2016-2017](#). These children spoke seven different languages, including Burmese, Nepali, Swahili, Karen (spoken in lower Burma and on the borders of Thailand), Mandarin Chinese, French, and Kinyarwanda (spoken in Rwanda). Seventy-nine percent (79%) of students scored at least at the "Kindergarten Beginning" level. There were significant pre to post-test differences on Letter Recognition, Letter Sound, Initial Sound, Blending, and Overall WACS scores. Of the refugee children completing the post-UPSTART WACS test, 50% scored as "Kindergarten Intermediate" or higher.
- In the [UPSTART Pilot First Nations Children: Oklahoma/South Dakota 2017-2018](#), with 100% of the population Native American and 58% below 200% poverty, children's outcomes averaged at the "Kindergarten Intermediate" level on WACS. Eighty-seven percent (87%) of children scored at "Kindergarten Beginning" or above on WACS, demonstrating strong school readiness outcomes. Ninety-eight percent (98%) of parents noted they became more aware of what their child needed to learn while participating in the UPSTART pilot program. Ninety-eight percent (98%) of parents said they felt more prepared to support their child's education because of the UPSTART pilot program.
- In the [UPSTART South Carolina pilot 2017-2018](#), with 59% of the population African American and 80% below 200% poverty, children's outcomes averaged at the "Kindergarten Intermediate" level on WACS, where most children score mid-point during the kindergarten year, demonstrating strong school readiness outcomes. The 54 children from the lowest income level also performed at the "Kindergarten Intermediate" level and children below 100% of poverty scored within 10 points of children above 100% of poverty. Hispanic children outperformed their Caucasian counterparts in terms of point gains. In Marion County School District, students were also evaluated using the Dominic Reading and Writing Assessment. (Note that all students also participated in the 4K program during the period of the UPSTART pilot program). UPSTART participants showed greater overall gains than their non-UPSTART peers in three of the four skills assessed. UPSTART participants experienced similar gains to their non-UPSTART peers in the fourth assessed skill, Word Writing, though this is not

a skill taught within the UPSTART software. In Chesterfield County School District, students were also evaluated using PALS-PreK. (Note that all students also participated in the 4K program during the period of the UPSTART pilot program). UPSTART participants finished with higher scores than non-participants in the Spring on every skill assessed (eight out of eight).

- In the [UPSTART Mississippi Head Start pilot 2018-2019](#) (where children attended Head Start during the day and used UPSTART at home), with 91% of the population African American and 97% below 200% poverty, outcomes averaged at the “Kindergarten Intermediate” level and 78% of students scored at least at the “Kindergarten Beginning” level, demonstrating strong school readiness outcomes.

Finally, Waterford UPSTART enjoys strong parent satisfaction. A sampling of survey responses from various pilot programs include:

Survey Question	AZ	CO	MS	PA	SC	TX
<i>UPSTART was helpful in preparing my child for Kindergarten.</i>	100% YES	100% YES	100% YES	100% YES	99% YES	100% YES
<i>Participating in UPSTART was beneficial to both my child and me.</i>	100% YES	100% YES	100% YES	99% YES	99% YES	100% YES
<i>I would recommend the program to family members and/or friends.</i>	100% YES	100% YES	100% YES	100% YES	99% YES	100% YES
<i>If my UPSTART child had/has younger siblings, I would enroll them in UPSTART.</i>	98% YES	99% YES	98% YES	95% YES	99% YES	100% YES
<i>I feel more prepared to support my child’s education because of the UPSTART program.</i>	100% YES	95% YES	98% YES	96% YES	99% YES	92% YES
<i>I became more aware of what my child needed to learn while my child was in the UPSTART program.</i>	98% YES	96% YES	98% YES	98% YES	98% YES	88% YES
<i>I became more aware of my child’s academic abilities while my child was in the UPSTART program.</i>	99% YES	99% YES	98% YES	98% YES	100% YES	97% YES
<i>UPSTART representatives were friendly and polite when I spoke with them.</i>	100% YES	100% YES	100% YES	100% YES	100% YES	100% YES
<i>UPSTART representatives were knowledgeable about the program and the software.</i>	100% YES	100% YES	100% YES	100% YES	100% YES	100% YES
<i>UPSTART representatives helped solve any issues I had.</i>	99% YES	100% YES	98% YES	100% YES	100% YES	100% YES
<i>It was helpful to have a consistent routine.</i>	99% YES	99% YES	100% YES	99% YES	98% YES	98% YES
<i>In general, did your child enjoy/like the software?</i>	99% YES	99% YES	100% YES	96% YES	99% YES	99% YES
<i>Was the software age appropriate?</i>	100% YES	99% YES	100% YES	100% YES	95% YES	98% YES

Waterford UPSTART in Wisconsin

So why would we like to bring UPSTART to Wisconsin? Wisconsin is known as an innovative state with regard to education policy (i.e. first state with kindergarten and a focus on parent options for education) and its unique geography (including significant rural and urban areas) cater to Waterford UPSTART's strengths in overcoming barriers related to kindergarten readiness. We also know that your low-income and minority populations have had some of the worst achievement gap issues in the country. Accordingly, we believe that Waterford UPSTART is a good fit for Wisconsin. Waterford.org has raised philanthropic funds to assist with program implementation and we are very interested in working with the Legislature to support a pilot program in the state.

The Assembly Education committee passed its version of the pilot program bill just last week with a unanimous vote in favor. The committee amended the bill to make sure the pilot program would be focused on children with low-income families who live in school districts with reading achievement gaps. We are very excited for this focus on the kids who need help the most and we believe, and have the data to back it up from other states, that we can help put those children on a firmer path to be more successful in school. It would be an honor to partner with you and your state.