



ENSURING EVERY CHILD IS READY TO LEARN



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Illinois has a vision for every child to begin kindergarten healthy, safe, eager to learn and ready to succeed. That starts with ensuring that children and families, especially those with complex needs, have access to a high-quality early learning system, comprising four key components:

- **A range of quality early learning programs** that meet families' diverse needs and set children up for success in school and life;
- **An educated and compensated workforce**, so early learning teachers and leaders have the knowledge and support they need to prepare children for kindergarten;
- **Strong community systems** that meet children's health, social and educational needs; and
- **Quality, linked data** so we can ensure that programs are effective.

Greater access to these quality programs and services allow more children to be prepared for success in school and life.

Illinois' programs and services that serve children and families are strong independently, but they're even stronger when woven together. Thanks to the **Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge** and the hard work of state agencies, local partners and programs, families today have improved access to quality program choices for their children. The Early Learning Challenge allowed Illinois to build the foundation of a strong, seamless system so that families may rely on consistently high-quality programs and services that serve each child according to his or her needs. Greater access to these quality programs and services

allow more children to be prepared for success in school and life. Now, we need to do more to move this work forward so that we can strengthen our ability to ensure that *all* Illinois children thrive.

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.

What Illinois Is Doing and Why

Children and families, especially those with complex needs, do not always get what they need to be ready for kindergarten. Child- and family-serving programs can be of inconsistent quality, and as more options became available to families, it becomes harder for them to make the best choices for their child. Families need help understanding where to find quality early learning programs with well-educated teachers and that can meet their families' unique needs.

To meet this demand, Illinois created a more seamless early learning system, aligning government agencies, public-private partnerships and local coalitions, so that children and families could be better served.

Using evidence-based strategies, including focusing on workforce development and improving data systems, Illinois has increased the quality of early learning programs available to children and families and made programs and services easier to access for the families who need them most.

How Illinois Children and Families Are Better Served

All families – especially those with the greatest needs – now have more high-quality early learning and development programs to choose from. Early learning programs are striving every day to better serve children with the support and direction of a new quality recognition and improvement system called **ExceleRate® Illinois**. ExceleRate gives all programs serving young children – child care programs, Head Start and Preschool for All – a common framework for continuous quality improvement. ExceleRate also allows families to be able to make more informed choices about early learning programs for their children because it provides families with the information they want and need about program quality.

Early childhood teachers are at the center of this work, and Illinois has made great strides in developing this



workforce so teachers and leaders have the skills and support they need to best serve children. Thanks to new and aligned investment in developing this workforce, families can now count on

more qualified teachers, assistants, coaches and leaders to facilitate enriching early learning environments for their children to grow. Furthermore, Illinois increased career incentives to encourage programs to stay up to date on the latest, evidence-based practices.

Families also have easier access to effective services as child- and family-serving programs in communities throughout the state collaborate in ways they never have before to maximize local resources. **Local partnerships build a seamless system** that supports all aspects of a child's development, from before birth through early elementary school, and lowers barriers to access for families with high needs, so they are able to give their child a healthy and bright start in life.

Where We Go From Here

With a significant one-time federal investment into state early learning system-building, Illinois was able to build on its legacy as a national leader in early learning and make strides toward achieving our vision for reaching all children.

- With ExceleRate, Illinois has been able to make great progress in improving the quality of programs and services. With continued investment in continuous quality improvement through the ExceleRate framework, we can reach more families so that **all children** arrive at kindergarten ready to learn.
- We expect a lot from our teachers, caregivers and leaders, and we have begun the work to prepare them. Renewed efforts to **better support and compensate this workforce** will enable our children to succeed in school and life.
- We can continue to support robust **community systems** to better and more effectively serve all children, bringing improved early learning programs and wider access to the families in their communities.
- With strong groundwork in place, agencies and programs can continue to improve and expand **data systems**. Illinois is now positioned to continue to develop and support valuable resources shared across agencies and providers, ensuring they are up to date with the latest evidence-based practices and informed by data on how to best serve all children.

Now is the time for policymakers and funders to build on this momentum and the state's progress to date. The Early Learning Challenge provided the critical first, foundation-building investment. With continued focused dollars and efforts, Illinois has the opportunity to see exponential gains for communities to strengthen and children to learn, grow and fulfill their highest potential.

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