

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



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Background

The Early Childhood Innovation Zones initiative was established by Illinois Action for Children (IAFC), with guidance from the Illinois Governor's Office for Early Childhood Development. Funded by a Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant, this initiative supported capacity building efforts for organizations working with young children in 11 underserved communities, or Innovation Zones (IZs), across Illinois. 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.

Findings

Innovations in Capacity-Building

Illinois Action for Children provided each IZ with a range of *technical assistance and supports*, including conferences, coaching, peer learning networks, and sponsored trainings. IAFC tailored coaching and support to each zone's specific needs and local context, and peer learning networks allowed zones to develop collegial professional networks through which they could share strategies and coordinate services in a more effective manner. The zones used small experiments to test innovative solutions to local problems that they likely would not have attempted otherwise. *Improvements to data collection and utilization* helped zones make evidence-based decisions about which strategies to implement and whether they were successful. The *Illinois budget impasse* had a substantial impact on the project, including disruptions to funding of collaborative partners and other early learning programs.

Capacity Outcomes: Participants reported that the IZ initiative helped create stronger connections between organizations and individuals within the early childhood system, and also helped build partnerships with families and other state and local agencies. They believe early learning is now a higher priority in their communities. Findings also suggest that participants acquired new problem-solving strategies and improved data collection and utilization.

Innovations in Enrollment

The IZs developed and tested strategies to increase the number of children from priority populations enrolled in high quality early learning programs. Efforts to *align the early childhood system* through cross-referral, shared intake, and simplified intake strategies helped families enroll their children more easily. Work to *foster new partnerships and expand existing ones* with traditional and non-traditional partners helped communities form a shared message about the importance of early learning. However, some zones struggled to get all necessary partners on board. *Developmental screening campaigns* helped more families receive the services their children needed. The zones explored a wide range of *family and community outreach strategies* to increase awareness of available early learning options, including utilizing social media, door-to-door canvassing, Parent Ambassadors, home visiting, and mobile preschools. Each zone used multiple strategies to increase enrollment, often combining innovations to fit the unique needs of their community.

Enrollment Outcomes: Over the duration of the grant, overall priority population enrollment across all zones grew by 12% and most zones also increased their share of students who were from priority populations. Seven of the 11 zones increased priority population enrollment, whereas two zones reported substantial priority population enrollment declines over the duration of the grant. Qualitative data indicate that the zones increased screening, referrals, and enrollment capacity.

Innovations in Quality

Four IZs focused specifically on improving early learning quality by working to increase participation in or ratings on Illinois' ExceleRate Quality Rating and Improvement System. Strategies for improving quality included *outreach and incentives for early learning programs, establishing communities of practice*, and coordinated *professional development*. More ambitious professional development efforts taxed zone resources with regard to capacity, technology, and time.

Quality Outcomes: 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.

Policy Implications

Implementation: The IZ model requires policy that is flexible enough to account for variations in local capacity, while also being sufficiently well-defined to achieve intended outcomes. However, as would be expected with such a new approach, project leadership occasionally struggled to properly calibrate the supports delivered to each zone. Moving forward, policymakers should consider how to ensure that such policies build on state capacity and existing research on best practices, while also being sensitive to local context.

Human Capital: Given the close link between early learning outcomes and access to high quality programs, human capital concerns must be addressed as part of a comprehensive approach to improvement. However, because staff compensations 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 hindered this approach to some extent. 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. The IZ project represented a bold experiment for early childhood education systems and policy in Illinois—a state-level capacity-building policy process that defers to local expertise for creating local solutions to local problems using local resources. This approach avoids some common pitfalls of state-level programs, but there are inherent trade-offs, especially given that it is relatively untested.