

Illinois' Early Childhood Innovation Zones: A New Model for State Policy?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Introduction

This evaluation reviews efforts made by Illinois Action for Children (IAFC), with guidance from the Illinois Governor's Office for Early Childhood Development, to spur experimentation with new systemic change strategies to increase the number of children from priority populations—those considered to be the most vulnerable, with multiple risk factors—who are enrolled in high quality early learning programs. The Early Childhood Innovation Zones initiative, funded by a Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant, supported capacity building efforts for organizations working with young children in 11 underserved communities, or Innovation Zones (IZs), across Illinois. The theory of action undergirding the IZ project calls for building capacity in these organizations to promote the implementation of system improvement strategies for increasing two primary outcome measures: 1) enrolling and serving more children (birth to kindergarten) from priority populations in early learning programs; and 2) increasing the number of early learning programs participating in ExceleRate Illinois, the state's quality rating and improvement system (QRIS). Illinois Action for Children's capacity-building efforts combined behavioral change theories with systemic thinking and community

engagement strategies. These efforts were designed to help zones conceptualize concerns at the system level and to equip zone leaders with the skills and community partnerships needed to address these concerns.

Methods

This study used a mixed methods approach to describe the strategies utilized by the IZs to improve enrollment and quality and evaluate the progress of capacity building efforts made by IAFC. The research team conducted interviews with leadership and core team members from all 11 IZs, as well as project leadership from IAFC. Interview items were designed around the initiative's logic model, as well as themes identified in IZ project narratives. Interview data were supplemented with a review of project documentation. Quantitative data included bi-annual reports submitted to IAFC by the zones that included priority population enrollment and ExceleRate ratings. An end-of-grant survey also gathered data on short- and intermediate-term outcomes, such as utilization of systemic thinking strategies and increased collaboration.

Findings

The zones used small experiments to test innovative solutions to local problems that they likely would not have attempted otherwise. Using more sources of data and examining data critically helped zones make evidence-based informed decisions about which strategies to implement and whether they were successful. However, incomplete and inconsistent data on early learning programs hindered these efforts. Other key findings include:

- Zones were provided a range of **technical assistance and supports** including conferences, coaching, peer learning networks, and sponsored trainings. The shift from a more academic and theoretical approach in cohort 1 to a more applied and practice-oriented focus in cohort 2 helped sites implement supports in a more meaningful way. Zones reported that IAFC tailored coaching and support to their specific needs and local context, and that peer learning networks allowed zones to develop collegial professional networks through which they could support one another, share strategies, and coordinate services in a more effective manner.
- Zones indicated that successful implementation of systems-level solutions required **engaging the community and developing trusting, genuine relationships** with parents and a wide range of stakeholders. This empowered the community and helped generate more innovative solutions to early childhood system challenges. Some zones noted that when preferred solutions were introduced in a top-down fashion, they tended to be less relevant to the community and less successful.
- The **state budget impasse** had a substantial impact on the project, including delayed and disrupted funding to many state-funded agencies and programs. As a result, zones occasionally struggled to meet the demands of both existing duties and IZ commitments, which limited participation in IZ efforts.

Innovations in Enrollment

All zones developed and tested strategies to increase the number of children from priority populations enrolled in high quality early learning programs. Enrollment strategies focused on aligning the early childhood system, developmental screening campaigns, family and community engagement efforts, and expanding organizational partnerships. Each zone used multiple innovations to increase enrollment, often combining multiple strategies to reflect the unique needs, demographics, and geography of their community.

- Efforts to **align agencies that provide services to high needs children** helped families enroll their children more easily, including cross-referral, shared intake, and simplified intake. However, some zones struggled to get all necessary partners on board.
- **Developmental screening campaigns** helped more families receive the services their children need and helped raise awareness of early learning and development programs zone-wide.
- The zones explored a wide range of **family and community outreach** strategies, including utilizing social media, door-to-door canvassing, Parent Ambassadors, home visiting, and mobile preschools. These strategies were often used in combination, such as joining the efforts of their Parent Ambassadors with mobile preschool events. Overall, zone representatives felt that their outreach efforts successfully increased awareness of available early learning options, although the door-to-door approach was viewed as the least effective.
- The zones worked to **foster new partnerships and expand existing** ones with traditional and non-traditional partners, such as healthcare providers, home- and community-based early learning programs, school districts, WIC offices, refugee groups, and the faith community. Strong partnerships helped zones

form a shared message about the importance of early learning and reach more children from priority populations. However, some partnerships were more difficult to forge than others.

Innovations in Quality

Four zones also focused on quality by working to increase participation in or ratings on the ExceleRate system. The zones' efforts focused on three broad strategies: outreach and incentives, establishing communities of practice, and professional development. Zones tended to use multiple approaches to quality, rather than pursuing a single strategy. Key findings include:

- Zones began by implementing **outreach campaigns** to inform early learning professionals about the ExceleRate system. They promoted and sustained these efforts with incentives, such as public recognition.

- Three zones utilized **communities of practice** to improve quality, collaborating across programs to share ideas and learn from local experience and expertise. The remaining zone relied on a handful of its largest and strongest programs to mentor smaller centers.
- All four zones used **professional development (PD)** as a key component of their approach. Some coordinated their PD zone-wide, whereas others utilized quality specialists or coaches, distance learning, or other outreach and incentive programs.
- We also identified several **challenges** to implementing innovations in quality. Some zones were initially overwhelmed by the requirements of the ExceleRate system. Others had overly ambitious quality goals. More ambitious PD efforts also taxed resources with regard to capacity, technology, and time.

Outcomes

Using qualitative data from interviews and analysis of project documentation and quantitative data submitted to IAFC by each zone, along with feedback gathered from our end-of-grant survey, we summarize the impacts of the IZ program on zone capacity, enrollment, and quality.

Impacts on Capacity. Zones reported that the IZ efforts improved capacity across seven areas:

- Increased collaboration amongst early learning professionals;
- Stronger connections with the community;
- Stronger connections to state and local systems;
- Increased prioritization of early learning and development;
- New approaches to working with families;
- New mindsets and problem-solving strategies; and

- Improvements in data collection and utilization.

Impacts on Enrollment. Enrollment outcomes centered on four areas:

- Increased screening and referrals;
- Increased enrollment capacity;
- Increased focus on priority populations; and
- Enrollment growth.

Our analysis of the quantitative data revealed that, over the duration of the grant, overall priority population enrollment across all zones grew by 12%. Seven of the 11 zones increased priority population enrollment, in some instances considerably, and two zones reported substantial priority population enrollment declines over the duration of the grant. Most zones also increased the proportion of students they served who were from priority populations, although these increases were somewhat limited

because priority populations generally represented a substantial proportion of total enrollment from the outset.

Impacts on Quality. The zones reported quality outcomes in two major areas:

- Improvements to training and professional development; and
- Participation in and ratings on the ExceleRate Circles of Quality.

Quantitative data indicated that ExceleRate quality ratings increased across all zones and within each zone over time. At the beginning of the grant, 34% of participating centers were rated Gold and none had earned an Award of Excellence. By the end of the grant, 40% were rated Gold and 4% earned an Award of Excellence.

Differences by Cohort. Our survey data suggest that there were large differences in perceptions of program effects by cohort. Cohort 1 reported substantially more positive impacts than cohort 2, likely due to the additional year they spent implementing the project.

Data Limitations and Other Challenges to Assessing Impacts. The quantitative outcomes reported in this study should be interpreted with caution due to data limitations and inconsistencies in reporting. Collecting the local program-level data needed to implement and evaluate innovations presented challenges across most zones. Data collected from early learning programs varied widely across zones and over time, and participants expressed concerns about attributing impacts to the IZ initiative, as most zones simultaneously were participating in multiple early childhood initiatives.

Sustainability of Innovations

All zones reported focusing on developing improvement strategies that would be sustainable after the grant ended in December 2016. Our analysis revealed four distinct approaches to sustainability:

- Focusing on sustainability from the outset;
- Embedding innovations into everyday practice;
- Leveraging funds and accessing additional funding; and
- Building community relationships.

Policy Implications

Implementation

The IZ initiative marks a new approach to delivering statewide education policy. The model requires policy to be flexible enough to account for variations in local capacity, while also being sufficiently well-defined to achieve intended outcomes. This approach allowed zones to develop context-sensitive strategies and promoted creative solutions to common problems. However, as would be expected with such a new approach, project leadership occasionally struggled to calibrate the amount and type of supports delivered to each zone, creating tensions between being prescriptive and allowing

for local variation. Moving forward, policymakers should consider how to ensure that strategies are responsive to local context, while simultaneously building on state capacity and existing research regarding best practices. Additionally, because IZ efforts often overlapped with other state-level early childhood initiatives, it is important to align and coordinate these policy reforms in such a way that they complement one another and are not perceived as redundant. Such reforms can be further supported by policies that require system-level collaboration, and the IZ communities will be well-positioned to implement such policies.

Human Capital

The importance of human capital was a central theme of improvement strategies and a consistent challenge to innovation noted throughout the IZ project and across zones. Zones working explicitly to improve quality, in particular, were hindered by the realities of compensation, working conditions, and turnover plaguing the field of early childhood education. However, increasing the number of qualified early childhood educators is also an important component for increasing access to high quality early learning, and most communities will need to drastically increase the number of high quality programs in order to serve all children who need them. Given the close link between teacher quality, increased access to high quality programs, and early learning outcomes, human capital concerns must be addressed as part of any comprehensive approach to improvement. However, because staff compensation comprises the bulk of early learning budgets, policymakers must seek innovative solutions to improve teacher qualification while still keeping early learning programs affordable for families.

Data

The IZ theory of action depended on systemic thinking driven by data. Unfortunately, the lack of uniform and systematic collection of early learning data impeded this approach to some extent. That is, although participants generally understood the benefits of using data to make and evaluate their decisions, they were also keenly aware of the need for better data to accurately identify problems and measure the impact of their efforts. Many participants described challenges with the data collection process, the quality of data collected, and the limitations of current datasets. In short, the early childhood system is simply not set up to measure many of the very things it hopes to accomplish. As communities begin to coalesce around a common agenda, the ability to share quality data becomes critical, and this will become even more important as community change strategies shift to a multi-sector, coordinated approach.

Conclusions

The IZ project was successful in building capacity and helped 11 high need communities move to new, more collaborative mindsets. Illinois Action for Children is also to be commended for their willingness to model continuous improvement. The challenge now is to advance these efforts in the absence of grant support and not revert back to working in isolation.

The IZ project represents a bold and audacious experiment for early childhood education systems and policy in Illinois—a state-level capacity-building policy process that defers to (and relies heavily on)

local expertise for creating local solutions to local problems using local resources. In doing so, it overcomes some common criticisms of state-level policymaking, but there are trade-offs inherent in this approach, especially given that it is new and relatively untested. The challenge for the IZ project, and similar initiatives in the future, will be finding the balance between prescriptiveness and flexibility, support and autonomy, that promotes solutions that fit local needs and are effective at meeting shared goals. It is our hope that this report contributes to efforts to meet this challenge.



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