



## The Illinois Early Childhood Teacher Reserve Pool Study

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### Executive Summary

As Illinois races to staff the hundreds of early childhood classrooms that will require certified teachers under the state's bold movement toward universal pre-Kindergarten for all 3- and 4-year olds, it has one distinct advantage: the state has long awarded a certification geared specifically towards teaching children aged birth through Grade 3. As a result, there are thousands of individuals who are already qualified to teach early childhood education, and many who are not currently doing so. This potential reserve pool—its characteristics and the conditions under which they might be willing to teach in an Illinois early childhood center—is the focus of this report.<sup>1</sup>

Using the state's Teacher Certification Information System and Teacher Service Record databases (under an agreement with the Illinois State Board of Education), we identified about 5,400 early childhood-certified individuals who were not working in Illinois public schools in 2002-03. We drew a random sample of 4,000 of these individuals to represent the potential reserve pool of qualified teachers. We used both a web survey and a paper follow-up survey, obtaining a 46% response rate, to gauge the viability of the potential reserve pool. We found no bias in response rates, so we are able

<sup>1</sup> We focus specifically on early childhood centers because they are the most likely settings for expansion of the state's early childhood block grant program, and with the understanding that they are more difficult to staff than public school settings. Thus, it is probable that individuals willing to consider working in early childhood centers would also be willing to consider working in public schools.

to generalize our findings to the population of the potential reserve pool and provide responses weighted to this population in all tables and figures in this report.

**A large majority of certified early childhood teachers who were not retired and not already working in an Illinois early childhood center were willing to consider working in an Illinois early childhood center.** After we removed those who reported they were currently working in an Illinois early childhood center (N=558) or retired (N=727) we found that 83% of those remaining, or 3,402 certified early childhood teachers, were willing to consider working in an Illinois early childhood center under the right conditions.

**Our study provides compelling evidence that it is the salary, not the setting, that makes it hard to recruit certified teachers to some Illinois early childhood centers.** We asked the Reserve Pool to indicate the degree to which different incentives would influence their decision to work in an Illinois early childhood center. Though many incentives were influential, when asked to choose the three most important conditions, higher salaries trumped all other strategies by a large margin. Almost half (45%) of the Reserve Pool said they required below \$40,000 to take a full-year position. Another 29% wanted \$40,000–\$49,999. Our results also suggest that the Reserve Pool will be viable employees for an extended period of time, as the majority is 40 years of age or younger, and a

third would anticipate working in an Illinois early childhood center for more than ten years.

**Contrary to popular belief, we found that the Reserve Pool has not left the field of education or even the early education arena—many are teachers and some even serve preschool-aged children in their current jobs.** The Reserve Pool has an abundance of relevant prior experience—almost all have worked in education in the past, and nearly half have had prior experience working in an early childhood center. Meanwhile, less than 10% of the Reserve Pool was currently employed outside the field of education. Instead, the most common reason for not working in an Illinois early childhood center was opting to be a full-time parent, and over half of those who listed their current occupation as caring for family members intend to be working in education by Fall 2010.

Unexpectedly, our survey identified over 600 Reserve Pool members who were working in the Illinois public schools (having entered or returned since 2002-2003) and would consider moving to an Illinois early childhood center. We interviewed 40 of these teachers and found that the most attractive aspects of early childhood centers, especially when compared to public schools, were: their developmental (as opposed to academic) emphasis; professional community; freedom from bureaucracy; the flexibility in teaching permitted; and increased interaction with parents.

**It makes most sense to recruit early childhood teachers from the universe of qualified candidates rather than attempting to target a specific group of individuals.** We compared the Reserve Pool to

those who were not willing to consider working in an Illinois early childhood center and found some differences between the groups—however, none of these differences could help us predict whether an individual would be interested in teaching in an Illinois early childhood center. We also found that the Reserve Pool is quite similar to respondents currently working in an Illinois early childhood center, which confirms that it would be reasonable to expect them to work in such settings under the right conditions. Interviews with fifteen early childhood center employees revealed that, contrary to anecdotal information on why certified teachers leave early childhood centers, the vast majority of interviewees were aware of what would be expected of them when they took the job, and that certified teachers and uncertified teachers in centers view one another as “part of the same team.”

**We conclude that there is a ready and potentially willing Reserve Pool of qualified teachers for Illinois early childhood centers.** We find little evidence that the early childhood center setting itself is unappealing to certified teachers—indeed, almost half of the Reserve Pool have worked in such centers in the past, hundreds are doing so now, and thousands are willing to consider doing so in the future. The state’s Teacher Certification Information System may provide a source to locate these qualified teachers. In order to tap into this Reserve Pool, however, Illinois early childhood centers will need to offer salaries that recognize these teachers’ professional training and education.

The full report is available at <http://ierc.siue.edu//iercpublication.asp>

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