



# RAISING QUALITY FOR ILLINOIS CHILDREN



**By creating a common set of expectations for early learning program quality, as well as a new way to recognize excellence and incentivize improvement, families today have better early education options for their young children.**

The Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge supported the implementation of **ExceleRate® Illinois**, a Quality Recognition and Improvement System, which is an innovative framework that has been used across Illinois' early learning landscape to improve program quality at scale. ExceleRate® codifies a common vision of **what quality early learning looks like** across our state, publishes evaluation-based program ratings on a website that every family can understand, and supports programs with guidance and resources to help them improve.

**The Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development**

**(OECD) leads the state's initiatives to create an integrated system of quality, early learning and development programs to help give all Illinois children a strong educational foundation before they begin kindergarten.**

## Create a Shared Vision of Quality

**High-quality early learning** programs help children grow and develop so that they are prepared with skills that are important for success in kindergarten and in life. Public and private partners worked together to create the shared ExceleRate® framework that promotes, for the first time, uniform policies, standards and practices across all early learning programs – child care, Preschool for All, Head Start and home-based child care – with the goal of helping all children arrive at kindergarten ready to succeed.

The ExceleRate® tiered rating system recognizes programs as licensed, bronze, silver or gold, depending on the elements of quality that programs demonstrate. Since ExceleRate® launched in 2013, Illinois has more than doubled the number of early learning programs that have achieved a quality rating.

Research demonstrates that social emotional skills – like a sense of right and wrong and the abilities to communicate emotions, make friends and deal with challenges – help children do better in school.

To fulfill Illinois' vision of reaching all children, partners are using this shared early learning framework to systematically raise the quality of participating

programs. The framework helps early learning programs continuously improve through a systematic approach, providing actionable guidance to programs and connecting them with expertise in quality early learning that can guide them toward improvement.

## Illinois' vision of quality includes program elements like:

- Low staff-to-children ratios, so that children get the one-on-one support they need to learn and grow
- Teacher qualifications, so that teachers know the most effective methods to prepare children for kindergarten
- Evidence-based curricula that supports all aspects of children's growth and development
- Monitored learning and progress, ensuring children stay on track and enter kindergarten prepared and ready to learn
- Ongoing professional development, so that leaders and teachers are equipped with the expertise and skills needed to maintain enriching learning environments

## What does a program do to achieve a quality rating?

Specific criteria increase with each level of quality, but generally:

- Teachers and leaders complete a robust series of training, covering 15 standards
- Teachers and leaders apply for credentials, which may involve completing additional college coursework
- Programs learn to implement a research-based curriculum and master protocols for child observation and developmental screening
- Programs demonstrate proficiency on elements of quality early learning programs, such as family and community engagement, professional development planning and inclusion of children with special needs

## Reach More Families and Children

Since Illinois implemented ExceleRate®, families now have more quality programs from which to choose and new tools to help make sense of their options, allowing them to pick the program that best fits their family.

Families with high needs require more support than others, and making high-quality early learning more accessible so their children are ready for kindergarten produces the greatest return on investment.

By supporting higher quality programs, ExceleRate® has helped improve access to quality programs for all families, and especially in areas where families need it the most. For example, children in the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) historically have had the fewest options for high-quality early learning – in

2013, only 13 percent of children in the CCAP system were enrolled in high-quality child care programs. Yet just two years after the launch of ExceleRate®, nearly one-third of children in CCAP were enrolled in silver or gold programs.

## Increase Quality of Early Learning

ExceleRate® supports improvement among early learning programs, which means the programs available to families, especially those with complex needs, are higher quality. The framework outlines clear opportunities for improvement. State agencies and partners work together to support programs through training, consultation and coaching.

49 Gold Circle schools and child care centers have also achieved an Award of Excellence

By establishing incentives for offering high-quality programs and providing the resources that programs need

to improve, ExceleRate® fostered a newfound culture of continuous improvement in early learning programs.

2,851 early childhood programs in Illinois have achieved an ExceleRate® Circle of Quality of Bronze, Silver, or Gold. These programs enroll 166,000 children under the age of 6.



## Where We Go From Here

With ExceleRate®, Illinois has made great progress in improving access to quality programs and services. The state now has the opportunity to **build on the groundwork established by ExceleRate® to reach more communities and families.**

Some communities still lack options for quality early learning programs compared to families from backgrounds or areas of the state with more resources. ExceleRate® has laid the groundwork to expand the quality early learning choices available to all families. This framework supports the efforts of state agencies, local partners and programs who are working to make the goal of providing high-quality programs to all children a reality.

To achieve Illinois' goal of reaching all communities where needs are greatest, so that all children arrive at kindergarten ready to learn, partners now have the opportunity to double down on support for raising the quality of early learning programs and helping parents understand their options to make informed decisions. A great body of research confirms that children, especially those with higher needs, start on a path to better outcomes in school and life when they have access to high-quality early learning programs. It is critical to **invest in the systems that create strong, lasting support for these quality early experiences.**

State policymakers can increase the number of children prepared for school and career by increasing efficient investments that build on the research-based groundwork established by ExceleRate® and have the greatest return on outcomes for children.

More than 1,300 child care centers (44%) are recognized above the Licensing Level, nearly triple the level since the Early Learning Challenge began