ILLINOIS EDUCATION RESEARCH COUNCIL

Innovations for High Quality, Aligned Early Childhood Educator Preparation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Introduction

The Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) provided Early Childhood Educator Preparation Program Innovation (EPPI) grants to 20 partnerships comprised of two- and four-year institutions to further develop models for early childhood educator preparation and build capacity in key areas of need. Recipients used grant funds to design and implement a wide range of seamless pathways for degree and credential attainment through innovative articulation initiatives, systems for aligning assessments to demonstrate candidate attainment of key competencies, and strategies for advising and supporting transfer students. Promising practices to improve early math learning, bilingual/English language learning, infant/toddler development, and quality field experience placements were also developed. This qualitative implementation study provides a systematic review of the innovations and strategies EPPI grant recipients utilized in addressing common barriers and practice-oriented issues experienced in early childhood educator preparation.

Methods

Seventeen of the 20 (85%) EPPI partnerships participated in this study. The research team interviewed the principal investigator (PI) for sixteen of these partnerships, along with 17 additional representatives identified by the PIs. Interview protocols were developed to identify the components of grant-related work, how the focus area was determined, lessons learned through implementation, data collected, and future plans for the grant-related activities. Interviews were conducted over a four-month period near the end of the second year of funding. The researchers developed detailed summaries of each interview using written notes and digital audio recordings. Each summary was sent to each interviewee for member checking. Validated summaries were then coded by a primary and a secondary coder and analyzed using the data matrix method (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to identify overarching patterns in responses. One noteworthy limitation of this study is that all data were self-reported and thus susceptible to positive bias and could not be corroborated with outcome data or other sources to confirm these perceptions.

Findings

Catalysts

Four primary factors influenced the partnerships' involvement in this initiative and the specific strategies they chose to pursue: a new willingness to work together; demands from the field; state and national policy trends; and the desire to minimize credit loss and related cost to students.

A new willingness to work together. Many partnerships recalled a desire to collaborate for years, and the EPPI grant presented an opportunity to do so. Once engaged, faculty from both types of institutions had favorable comments about their partners' abilities to work toward common solutions.

Demands from the field. There are growing concerns about the supply of individuals with the necessary education and credentials to fill positions in the early childhood education (ECE) workforce. As a result of federal and state legislation and the **ExceleRate Illinois** quality assurance program, demand for ECE credentials has increased. Employers also desired greater racial diversity, more bilingual teachers, and teachers with the skills to meet more rigorous academic standards.

State and national policy trends. Illinois' new **Gateways credentialing** requirements, in particular, created a valuable framework for building cross-institutional partnerships. The state's new ECE standards, the Illinois Learning Standards, and the push for higher completion rates also served as catalysts for innovation.

Desire to minimize credit loss and related costs. For many grantees, participation was motivated by a personal commitment to help students be successful and to address issues of social and economic justice. For these respondents, the EPPI project offered the opportunity to help students prevent retaking courses and to address the related costs, lost time, and negative experiences often associated with transferring between postsecondary institutions.

Innovations

We organize the EPPI innovations into seven broad categories: articulation arrangements, alignment of assessments, advising and supporting students, early math, English Language Learner instruction, infant and toddler programs; and improving field experiences. For each innovation, we discuss the reasons grantees chose to address this issue, then we provide descriptions, examples, and common features of these innovation, and we close with lessons learned, including challenges and early evidence of impact, where applicable.

Articulation Arrangements

Motivation. Teacher candidates at four-year institutions traditionally take general education courses during their first two years of study and early childhood courses during their third and fourth years of preparation. Conversely, coursework for students in two-year Associate of Applied Science (AAS) programs generally only covered early childhood content, and not general education. This situation made it challenging for students with an AAS degree to transfer to a four-year program and to account for differences in credit hours awarded for those courses. This was often the "brick wall" that kept prior articulation efforts from being successful.

Innovations. This study identifies, describes, and provides examples of eight distinct articulation innovations. Some models viewed **high schools as part of the continuum**, and partnered with local school districts, often allowing students to earn college credits prior to enrollment. Other models used a **four-year continuum** and developed licensure pathways that included early identification of two-year students who had the explicit goal of enrolling at a specific four-year institution. **Cohort bridge programs** allowed students to obtain a bachelor degree from the four-year partner onsite at one of the two-year colleges. **Leveling bridge courses** intentionally worked to remedy differences in the level (100- or 200- versus 300- or 400-) of the courses offered at the two-year and four-year institutions. **Early Childhood Education 2+2 articulation agreements**, similar to general 2+2 articulation agreements, were geared specifically toward helping ECE students with Associate of Arts (AA) or Associate of Arts in Teaching (AAT) degrees obtain a bachelor degree in two additional years. **New non-licensure programs** were created to allow greater flexibility for students not planning to teach in public school settings. **Holistic AAS transfer** programs allowed blanket acceptance of all AAS credits towards a non-licensure program, so that students could complete a bachelor degree in two years. Other models used the **Transferology** online transfer assistance program, provided through the statewide iTransfer initiative to allow the partnering two-year and four-year programs to create pseudo-courses for seamless transfer.

Common Features. Articulation often involved formal agreements between institutions to secure the support and approval of offices involved in the transfer process. Over the duration of the grant, programs began to recognize that learning about partner institutions was one of the most important tasks of the partnership. As the EPPI partners began to better understand the scope of their work, the importance of involving a broad array of stakeholders early and throughout the process became more obvious. Most partnerships also came to the realization that the articulation process requires recognizing that changes are needed at both the two- and four-year levels. Adopting common credentialing requirements and learning standards often

helped partners confirm the quality of each other's programs. Several partnerships used the Illinois Articulation Initiative[1] as a means for increasing the number of articulated courses. Many participants were also eager to share resources developed by others to ease the articulation process.

Challenges and lessons learned. The biggest challenge with the articulation pathway was the amount of time required to get agreements and transfer plans approved at all of the necessary levels by each of the institutions involved due to issues of institutional culture. Buy-in and support was also an occasional challenge, because not all two- and four-year partners saw eye-to-eye from the outset on the issue of articulation. Several partnerships also said it was difficult to keep the articulation efforts a priority due to limited capacity for reform. Participants mentioned that it was beneficial to learn about the activities of other grant recipients, and noted that tools such as the Transferology program could be used to help transition to a more flexible model of transfer policies. Building on the Gateways system was supported by a number of participants as a way to move forward with articulation, and some participants recommended making collaboration between two- and four-year institutions a requirement for program approval.

Alignment of Assessments

Motivation. Because students may take courses at multiple institutions, aligned assessment systems were designed to simplify the standards and benchmarks set by various credentialing and accreditation organizations and to make it easier to obtain credentials or transfer courses among colleges. The most frequently referenced catalyst for aligning assessments was to prepare students for the edTPA.

Innovations. This study identifies, describes, and provides examples of five innovations in assessment alignment. One of the most ambitious assessment innovations implemented through the efforts of this project was the **cross-institutional assessment system (CIAS)**, which incorporates the Gateways' benchmarks, along with other state and national standards. **Bridge assessments** were used to match competencies across the two- and four-year levels. Successful completion of these assessments allowed students to get credit for courses that would not have otherwise transferred. A consortium of Chicago institutions also plans to implement **common portfolio software** to house artifacts for key assessments related to the edTPA process. The City Colleges of Chicago all use **similar documentation** for each course to align assessments and facilitate the completion of Gateways Credentials. Finally, one partnership uses **shared assignments** to ensure that courses at the community college are aligned with those at the four-year program.

Common features. All of the aligned assessments take into account the Gateways credential requirements and the Illinois Early Learning and Developmental Standards. Additionally, all partners were working to prepare students for the edTPA.

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[1] The Illinois Articulation Initiative is a statewide transfer agreement among more than 100 participating colleges and universities in Illinois, designed for students who know they are going to transfer but are undecided on the four-year institution that they will attend to obtain their bachelor degree.

Challenges and lessons learned. Because key assessments typically "lived" at the four-year institutions, it was often difficult to transfer these courses to the community colleges. edTPA posed an additional challenge, because transfer students would need to document how they met requirements at another institution. Focusing on competencies gained, rather than course hours accumulated, has required a significant mind shift, but was considered to be well worth the effort. Further, designing these innovations provided the opportunity for partners to engage in evaluation of their own programs.

Advising and Supporting Students

Motivation. Innovations in student advising and support were developed to improve retention and completion by helping students become academically and culturally oriented to their new settings.

Innovations. Grantees supported transfer students through cross-advising, development of advising guides, increasing accessibility, and bridge programs. **Cross-advising** occurred across two institutions rather than within a single institution. For the grantees, this typically occurred when four-year faculty and advisors met with potential transfer students at the two-year site to inform them about degree requirements and provide a contact point to ease students' transitions to the four-year environment. Many partnerships created **advising guides** to help communicate–to both students and advisors–the degree and credential requirements and pathways between two- and four-year institutions and careers. Innovations to improve access for transfer students focused on meeting students' needs for flexibility in scheduling and addressing financial and academic barriers. The **bridge programs** developed by many partnerships also helped to create smoother transitions between the two- and four-year programs.

Common features. Because it can be overwhelming to understand all of the necessary coursework and other requirements for seamless transitions, all of the partnerships worked to reduce the complexity of the transfer process. In addition to strengthening relationships between individuals and institutions, strong communication was critical to partnership development.

Challenges and lessons learned. The state budget crisis and the status of the early childhood profession posed challenges to advising and supporting students. One of the most important lessons learned about supporting transfer students was the need to involve others – including advisors, their supervisors, and other faculty and administrators from the school of education—in the process to expand their understanding of ECE and help faculty gain different perspectives on transfer issues and institutional supports. Partnerships plan to continue monitoring transfer students to ensure they are still receiving the supports they need. They also note the need to institutionalize processes for cross-advising, support activities, and bridge programs for sustainability.

Early Math

Motivation. Participants noted that the need for improvement in early math teacher preparation is an urgent priority, and math anxiety and low math competency were identified as challenge areas. Grantees were motivated by the desire to improve this situation. Aligning early math across institutions was viewed as instrumental in preparing community college students to transfer, and alignment within the workforce was important to ensure instructional cohesion across all classrooms in the community.

Innovations. The partnerships aimed to improve early math instruction by implementing new **coursework** and **professional development** (PD) activities focused on developing students' skills in numeracy. Some partnerships also implemented initiatives to integrate **early math instruction for ECE teachers working with children who are dual language learners**. An additional partnership used **site visits** to provide students with experience in early childhood centers that were successfully implementing the math strategies introduced in their program.

Common features. Each of these strategies were aligned to standards such as the Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards, the Gateways credential benchmarks, or the National Association for the Education of Young Children's Professional Development Standards. Audio/visual technology, such as video clips of exemplary early math lessons, was used in both teacher preparation programs and PD. All early math partners also utilized external experts on early math for training and consultation. Grant funds were often used to purchase the curriculum materials that were required to implement the interventions.

Challenges and lessons learned. Interviewees generally reported that the early math work was highly relevant for ECE and that it was beneficial to have partners who shared a belief in the importance of math in ECE. Lack of funding, scheduling PD time for current practitioners, and faculty turnover were said to challenge to the implementation and sustainability of early math activities. Plans for future work often consisted of scaling and disseminating early math interventions to other sites and discussing the importance of early math in their communities.

English Language Learner Instruction

Motivation. Demographic and policy shifts statewide, leading to high demand statewide for early childhood educators with English as a Second Language (ESL) credentials, were the primary catalysts driving programs to bolster their bilingual programming or add English Language Learner (ELL) endorsements to their offerings.

Innovations. Almost all of the programs interviewed for this study **embedded the bilingual/ESL endorsement** in their ECE programs through either undergraduate or graduate coursework. About half of the partnerships in this study reported that they require all candidates to take the ESL courses and student teaching required by ISBE for endorsement. Another major innovation brought about by the grant was a focus on **PD for in-service educators working with ELL students**. Grantees noted that this was important because practicing early childhood professionals may not have received the high quality ELL training that current candidates are receiving.

Common features. The partnerships implementing ELL innovations used several sets of standards and guidelines to support their work, including the WIDA standards, the Illinois Professional Teaching Standards for English as a New Language (ENL), and the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) standards.

Challenges and lessons learned. Finding field placements with ESL/bilingual-endorsed supervising teachers proved to be one of the biggest challenges for implementing these innovations. Recruiting bilingual students away from other programs and into the ECE profession was also a challenge.

Infant and Toddler Programs

Motivation. High demand from the field also motivated partnerships to focus on training teachers for infant and toddler classrooms. Others saw an educational need to boost the qualifications of infant and toddler teachers. State policy initiatives, such as Illinois' new Early Learning Guidelines and the ExceleRate and Gateways programs, also promoted improving the credentials of infant and toddler professionals .

Innovations. Programs implemented new infant and toddler programs or improved existing programs. Because programs serving infant and toddlers are typically situated outside of Illinois public schools, grantees were able to focus on establishing **non-licensure degree** programs at both the undergraduate and graduate level.

Common features. Many partnerships also worked on articulation efforts and alignment of infant and toddler programs across the two- and four-year institutions and with the Gateways Credentials and Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards. They also worked to improve field experiences with infant and toddler populations.

Challenges and lessons learned. Some programs found it difficult to recruit or retain candidates because infant and toddler positions typically have lower pay than teachers working with older children. Others perceived that infant/toddler education is not valued statewide.

Quality Field Experiences

Motivation. Participants noted that placement sites varied widely in their commitment and were often selected out of convenience, and that training for cooperating teachers prior to the field experiences was minimal. Because of these factors, partnerships recognized that formal procedures were necessary to ensure more consistent and higher quality field experiences.

Innovation. One strategy for improving both the quantity and quality of field placement sites was increased **networking**. Some partnerships sought to improve field experiences by adopting a more intentional approach in **site selection**. Partnerships also sought to improve the field experience by providing **training and support to mentor teachers** that aimed to help them provide more detailed, actionable feedback. One program has been piloting a **Gateways Technical Assistant Credential** to help identify educators who would be high quality mentors for field placements, and another is developing **criteria for home day care placements** that they hope will encourage participation as a placement site and serve as a signal of quality.

Common features. A number of partnerships used embedded field experiences within courses to reinforce coursework immediately with more practical application. Partnerships are also expanding the variety of settings for early childhood placements to provide candidates experience working across public and private providers, student age groups, and family demographics. Multiple partners used video and audio technology to record student teaching and improve the instruction through feedback from peers and instructors. Partnerships also conducted needs assessments to identify focus areas for improving their field experiences.

Challenges and lessons learned. Because employers are often reluctant to let employees take off large chunks of time, it is sometimes difficult for students who are employed in ECE centers to fulfill the typical full-time field experience. One solution that has been suggested is to use stipends to support students when they have to give up work to complete field placements. There is also a growing need for high quality field placement sites, and some partnerships suggested that cooperating teachers and schools could receive credit for their service to encourage participation. Future work in this area will focus on analyzing the effectiveness of the training and making the changes necessary for improvement.

Cross-Cutting Challenges

Our analysis identified seven broad challenges that cut across the various innovations described in this report: lack of alignment and communication between institutions; university administration and bureaucracy; state policy and other external forces; the status of the early childhood profession and misperceptions about ECE; student and institutional characteristics; time; and sustainability and scalability.

Lack of alignment and communication between institutions. Limited collaboration amongst programs, particularly between the two- and four-year levels, is a widely-acknowledged challenge that has dogged early childhood educator preparation for some time. Creating positive relationships between institutions was viewed as a critical step in the innovation process, and interviewees noted that it was important to establish frequent communication with partners upfront and to build on existing relationships.

Administration and bureaucracy. Another challenge was excessive or restrictive bureaucracy, or "institutional gridlock." Strategies recommended for overcoming these institutional constraints included increased communication with administrators and staff from multiple offices, and flexibility on the part of programs.

State policy and other external forces. State budget issues and frequent policy changes also posed challenges for many of the partnerships. To address these challenges, interviewees said it was especially important for stakeholders to collaborate and work together toward common goals to ensure that ECE remains a high priority.

Misperceptions and status. Perceptions about the low status and low prioritization of ECE represented another significant challenge to this work. Efforts such as the EPPI work were viewed as necessary to elevate the profession and help others recognize its importance.

Student and institutional characteristics. Interviewees pointed out that many candidates in ECE programs are non-traditional students, working full-time in early childhood centers and taking coursework part-time to remain qualified for their positions or advance their careers. These factors limited the time and money students had available to invest in coursework and prolonged their timeline for earning credentials. Geographic isolation also made it difficult for some rural campuses to meet face-to-face, hindering collaboration.

Time. Partners wished they had more time for planning and collaboration, and pointed out that increased funding is needed to buy the time required for this work. Some stakeholders cautioned partnerships to focus on simpler plans in future endeavors.

Sustainability and scalability. Although most programs were convinced that they would be able to continue their efforts after the grant expired, some expressed concerns about the sustainability and scalability of their efforts. Programs are working to overcome this challenge by integrating their innovations with the day-to-day operation of their organization and by widely disseminating their grant work so others can learn from their experiences.

Conclusions and Implications for Policy and Practice

Five prominent themes emerged from these findings and frame our conclusions: improving communication and alignment within and between institutions; understanding and acting on data about the ECE students and the ECE workforce; improving the quality of early childhood educator preparation to meet the educational needs of all students; the vital role played by state and national policy initiatives; and facilitating sustainability and scalability through shared resources and experiences.

Communication and Alignment

Throughout the project, two- and four-year institutions partnered to recruit and prepare students, align assessments, and to monitor student progress. The Gateways credentialing system was viewed as vital in strengthening these relationships by providing a common language and a bridge to connect their work. Communication and alignment *within* one's institution was also viewed as an important contributor to success and to overcoming the "institutional gridlock" that plagued some early implementation efforts. Institutional support and buy-in beyond the ECE department was critical for prioritizing and sustaining grant work.

Implications. Alignment is an *ongoing* process that requires continuous communication and reconfirmation as programs and state regulations evolve over time. In order to bring this work to scale, programs must continue to expand their collaborations to institutions that were not part of the grant.

Meeting the Needs of ECE Candidates and the ECE Workforce

State and federal initiatives are driving employers to raise qualifications for ECE teachers, and demographic changes are increasing the demand for racial and ethnic diversity in the workforce. In addition, many ECE candidates work full-time, but low pay and status make it difficult to attract qualified educators into the field.

Implications. Early childhood educator preparation programs should create structures that attract qualified and diverse students by offering courses that are accessible and acknowledge multiple on- and off-ramps, while providing the financial and academic supports students need to succeed.

Early Childhood Educator Quality

By targeting innovations at both early childhood educator preparation and professional development of the existing workforce, increasing the focus on meeting students' academic needs, improving research utilization, and further professionalizing the workforce, partnerships worked to improve the ECE quality and ensure that all children have access to high quality instruction.

Implications. Amidst efforts to improve the postsecondary experiences of students preparing to become early childhood educators, programs should not lose sight of improving the quality of educational experiences of children aged birth through 8.

State and National Policy Initiatives and Context

Numerous state and national initiatives—including the EPPI grant itself, the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge, the Gateways Credentials, the ExceleRate quality assurance, Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards, the Illinois Articulation Initiative and Transferology, edTPA, the Illinois Learning Standards, and Illinois' state budget issues—influenced programs' abilities to implement new innovations.

Implications. Policy implementation does not occur in a vacuum. Programs—and policies—need to take context into account and seek out ways to align and leverage ongoing initiatives so they complement one another, rather than working at cross purposes.

Sharing Resources and Experiences

Although many of the innovations described in this report were complex and time consuming, stakeholders note that much of the arduous work has already been done through the EPPI grant. This can reduce the amount of time that new programs will have to spend on these logistics, and increase the likelihood that they will be to utilize these tools more deeply.

Implications. Sharing resources and learning from other institutions' experiences are important steps for facilitating implementation and ensuring the scalability and sustainability of reforms. Institutions should learn from the efforts of the EPPI grantees and borrow the materials and artifacts created by programs that have already undertaken similar reforms.

Closing Thoughts

The EPPI grantees were able to make substantial progress with fairly small grant awards in a relatively tight timeframe. However, it is important to note that the data used in this study have not been triangulated with additional sources, and that further research is needed to track the outcomes of these innovations. Data on ECE students will be vital to examining whether these changes are making an impact on the social-emotional and academic success of our youngest children, and a logical next step will be to increase our investment in those strategies that have proven successful and have the potential to be scaled statewide.

IERC

The Illinois Education Research Council at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville was established in 2000 to provide Illinois with education research to support Illinois P-20 education policy making and program development. The IERC undertakes independent research and policy analysis, often in collaboration with other researchers, that informs and strengthens Illinois' commitment to providing a seamless system of educational opportunities for its citizens. Through publications, presentations, participation on committees, and a research symposium, the IERC brings objective and reliable evidence to the work of state policymakers and practitioners.