IMPROVING EARLY LEARNING THROUGH QUALITY DATA

Improving Early Learning Through Quality Data

Quality, reliable early childhood data helps policymakers and educators make informed decisions to ensure that more children arrive at school ready to learn and succeed.

Through the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge, Illinois is improving how it tracks data across early learning programs, linking that data to K-12 and higher education, and making this information available to policymakers so they can make informed decisions that better meet the needs of children and families. These initial investments in the state's linked early childhood data system have laid the groundwork to better understand the long-term impacts of the state's early learning investments. Specifically, the Early Learning Challenge investments will enable policy makers and program managers to:

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.

- **Understand long-term impacts:** Develop, pilot and adapt tools for an unprecedented synthesis of information that provides a clear picture about how well-prepared children are to succeed in kindergarten.
- **Meet community needs:** Eliminate the data silos that form when state agencies don't have mechanisms to share information and allow policymakers to better understand and analyze services families are receiving.
- **Prioritize effective investments:** Help program leaders understand what is and isn't working in their program, so they can make timely, informed decisions and ensure resources support effective teaching and high-quality early learning through programs, such as ExceleRate®.
- **Illuminate trends:** Support children and families who are benefiting from multiple programs more effectively.

Understand Long-Term Impacts

Illinois has not only improved how it tracks data across early learning programs, it has taken the essential step of linking that data to K-12 and higher education – so that teachers, policymakers and researchers can learn how children fare after they leave programs and enter K-12 schools, allowing them to analyze the long-term impact of early investments.

Meet Community Needs

Illinois has long been a leader in analyzing on a community level whether the available early learning resources were sufficient to meet the needs of local families. Through the Early Learning Challenge, policymakers now have better data about early learning and family-serving programs to identify and address the specific needs of communities and families. This improved data allows policymakers to make smarter choices about how and where to provide additional early childhood services and funding, so families have more quality programs to choose from.

- Data from ExceleRate® can provide communities with a more detailed snapshot of the supply of high quality programs and the extent to which children with high needs are accessing those programs.

- Communities are building capacity to access, analyze, and use programmatic data from across early childhood systems to identify barriers, gaps, and opportunities, with particular focus on priority populations.

Prioritize Effective Investments

Linking data across early learning, K-12 and higher education promotes alignment and paints a full picture of the effectiveness of early learning programs, enabling researchers to identify the programs that have the greatest impact on families with different needs. To ensure data continues to benefit children and families, the state has developed a research agenda for early learning that will help guide efforts and make sure data is used to guide future early childhood policies.

Illuminate Trends

Children and families with high needs frequently receive services from multiple state programs, making it challenging to monitor children's progress and long-term outcomes through kindergarten, college and career. While all states can identify how many children are served by their state preschool, child care and Head Start programs – until now, no state could identify how many children were enrolled in all three, or even any two, of these programs. Through the Early Learning Challenge, Illinois became the second state to understand enrollment patterns across pre-K and child care – and is on track to become the first state with data spanning all three programs.

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Where We Go From Here

With a strong foundation in place, agencies and providers are positioned to continue to improve and expand the effective use of early childhood data to ensure:

- Agencies and providers can contribute to a robust data system that allows decision makers at the state, community and program levels to target resources effectively and understand the impact of these investments.

- Illinois can build on its strong base to link information across even more early learning programs – like home visiting, which is not yet fully integrated into the system.

- Education leaders can access school readiness data that will make it easier to understand community-level differences in kindergarten readiness.

- Child- and family-serving programs can better understand the children and families they serve, the quality of services they provide and opportunities to improve how they meet the local needs of children and families.

- State policymakers and agencies can continue to build on existing infrastructure and prioritize supporting the effective and responsible use and protection of data.