



Early childhood innovation zones work to transform Illinois communities

by Megan Wieser
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EDWARDSVILLE - Early childhood education is vital for students to succeed in school, but far too few of Illinois' youngest children have access to high quality early learning programs. A report released today from the Illinois Education Research Council (IERC) at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville describes how eleven Illinois communities are working to change that.

The communities are part of the Early Childhood Innovation Zones initiative, sponsored by the Illinois Governor's Office for Early Childhood Education and managed by Illinois Action for Children as part of the state's Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant. The IERC study details the innovations emerging from this grant and lessons learned from the communities' experiences.

"This in-depth study of community systems development provides insights into the strategies used to increase enrollment and quality in the early childhood system, as well as the broader implications of these efforts," said [IERC Executive Director Janet Holt](#).

The Innovation Zones initiative was designed to allow local communities to develop and implement new strategies to ensure that all young children have access to high quality early learning programs.

According to [Bradford R. White](#), the lead author of the report, "The project represents a bold and audacious experiment for improving the early childhood system in Illinois. It's a state-level capacity-building policy process that sets forth broad goals, yet defers to (and relies heavily on) local expertise for creating local solutions to local problems using local resources."

The participating communities were Aurora, Cicero, Elgin, Greater East St. Louis, the south suburbs of Cook County, Williamson County, and the Altgeld-Riverdale, Austin, Englewood, North Lawndale, Pilsen and Little Village communities in Chicago. Illinois Action for Children worked closely with each community to guide and support their progress.

This IERC study describes how individuals in each of these communities worked together to develop new ways to increase enrollment in their local early learning programs and summarizes the impacts of this work. Innovations detailed in the report include efforts to increase enrollment by building partnerships with other social service organizations, expanding developmental screening campaigns, and making the early childhood education system more user-friendly for families.

According to Carol E. Colannino, assistant research professor at SIUE and a co-author of the report, a key factor in the success of the Innovation Zones was disrupting the climate of isolation or competition in the early learning community and providing educators the skills and the opportunity to work together to form a collaborative and coherent system.

The complete report is available at ierc.education. For more information, call the IERC at [\(618\) 650-2840](tel:6186502840) or [\(866\) 799-4372](tel:8667994372).

About the Illinois Education Research Council

The [Illinois Education Research Council](http://ierc.education) is an independent research organization that conducts education policy research on issues of import to the state of Illinois. Since 2009, it has been the legislated research arm of the Illinois P-20 Council. Our policy research follows important educational trends in Illinois and is disseminated through our research reports, presentations to the Illinois P-20 Council and its subcommittees and through conference presentations.

[Southern Illinois University Edwardsville](http://www.siu.edu) provides students with a high quality, affordable education that prepares them for successful careers and lives of purpose to shape a changing world. Built on the foundation of a broad-based liberal education, and enhanced by hands-on research and real-world experiences, the academic preparation SIUE students receive equips them to thrive in the global marketplace and make our communities better places to live. Situated on 2,660 acres of beautiful woodland atop the bluffs overlooking the natural beauty of the Mississippi River's rich bottomland and only a short drive from downtown St. Louis, the SIUE campus is home to a diverse student body of more than 14,000.