Illinois' Early Childhood Innovation Zones:
A new model for state policy?

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The Problem

- The early childhood system is complex and often struggles to meet the needs of families and their children, especially those from priority populations

- **System barriers**
  - ➢ Difficulties navigating the enrollment process
  - ➢ Programs may not have enough available slots
  - ➢ Funding issues
  - ➢ Hours of operation are often inconvenient
  - ➢ Families may lack transportation
- **Policy barriers**
  - ➢ Difficulties navigating the CCAP system
  - ➢ Parents receiving subsidized care may prefer friends/family to care for their children
- **Social barriers**
  - ➢ Families may not have prior experience (or have negative experiences) with early learning programs
  - ➢ Language barriers or concerns about immigration status
  - ➢ Lack of trust or concerns about safety
  - ➢ cultural values about caring for children on their own or belief that childcare is a family responsibility
  - ➢ Families overwhelmed by more pressing issues such as mental illness, poverty, violence
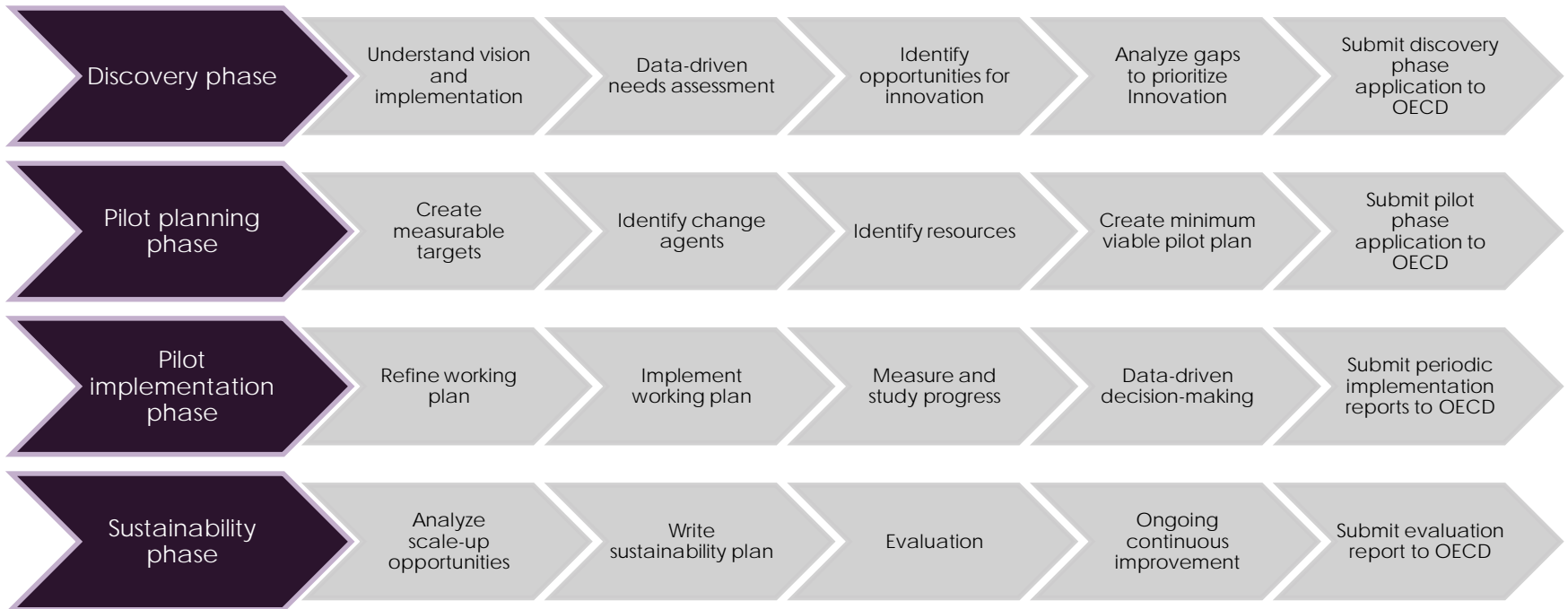
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Early Childhood Innovation Zones (IZ) Project Evaluation

- Initiative funded by Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge and managed by Illinois Action for Children (IAFC)

- Designed to build capacity in 11 underserved "Innovation Zones" from across the state

- Promotes *system-level* improvement strategies for:
  1. Enrolling and serving more children (birth to kindergarten) from priority populations in ECE; and
  2. Increasing participation in and ratings on ExceleRate Illinois, the state's quality rating and improvement system

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+ IZ Logic Model

- **IAFC provides capacity-building supports to Zones (inputs)→**
  - Setting clear expectations from the outset to ensure understanding and buy-in
  - Training collaboration leaders
  - Providing guidance on data collection and use
  - Facilitating peer learning
  - Coaching Zone leaders
  - Connecting Zones with external support and resources
  - Helping eliminate barriers to implementation

- **Zones engage in new, systematic decision-making and problem-solving processes (activities) →**
  - Engage diverse perspectives to understand current conditions by identifying root causes and analyzing data;
  - Ese systematic thinking to make sense of data, prioritize areas for change, and design feasible strategies from user's perspective that match root causes;
  - Implement change effectively and inclusively through small experiments with small wins
  - Adapt and pivot quickly by using continuous action learning and feedback loops

- **Zones implement systems-level strategies for increasing enrollment and quality (outputs)→**

- **Increased enrollment of children from priority populations and improved program quality (short-term outcomes)→**

- **Children begin kindergarten safe, healthy, and eager to succeed and learn (long-term outcomes)**

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Stages of Implementation

Discovery phase	Understand vision and implementation	Data-driven needs assessment	Identify opportunities for innovation	Analyze gaps to prioritize Innovation	Submit discovery phase application to OECD
Pilot planning phase	Create measurable targets	Identify change agents	Identify resources	Create minimum viable pilot plan	Submit pilot phase application to OECD
Pilot implementation phase	Refine working plan	Implement working plan	Measure and study progress	Data-driven decision-making	Submit periodic implementation reports to OECD
Sustainability phase	Analyze scale-up opportunities	Write sustainability plan	Evaluation	Ongoing continuous improvement	Submit evaluation report to OECD

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Overview

1. Data

2. Innovations in:
   - ✓ Capacity-building
   - ✓ Enrollment
   - ✓ Quality

3. Impacts on:
   - ✓ Capacity-building
   - ✓ Enrollment
   - ✓ Quality

4. Conclusions and policy recommendations:
   - ✓ Policy implementation
   - ✓ Data
   - ✓ Human capital

Data

- Interviews
  - Leadership and core team members from all 11 IZs
  - Project leadership from IAFC

- Review of project documentation

- Bi-annual reports submitted by the Zones to IAFC
  - Priority population enrollment
  - ExceleRate ratings

- End-of-grant survey

Innovations in Capacity-Building

- IAFC provided a range of technical assistance and supports to build local capacity:
  - ➢ Coaching and sponsored training tailored to local context
  - ➢ Conferences and peer learning networks that allowed zones to develop professional networks to one another, share strategies, and coordinate services
  - ➢ Strategies for problem-solving and decision-making, including behavioral science changes, systematic thinking, small experiments, root cause analysis, & logical planning
  - ➢ Using data to make informed decisions and to monitor effects of interventions, including strategies for engaging the community

- Key features:
  - ➢ Allowed zones freedom to test new strategies
  - ➢ Conscious shift from an academic approach in cohort 1 to a more practice-oriented focus in cohort 2

Innovations in Enrollment

- System alignment strategies
  - To coordinate early learning and development efforts throughout the community and foster cooperation rather than competition
  - Examples: cross-referral, shared intake, and simplified intake

- Developmental screening
  - To help more children receive the services they need
  - Examples: universal screening with referral and follow-up

- Family and community outreach
  - To increase awareness of early learning and development program options
  - Examples: utilizing technology/social media, door-to-door canvassing, Parent Ambassadors, home visiting, mobile preschools

- Expanding organizational partnerships
  - To meet families where they are and form a shared message about the importance of early learning
  - Examples: new partnerships (or expanding existing partnerships) with healthcare providers, home- and community-based early learning programs, school districts, WIC offices, refugee groups, faith community

Innovations in Quality

- Four zones focused explicitly on quality

- Outreach and incentives
  - To inform early learning professionals about the ExceleRate system
  - Example: incentives, such as public recognition

- Communities of practice
  - Collaborating across programs to share ideas and learn from each others' experience and expertise
  - Example: using largest/strongest programs as mentors for smaller centers

- Professional development
  - To build skills of early childhood educators
  - Examples: coordinated, zone-wide PD; quality specialists or coaches; distance learning

Impacts

- **Capacity**
  - ➤ Increased collaboration amongst early learning professionals and the rest of the community
  - ➤ Stronger connections with state and local systems
  - ➤ Increased prioritization of early learning and development
  - ➤ New approaches to working with families
  - ➤ New mindsets and problem-solving strategies
  - ➤ Improvements in data collection and utilization

- **Enrollment**
  - ➤ Increased screening & referrals and enrollment capacity
  - ➤ Enrollment growth: *Over the duration of the grant, priority population enrollment across all zones grew by 12% and 7 of the 11 zones increased priority population enrollment, in some instances considerably*
  - ➤ Increased focus on priority populations (though somewhat limited because priority populations generally represented a substantial proportion of total enrollment from the outset)

- **Quality**
  - ➤ Perceived improvements to training and professional development
  - ➤ Increased participation in and ratings on ExceleRate: *ExceleRate quality ratings increased across all zones and within each zone over time*

- ***Caveats and limitations:** Cohort 1 generally reported more positive impacts than cohort 2, much of the data are self-reported, program-level data collection was a challenge and participation varied widely across zones and over time, and it is difficult to attribute impacts to the IZ project because many zones were simultaneously participating in multiple early childhood initiatives*

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Conclusions & Policy Recommendations

- **Data:** IZ theory of action dependent on systemic thinking driven by data, but the lack of uniform and systematic collection of early learning data impeded this approach to some extent
  - ➤ As communities begin to coalesce around a common agenda and as community change strategies shift to a multi-sector, coordinated approach, the ability to share quality data becomes even more critical

- **Human capital**: Increasing the number of qualified early childhood educators is critical for increasing both quality and access, but efforts are hindered by realities of teacher quality, compensation, working conditions, and turnover in early learning programs
  - ➤ Because staff compensation comprises the bulk of early learning budgets, policymakers must seek innovative solutions to improve qualifications while keeping programs affordable for families

- **Policy Implementation:** The IZ initiative represents a new approach to that allows for context-sensitive strategies and promotes creative solutions to common problems, but this led to tensions between being prescriptive and allowing for local variation
  - ➤ Project leadership needs to calibrate the appropriate level of support and policymakers should coordinate reforms so they are not perceived as redundant