



# WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT



## Workforce Development

The Early Learning Challenge helped raise the bar for Illinois' early childhood workforce and provided teachers and leaders with supports needed to meet these higher expectations. The result: Children in the state's early learning settings today are more likely than ever to fully develop and learn to their potential.

### Progress: Strengthened Teacher Incentives

Long before Illinois received the federal Early Learning Challenge grant, teachers' education and qualifications were recognized with early learning **credentials**, yet they had no incentives to earn those credentials. With the support of the grant, Illinois began to link programs' ratings under ExceleRate® with the number of credentialed teachers in each program, motivating programs to hire and maintain credentialed teachers. Teachers, too, responded to the demand for credentials by pursuing and obtaining these higher qualifications.

*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.*

### Progress: Improved Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

Illinois established supports to help prospective and existing teachers obtain these higher qualifications and credentials. To serve those studying to become early learning teachers, the early learning system helped **higher education institutions** align curricula with the credentials. This helped prospective teachers to:

- Master skills and competencies needed to be effective early learning educators; and,
- Be better prepared and qualified when they enter the workforce.

Illinois also made it easier for existing teachers to access professional development opportunities, while simultaneously improving the quality of those opportunities. This was accomplished by:

- Reducing the cost to teachers for applying and issuing credentials;
- Offering scholarships to make professional development more affordable for higher need programs;
- Reorienting professional development programs and curricula toward the new common framework and building out a robust training infrastructure;
- Increasing support for program leaders to help them embed teacher professional learning opportunities in their day-to-day work; and
- Supporting use of the latest, evidence-based practices in professional learning, such as coaches who provide real-time feedback to teachers and demonstrate how to use data-driven instructional methods in the classroom.

**Lead Learn Excel** is a program for early education leaders to better support the everyday learning and improvement of their teachers. In addition to local training, leaders are given access to ongoing technical assistance, peer learning communities and a full suite of digital tools and resources. Created by the Ounce of Prevention Fund and implemented through the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant, Lead Learn Excel has engaged over 300 instructional leaders in the full complement of supports.

## Results: Higher Quality Early Learning Experiences for Children

Although there is much more work to do, Illinois' progress in strengthening its early learning workforce already has resulted in programs that better serve children, especially those with high needs.



Today, more early learning teachers and program leaders are up to date on the latest, proven instructional practices. By expanding incentives to earn credentials and giving teachers the support they need to earn them, Illinois has seen a substantial increase in the number of early learning professionals who hold one or more credentials, including an increase between 2012 and 2015 by:

- 4,912 for the early childhood education credential
- 2,529 for the infant and toddler credential; and
- 854 for the program director's credential

Vast bodies of research have demonstrated that an educated and supported workforce – which includes the teachers, program leaders and others – sits at the heart of high quality early care and education. From research, we know the value of investing in this workforce is clear:

- Raising the quality of the workforce is a critical lever to raising the quality of early learning programs.
- Early learning leaders and teachers know the most effective evidence-based teaching methods to help ensure children arrive at kindergarten ready to learn.
- Prepared early learning leaders and teachers understand the most important milestones for children's school readiness and have the skills to ensure children meet those milestones and don't fall behind.

## Next Steps: The Work Ahead

With this strong foundation for preparation and support now in place, Illinois' vision to achieve the strongest early education workforce in the nation is clear and within reach. That vision includes:

- **Knowledgeable, highly competent teachers** and leaders in all early learning settings;
- **Diverse workforce** in all settings;
- Quality, accessible and affordable **professional development opportunities** that support educators and leaders equitably; and
- **Evidence-based programs and practices** that rely on robust data to continually improve and inform workforce development and professional learning for this valuable workforce.

We are positioned to support teachers – as they diligently and enthusiastically meet the challenge of higher expectations – by recognizing that today's early learning "market" cannot continue to be financed the way it has been historically.

The annual median income for a preschool teacher in Illinois is \$28,670 (compared with \$55,320 for an elementary school teacher)

**Adequate compensation** remains one of the critical and unsolved challenges to a high-quality system of early learning and professional development, and our goal of reaching more children with quality programs cannot be fully realized until we address it.

We need new financing strategies that acknowledge that reality and adequately support this workforce, just as we have long recognized the value of sufficiently financing and supporting K-12 systems. Policymakers can support a robust, qualified and diverse early learning workforce by providing fair compensation that reflects how highly we **value the work of early learning teachers and leaders** and ensures a continued **pipeline** of qualified professionals that reflects Illinois' racial, ethnic, linguistic and geographic diversity.