



COMMUNITY SYSTEMS



Community Systems

The Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge helped more than 20 community collaborations improve early learning experiences for local families.

As a result, children in those communities are more likely today to be:

- Enrolled in early learning programs that address their specific needs;
- Ready to learn, because their basic health, nutrition and social needs are met;
- Taught consistently based on the community's learning goals, even as they grow or move across programs; and
- Taught using methods more likely to prepare them for school.

These successes begin to solve long-standing problems in early education systems. Until recently, services for young children and their families have been delivered in isolation. Each school, child care center, health clinic and social service program saw community needs in a different way and worked alone to address them. State and federal funders had always encouraged coordination, but until the Early Learning Challenge, the research and supports had not been available to help communities collaborate effectively and take action.

Through the Early Learning Challenge, local partners have applied the principles of community-systems-building and accomplished shared goals for the community's children. Here are just a few examples:

- Community-wide outreach and coordinated enrollment make it easier for families to find just what is needed for their child. A family that wants a part-day program to help their child develop social skills finds a community preschool, while a homeless family finds a full day Head Start program that provides a stable environment for the child and connects the parents to an agency that helps them find housing.
- Health and social service agencies are referring high-need families to early learning programs designed to meet their child's needs. In one community, the local health clinic makes referrals to preschool in the same way that it makes referrals to the eye specialist.
- Schools and child care centers across the community share goals and teaching methods, and teachers attend the same training sessions and visit each other's classrooms.

*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.*

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Create Seamless Systems

Through the Early Learning Challenge, Illinois provided the supports that communities needed to achieve these results. Community leaders received training on the research and science behind

community systems building, and coaches also helped leaders solve problems in their day-to-day work. Communities now have additional guidance and resources



available to them on the Partner.Plan.Act website (www.partnerplanact.org). Plus, communities learned how to give state agency leaders the information they need to improve policies and procedures. Eleven early childhood Innovation Zones served as “incubators” to test systems-building strategies.

The Greater East St. Louis Innovation Zone team has been working to make sure that children with special needs are identified and connected to supports, including early learning programs. In two years, 553 families with high needs have applied to early learning programs.

Where We Go From Here

Illinois is now positioned to bring this work to scale by supporting strong, focused community collaborations that will help ensure statewide kindergarten readiness. This work will require continued leadership and coordination from the Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development and partner organizations.

Illinois can support this work by providing continued funding for training and coaching community leaders on how to use the research and science of community systems building, and providing financial support for cross-sector coordination at the community level.

State agencies are positioned to contribute by encouraging programs they fund to collaborate at the community level and by improving the policies and procedures that govern those programs based on community experience.



The Pilsen and Little Village Innovation Zone built cross-community partnerships with early intervention, homeless shelters, the Mexican Consulate, local businesses, churches, social service organizations, and health clinics to build a strong referral pipeline to enroll children whose families may not have had access to high quality early learning programs.