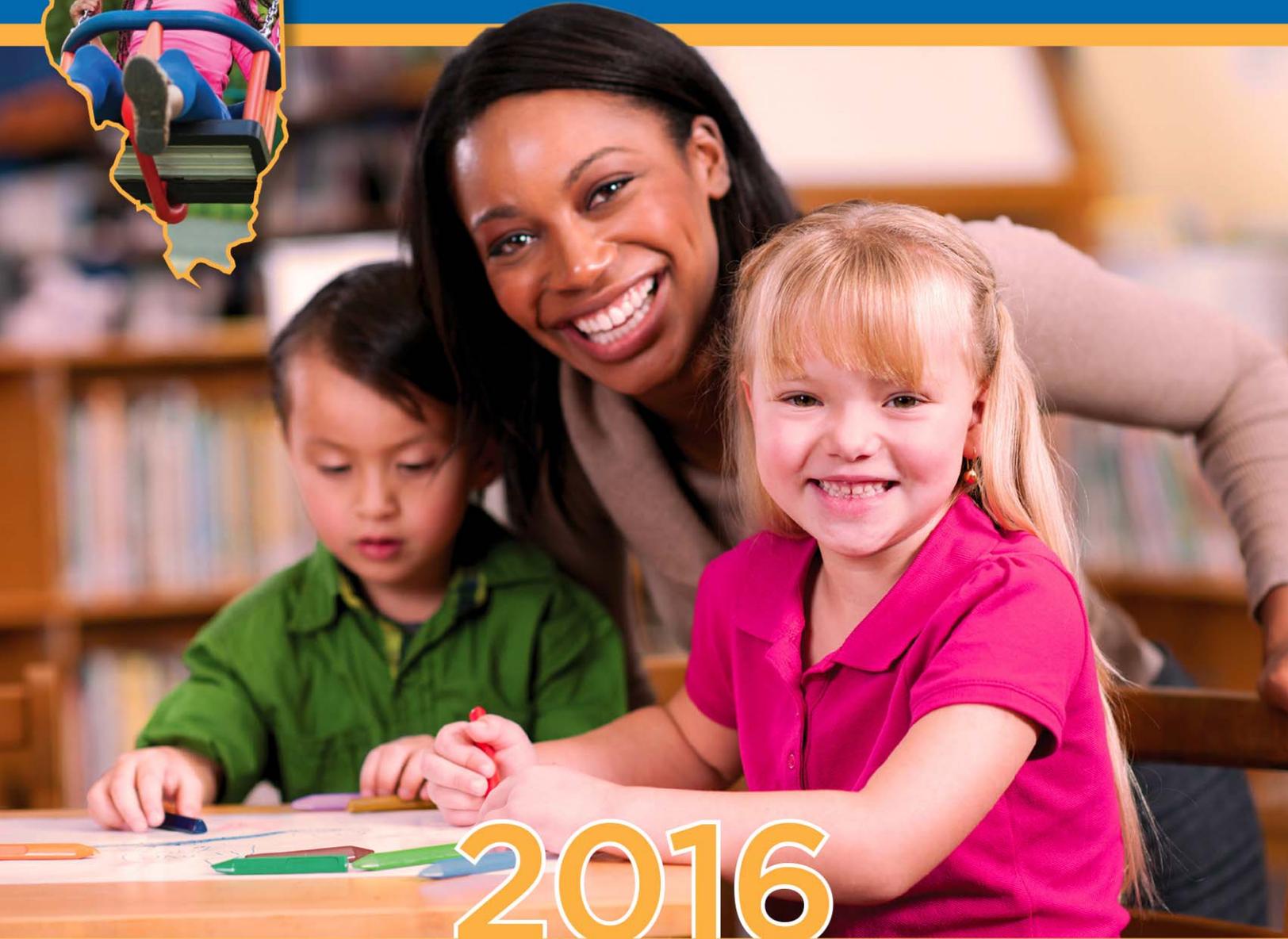


Illinois Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge Evaluation Report Executive Summary



2016

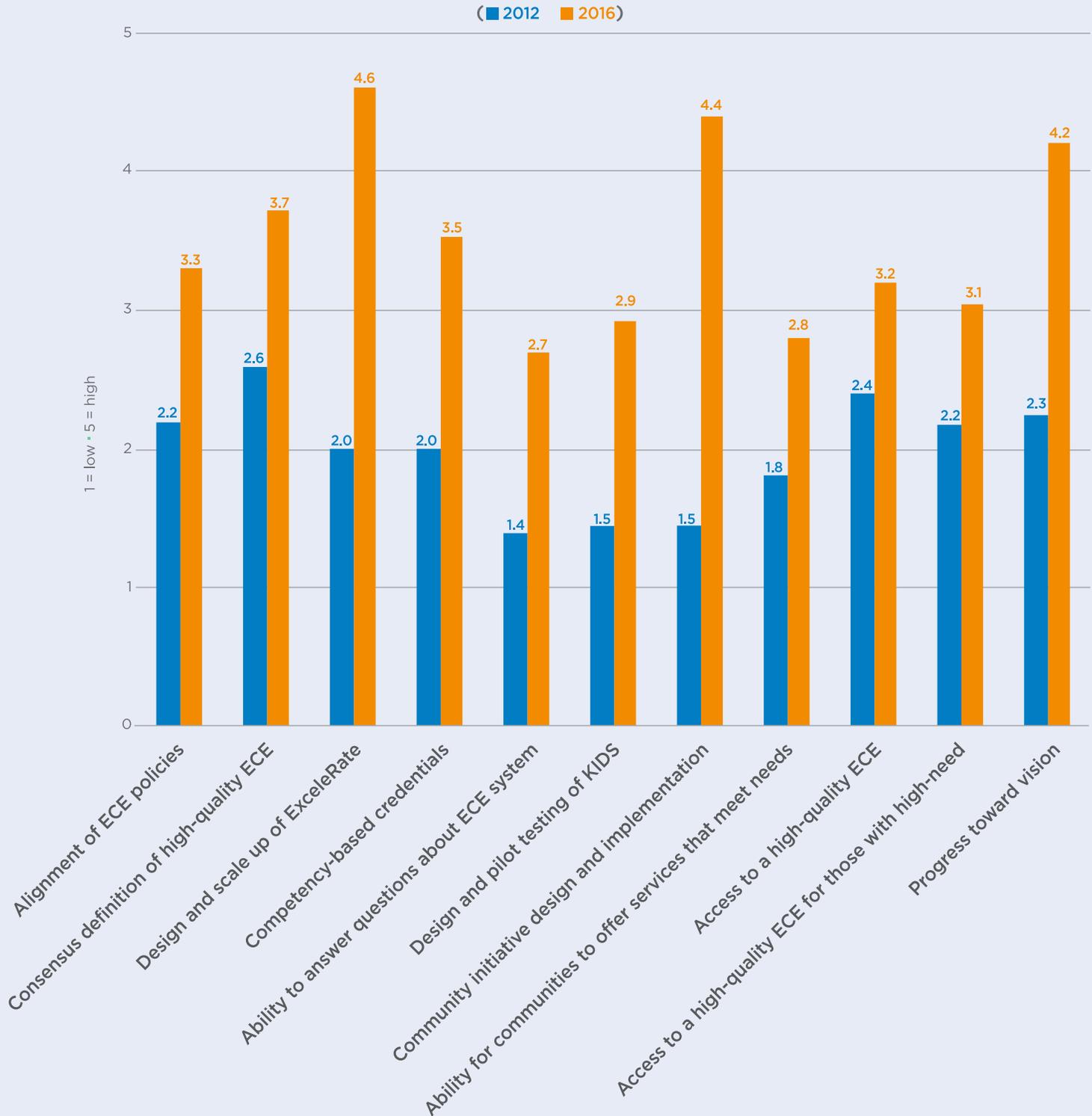


Written by Diane Schilder

What the Evaluation Team Found

With federal Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) funding and support, an independent evaluation team found that Illinois has met all RTT-ELC desired short-term outcomes and is making substantial progress toward longer-term desired outcomes.

ECE Stakeholder Reports of Status in 2012 and 2016 of...



[Number of ECE stakeholders = 25]



An independent evaluation team from Education Development Center, Inc. collected and analyzed qualitative and quantitative data. During the RTT-ELC implementation, Illinois faced a budget crisis and elected a new governor. Both of these had the potential to affect implementation of RTT-ELC activities. Nonetheless, the evaluation team found that the RTT-ELC has had a positive influence on:

1. **The scale up of a more unified early care and education framework.** Most study participants reported the RTT-ELC is leading to increased efficiency among state agencies and private organizations responsible for administering and enhancing the quality of early childhood programs. One state early childhood leader noted, “We need to carry this frame in every single piece of early childhood systems work. It is so important.”
2. **The design and implementation of a quality rating and improvement system called ExceleRate.** ExceleRate is supporting the continuous quality improvement of 12,836 programs of early care and education (ECE), Head Start, and preschool in Illinois. Currently 44 percent of centers and about five percent of family child care homes have moved above the licensed level of quality. Progress has been made with center-based providers, but an unmet need remains for supporting the quality improvement activities among license-exempt providers. Nonetheless, providers who responded to a survey reported benefits. For example, one Silver-Rated family child care provider reported, “Participating in ExceleRate has given me the opportunity to assess and change areas in my program that may have been lacking quality. . . ExceleRate has given me the opportunity to purchase items needed to increase the quality of care provided to families in my community.” Other providers reported benefits ranging from use of screening and assessments to better family engagement practices.

In 2012, Illinois received over \$52.5 million in federal funds to reform the early childhood system in the state with the aim of more effectively supporting the state’s neediest young children and their families. Illinois is in the fifth and final year of implementing the federal Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) initiative, which funded the state’s activities. The RTT-ELC was launched in 2011 by the federal government to reward states that created comprehensive plans to: (1) increase the percentage of children with high-need enrolled in high-quality early learning programs; (2) design and implement an integrated system of high-quality early learning programs and services; and (3) ensure that early childhood assessments conformed with the National Research Council’s recommendations. Awards were based on the degree to which each state described how it would develop and scale up: a) a successful early care and education state system; b) high-quality, accountable programs; c) systems that promote early learning and development outcomes for children with high-need; d) supports for a great early childhood workforce; and e) systems to measure progress and outcomes. Applicants could earn additional points for including all early learning and development programs in the Quality Rating and Improvement System and for addressing the status of children’s learning and development at kindergarten entry.

3. **Enhancements to the early childhood professional development system.** RTT-ELC has led to large increases in numbers of credentialed ECE providers through the creation of a more cohesive, aligned, competency-based professional development system. Many stakeholders reported the professional development system could be a model for the state to create competency-based credentials in other areas. Since obtaining the RTT-ELC, the state has experienced a substantial increase in the number and percentage of providers who are credentialed. For example, in 2016 over 16,300 ECE professionals in the state had acquired credentials and thousands of applications for credentials were pending—a large increase from 1,198 who were credentialed in 2013. Many ECE providers reported that since Illinois received RTT-ELC funding, access to professional development and credentials increased. Although the state made substantial progress, a sizable percentage of the ECE workforce have not yet acquired credentials. Multiple state stakeholders and ECE providers voiced concern that progress will stall if the costs of credentials increase or supports for attaining credentials disappear at the conclusion of the RTT-ELC grant.
4. **More aligned data systems that now position the state to answer important policy questions about the effectiveness and efficiency of early childhood programs.** Although data systems are more aligned, stakeholders reported a need for additional enhancements and for dedicated staff to analyze data to address important research and evaluation questions that have not yet been answered. Evaluation participants reported that leadership is needed to maintain aligned data systems and dedicated staff are needed to analyze the aligned datasets to answer policy questions about the outcomes of the early childhood system for children and families.
5. **The design and pilot testing of a system for understanding the school readiness of Illinois’ children that can be used to support learning outcomes in kindergarten.** The system that exists will provide a snapshot of kindergarten readiness in 2017-2018. The full robust system is now being used by some districts to administer age-appropriate assessments that support evidence-based kindergarten teaching practices and yield results that can be useful to teachers and parents.
6. **Community systems-building activities that have resulted in greater community engagement and the ability to better engage the state’s neediest children.** Analysis reveals that RTT-ELC has had a large influence on the creation of community systems building including Innovation Zones. Community systems-building initiatives have led to both targeted improvements in community-level outcomes and information that is being used to improve state practices and policies. One state ECE leader reported that the community-building strategies engage the highest need children and families and also provide an opportunity for state government to learn in “real time,” and make policy changes that lead to much more efficient and effective delivery of services.
7. **Progress toward a long-term goal of increasing the number of children – especially children with high-need – who enter kindergarten safe, healthy, eager to learn and ready to succeed.** ECE providers reported substantial benefits from participation in ExceleRate and associated professional development. State stakeholders reported that lessons learned and promising practices from the RTT-ELC have informed policies and practices in Illinois so the state is better positioned to achieve this long-term goal. Stakeholders recommended continued actions to sustain progress.



Actions Recommended

Illinois has made progress building a stronger early childhood system that supports quality early care and education. Yet, analysis of evaluation data suggests that to sustain progress, state leadership and funding is needed. The state has articulated a goal of increasing the number of children—especially those with highest need—who enter kindergarten safe, healthy, eager to learn, and ready to succeed. To achieve this goal, stakeholders recommended the state continue to demonstrate leadership and dedicate funds to support systems that have been built with RTT-ELC funds. Specifically, stakeholders recommended that Illinois: a) continue to support a system that offers high-quality early care and education for the state’s young children with highest need; b) support quality enhancements to early care and education programs at all levels of quality; and c) ensure state and community leaders use the data systems and documented lessons learned from the RTT-ELC to improve policies, programs, and practices.

Three recommendations emerged from analysis of evaluation data:

- **Recommendation 1.** State leaders should continue to support cross-agency early childhood systems activities because the work leads to more efficient and effective policies and programs.

Rationale: The evaluation found that the unified framework resulted in changes in policies, programs, and practices that are leading to more efficient and effective early childhood services. Nonetheless, substantial work remains to be completed and support is needed to maintain what was accomplished with RTT-ELC funding. RTT-ELC has been influential in increasing the capacity of the Office of Early Childhood Development (OECD) and the Inter Agency Team (IAT). Moreover, documentation shows that the OECD and IAT activities have led to improvements in the early childhood system. Many voice concern that in the absence of leadership and dedicated staffing, the system would revert to more fragmentation among programs and therefore lower efficiency in the way the state provides early care and education services to the state’s neediest children and families.

- **Recommendation 2.** The state should dedicate dollars to support systems quality improvement activities that were initiated through federal grant dollars.

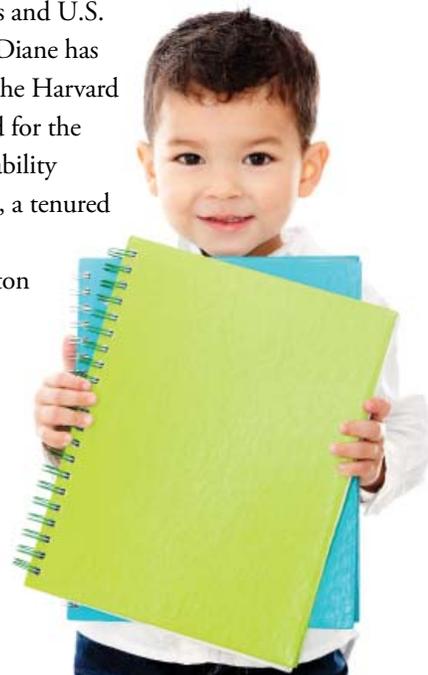
Rationale: Now that Illinois has data showing the need for quality improvement, it is important for the state to invest in enhancing quality, especially in the settings that serve the state’s most vulnerable, low-income children who, research has shown, benefit the most from high-quality early learning. Research evidence shows that low-quality child care can undermine children’s learning and development whereas

higher quality early care and education is important for children’s long-term learning outcomes. Stakeholders reported that ExceleRate’s next steps should be to continue to enhance quality for all programs while at the same time applying lessons from community engagement activities to engage license-exempt and family child care providers in the system.

- **Recommendation 3.** State leaders should support efforts to align data and use the aligned data systems to address policy questions and support ongoing quality improvement efforts. *Rationale:* Illinois has made progress in aligning state-level data systems and is using data more effectively to: target early care and education quality enhancements, support professional development that leads to credentials, and address community needs. Many voice concern that in the absence of federal funds, state leaders will no longer focus on using data to improve policies and practices despite the access to data systems just built that have the capacity to address important questions.

About the Study and the Evaluation Team

An external evaluation of the overall RTT-ELC grant program was not required but the BUILD Initiative recognized that an independent evaluation could inform continuous improvement and policy, document the early influence of the grant, and provide strategies for other states to adopt or adapt. The BUILD Initiative, funded by a consortium of private foundations, chose to focus on the implementation and early influences of the RTT-ELC on early childhood systems in Illinois. Diane Schilder, a principal research scientist at EDC, led the study. Diane serves as a principal investigator of evaluations and studies funded by federal and state agencies, including the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education. Diane has served as senior analyst for the Harvard Family Research Project and for the U.S. Government Accountability Office. Stephanie Curenton, a tenured associate professor in the School of Education at Boston University, contributed to the study. Melissa Dahlin, Meghan Broadstone, and Sarah Kim, who work at EDC in a research and evaluation capacity, also contributed to the study.





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