

Illinois

OVERVIEW

The Birth to Five Project is an outgrowth of the Birth to Three Project, which the Ounce of Prevention Fund initiated in 1998 in partnership with government agencies and other key stakeholders. The purpose of the project was to maximize investments in early childhood by developing a statewide prevention *system* from a complex array of existing programs and services. In 2002, with funding from the Build Initiative, the Project developed a comprehensive five year strategic plan to expand, improve, and coordinate services for children ages birth through kindergarten entry and their parents in Illinois. During the past two years, several hundred stakeholders from all parts of the public and private sectors have participated in the Project, accomplishing many of the goals and objectives laid out in the plan.

From the beginning, the Birth to Five Project sought not to duplicate existing collaboration efforts, but rather to coordinate work among these existing groups and provide new forums for discussing issues that were not yet being addressed in any existing group. Thus, the Birth to Five Project Strategic Plan identified the appropriate “table” for addressing each objective, including Project committees and other existing task forces, partnerships, and advisory committees. This strategy has proved effective for maximizing buy-in to the Project’s plan, participation in its work, and efficiency in accomplishing objectives

Over the past 18 months, the Project has undergone significant changes as much of its systems development work has moved to newly created entities that have great potential to effect lasting and meaningful changes in early childhood services in Illinois. The most significant development is the creation of the Illinois Early Learning Council. This public-private partnership was created by statute and includes the heads of all state agencies involved with young children and their families, legislative and Governor’s Office representatives, and a wide range of stakeholders from the advocacy, service provider, and business communities. (Attachment A describes the Early Learning Council and its committee structure.) The purpose of the Early Learning Council is to create a coordinated early childhood learning system of programs, policies and services for families with children under age five in Illinois by:

- Engaging in collaborative planning, coordination and linkages across programs, divisions and agencies at the state level
- Prioritizing system gaps and barriers
- Reducing or eliminating policy, regulatory and funding barriers
- Developing multi-year plans to expand programs and services to address gaps and insufficient capacity
- Implementing recommendations of previous and ongoing early childhood efforts and initiatives

- Developing a statewide training and workforce development system to meet the present and future needs of practitioners and programs to serve young children and their families
- Ensuring on-going coordination and communication across different early childhood initiatives

Another important new entity that has been formed is the Children’s Mental Health Partnership. This outgrowth of the Children’s Mental Health Task Force was created as part of the Children’s Mental Health Act that the Governor signed in September 2003, and is charged with creating a developing a strategic plan related to mental health services for children 0-18, including an early childhood strategic plan.

Much of the work that was originally done in the committees of the Birth to Five Project is now being addressed by the committees of the Early Learning Council, the Children’s’ Mental Health Partnership, or another statewide task force that has been officially chartered. Although there is not a one-to-one mapping of former to current “tables” for discussing early childhood systems issues, the following chart summarizes shifts that have occurred over the last 18 months.

Former Birth to Five Project Committee	Current “table(s)” where issues are discussed
Systems Coordination	Early Learning Council Quality Committee Linkage and Integration Committee Expansion Committee
Best Practices and Outcomes	Early Learning Council Evaluation and Assessment Quality Committee
Training and Workforce Development	Early Learning Council Workforce Development Committee Professional Development Advisory Committee
Child Health and Development Committee	Early Learning Council Linkage and Integration Committee State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Grant Workgroup
Social and Emotional Health Committee	Children’s Mental Health Partnership Early Childhood Committee

The two original committees of the Birth to Five Project that remain active are the Steering Committee and the Interagency Government Team. The Steering

Committee serves as a “clearinghouse” where information about the progress being made within other initiatives/councils/task forces can be shared, and gaps in the issues being addressed can be identified. The Steering Committee meets approximately every six months, and Birth to Five Project staff monitor the other initiatives on an on-going basis to ensure maximum coordination and communication.

The Government Interagency Team continues to meet every two to three months. This group of state, federal and city (Chicago) mid-level officials continues to be an effective forum for cross-agency communication about common issues. For example, the Interagency Team developed a new consensus about what constitutes appropriate practice for developmental screening across all early childhood programs, including Healthy Families, Family Case Management, Early Intervention, ISBE Early Childhood Block Grant programs, and Child Care. They have also worked together to foster local-level collaboration among home visiting programs.

The Birth to Five Project staff continues to provide logistical support to many of the collaborative efforts that are addressing early childhood issues. They also continue to conduct the critical background research and policy and systems analysis that are so critical to the success of this system building work.

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

The Birth to Five Project has benefited from strong political leadership, particularly in the area of early education and care. Governor Rod Blagojevic has expressed his support for creating access to preschool for all interested families, and he has supported substantial increases in funding for child care, the Early Childhood Block Grant, and health care for children and their families. There is also strong bi-partisan, bi-cameral support in the General Assembly for the Birth to Five Project’s agenda. The Majority and Minority Leaders of both the House and Senate co-sponsored the legislation to create the Early Learning Council, and they have supported significant funding increases for early childhood education and care. Legislators have actively participated in both the Birth to Five Steering Committee and the Early Learning Council.

Mid-level state agency officials have continued to be actively engaged in the Birth to Five Project. Division directors from the Department of Human Services (IDHS), Department of Public Aid (IDPA), Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), and State Board of Education (ISBE) have regularly attended meetings of the Government Interagency Team and have consistently followed up on discussions there with work in their own agencies.

Political leadership around early childhood issues has also emerged at the local level. Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley is committed to expanding high quality preschool education in the city so that it is available for every interested family.

The mayor also launched the “Born Learning” campaign in August 2003 to educate new parents about the importance of early learning. Recently, Chicago city government was reorganized to create a Department of Children and Youth Services, thereby increasing the visibility of early care and education services and underscoring their importance in the Mayor’s agenda.

RECOGNITION OF THE NEED FOR SYSTEM BUILDING, THROUGH CREDIBLE DATA AND INFORMATION

The Birth to Five Project has generated considerable consensus around the limitations in the current system of services for young children and their families, and the priorities for improving that system. Indeed, several policies have been changed and programs expanded in response to data reviewed in the Project:

- In May 2003 the General Assembly raised the required set-aside for birth-to-three programs in the Early Childhood Block Grant to 11%, reflecting both the actual amount that had been devoted to these programs in the previous years and the continuing need for further expansion of these programs.
- In response to data tracking the number of families who were “falling off the cliff” in terms of child care subsidy eligibility, the income eligibility ceiling was raised and indexed to inflation by the General Assembly in 2003. Child care funding was increased by \$55 million to cover this expansion in eligibility.
- Kid Care and Family Care eligibility was expanded in response to data showing that a high number of children and their parents were still lacking health insurance.
- A study was launched to investigate reasons for the low percentage of children in the Early Intervention (Part C) program who were under age one. New strategies for increasing referrals from the hospital-based Perinatal Network programs to Child and Family Connections (local Part C coordinating agencies) were then developed and implemented, thereby substantially increasing the number of children who enter the EI system before their first birthday
- In response to legislation initiated by members of the Birth to Five Project’s Steering Committee, the Illinois Department of Public Aid convened a Perinatal Task Force in November and December 2003 to develop a comprehensive report to the Governor and General Assembly on the status of perinatal services in Illinois and strategies to improve birth outcomes for Medicaid-eligible women through enhanced perinatal services. The report was submitted in April 2004 and departmental priorities articulated in the report include:
 - Expansion of Family Care from 90% to 133% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL)
 - Expansion of Family Planning services

- Addition of targeted intensive prenatal case management for high risk pregnancy sites
- Addition of certain dental services for pregnant women
- Development of a smoking cessation program for pregnant
- Pilot for outreach to locate the “hard to reach” pregnant women
- Creation of a statewide perinatal mental health consultation service for primary care providers
- In response to research completed by the Birth to Five Project and the Professional Development Advisory Committee that documented the difficulty students face when trying to move into a bachelor’s degree program from a community college program in early childhood care and education, legislation was passed requiring the development of a new Associate of Arts in Teaching degree that will facilitate the articulation of courses to a bachelor’s degree program.

Looking ahead, there is consensus around the need to expand both preschool services for all children and birth to three services for families with children who are “at-risk” due to biological or environmental factors, as well as the need to expand mental health services for children birth through age five.

VISION ON WHAT CONSTITUTES AN EFFECTIVE EARLY LEARNING SYSTEM

Through its strategic planning process, the Birth to Five Project developed a comprehensive vision of an effective system of services for young children and their families that encompasses health, early education and care, mental health, and other needed services. Work on all aspects of this system has continued during the past 18 months.

In the area of Early Childhood Education, the Early Learning Council has developed and approved a set of “Essential Elements” that constitutes a shared understanding of what a quality system should contain. The committees of the Council have further developed specific recommendations for the design and roll-out of the program that were considered by the Council at its October meeting. In December the Council will issue its recommendations for the “Preschool for All” Program for Illinois.

As part of the recommendations for the Preschool for All program, agreement has been reached on the Council that it is critical to include an expansion of services to all interested families with at-risk birth-to-three year olds as part of the preschool expansion. In addition, there is now consensus that funded programs for birth to three year olds should follow a research-based program model, such as Early Head Start, Parents as Teachers, Healthy Families, or a similarly well-researched approach. Birth to Five Project staff produced a white paper describing proven birth-to-three models that served as catalyst for developing this consensus.

In the area of staff development, the Professional Development Advisory Committee has developed a Career Lattice that specifies the competencies required by early childhood program staff at different levels. The Lattice outlines a common vision of what constitutes appropriate preparation for early childhood professionals at different levels of education, and can be used as the basis for a credentialing system for staff at these various levels.

Consensus has also been developed on what constitutes best practice in developmental screening for very young children. Five programs for children 0-5 are now conducting social emotional specific screening for young children (Part C, child welfare in Cook County, child care at pilot sites, Early Head Start, Head Start). Four additional 0-5 programs are developing plans to do so in FY05 (Early Childhood Education Block Grant, Healthy Families, Family Case Management/WIC, EPSDT). Prior to Phase I of the Birth to Five Project, no government agencies administering 0-5 programs indicated that they were screening children for social emotional issues. In addition, state agencies are beginning to coordinate their efforts regarding developmental screening, resulting in a higher percentage of children receiving screening, and a record number of children being referred to Child and Family Connections (Part C) for Early Intervention services.

Finally, a new consensus on the importance of early childhood mental health services has developed in Illinois. Birth to Five Project staff produced a white paper that articulates a shared understanding among varied agencies and service providers of how early childhood mental health consultation can support and enhance their work. Both the Early Intervention and Child Care Assistance program have developed pilot programs to provide mental health consultation within their systems, with Early Intervention moving toward statewide implementation this year. Mental health consultation is one of the Essential Elements of the new Preschool for All system being proposed by the Early Learning Council.

ACTIONS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Illinois has had several major accomplishments in the last 18 months regarding the development of a highly effective system of services for children birth to five and their families. As noted above, perhaps the most important of these has been the formation of the Early Learning Council. The Council has met four times, and its five committees have met frequently during the year to develop the plan for Preschool for All.

Illinois has also continued to expand its commitment of resources to early childhood education and care despite severe budget constraints. For FY 2005, the General Assembly and Governor approved a \$30 million increase in the Early Childhood Block Grant, on top of a \$30 million increase in FY 2004. The Governor has promised to support another \$30 million increase in FY 2006.

Resources for Child Care Assistance, Kid Care, and Family Care have also been substantially increased as detailed above

On the systems coordination front, the Birth to Five Project developed a Geographic Information System that provides both demographic information and the location of birth to five services for communities across the state. This tool has been useful to state agencies as they plan for deployment of new resources, helping ensure that new programs go into the areas of highest need. The GIS was also a valuable resource for programs completing applications for the Early Childhood Block Grant.

The integration of the social-emotional component into the Early Intervention system is another noteworthy accomplishment. In FY 2005 approximately \$1 million will be spent to provide a mental health consultant to every Child and Family Connections agency across the state, and to provide on-going training in social and emotional development for both agency staff and EI service providers.

INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

Illinois has made great progress in infrastructure development for early learning programs over the last 18 months. The committees of the Early Learning Council have developed an exceptionally detailed plan for Preschool for All, with even minor points about program operations already thoughtfully debated and agreed upon. When legislation for the program is passed, relatively little work will need to be done to convert these recommendations into program standards.

There has also been some work to build community-level capacity to expand early childhood services. A few local Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies have worked with local child care providers to help them plan and apply for Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) funds. More work remains to be done in this area, however. There are still areas of the state that are substantially underserved where no school or community-based agency has come forward to apply for funding for Prekindergarten or birth to three programming. ISBE is planning to provide technical assistance in the coming months to help cultivate successful applicants from these areas for its next round of ECBG funds.

The Birth to Five Project has fostered substantial growth in interagency collaboration and coordination. For example, during the past 18 months, the Government Interagency Team has examined the range of home visiting programs funded by various state and federal agencies that are offered in local communities. In cases where more than one home visiting program serves a community, the state and federal officials have worked with their local grantees to ensure that the programs are aware of one another, and the local programs have begun to share information and in some cases coordinate their intake to ensure that families enroll in the program that best meets their needs.

Local collaboration efforts have been established to foster cross-agency communication and coordination in many communities across the state, including Rockford, Evanston, Oak Park, and Will County. Birth to Five Project staff have shared with these newly formed entities the lessons learned from the Birth to Five Networks that have been in operation in 10 pilot communities across the state since FY 2001.

POLITICAL MOBILIZATION AND ADVOCACY

Early Learning Illinois (ELI) is the partnership among early childhood advocacy organizations that is spearheading the political mobilization efforts for creating the new Preschool for All system. ELI has had great success in securing endorsements from a wide range of statewide and local organizations concerned with young children and their families. The partnership has been successful in “getting the word out” about the benefits of early learning opportunities through a media campaign encouraging support for greater public investment in early learning programs despite the state budget crisis, meetings with newspaper editorial boards, and a short film on ELI that has been shown at conferences and parent meetings throughout the state. Long-term efforts to develop relationships with the media resulted in a substantial amount of positive press on the Governor’s proposal to expand the Early Childhood Block Grant, including two editorials by Chicago papers, a “Voice of the People” letter to the editor by Harriet Meyer (Ounce President) published in the Chicago Tribune, and several newspaper articles published throughout the state. ELI mobilizes public support by sending out regular updates and action alerts summarizing key policy decisions and legislative action. Tools such as sample letters to legislators and newspaper editors have been developed to facilitate grassroots involvement in policy development and advocacy around early childhood issues. In addition, “Lobby Days” have brought parents and providers to Springfield to talk with legislators on such issues as expanding child care assistance eligibility, funding for early education and home visiting programs, and other issues on the ELI agenda. These efforts have contributed to many successes during last year’s legislative session.

The Birth to Five Project and Early Learning Illinois have been successful in recruiting “unusual suspects” to endorse and participate in their efforts. ELI partners and Chicago Metropolis 2020 (a civic organization started by the Commercial Club of Chicago) co-sponsored a presentation in September, 2004 by Art Rolnick of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis that re-cast early childhood education as an effect method of economic development. Over 200 business and civic leaders attended, and the response was very positive. Business leaders have become more active in the work of the Birth to Five Project through the membership on the Early Learning Council of Dea Meyer, Vice President of the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago.

The Birth to Five Project has forged a strong partnership with Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Illinois, with a representative from Fight Crime joining the Steering Committee for the Project. Fight Crime has mobilized law enforcement officials across the state to endorse the Early Learning Illinois campaign

Several organizations have become involved in early childhood systems development work for the first time as a result of the Birth to Five Project. These include:

- Illinois Federation of Teachers: participating in the Early Learning Council and in discussions around teacher qualifications for PFA programs
- Illinois Board of Higher Education: participating in the Early Learning Council and actively creation of new early childhood career lattice
- Illinois Community College Board: actively engaged in full range of professional development issues
- Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies: participating in Early Learning Council and taking leadership role in professional development issues—Executive Director of INCCRA is the co-chair of the Workforce Development Committee of the Early Learning Council
- The Illinois Association of Family Practitioners and the Illinois Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatricians: both are participating in the Birth to Five Project, and have taken leadership roles in providing statewide training on effective developmental screening procedures
- The Illinois Department of Public Aid: regularly attends the Government Interagency Team meetings, and has worked closely with project staff to revise Medicaid billing procedures to allow practitioners to bill for a wider range of developmental screenings. IDPA has also partnered with the Ounce of Prevention Fund on an Assuring Better Child Health and Development II grant that seeks to increase the provision of mental health-related services to Medicaid eligible women and children under age five.

The Birth to Five Project has been remarkably successful in recruiting and maintaining participation from a very wide range of public officials, community leaders, and other stakeholders. Attendance at meetings of committees of both the Birth to Five Project and the Early Learning Council has remained strong, demonstrating the high level of commitment that participants have to both the policy agenda and the process through which it is being pursued.

PUBLIC AWARENESS AND SUPPORT

Illinois has enjoyed a high level of public awareness and support for early childhood programs. A successful public awareness campaign in the late 1990s stressed the importance of early learning, including in the birth to three years, and there appears to be broad public support for early learning programs. The extent of public support is confirmed by the fact that during the recent campaign season many candidates (from both parties) for state legislative offices

highlighted their support for early childhood initiatives as part of their campaign materials.

ALIGNMENT AND READINESS FOR BIG LEAP FORWARD

The Illinois Early Learning Council has targeted the upcoming spring legislative session as the time to propose legislation to create a new Preschool for All system. There is consensus around what the program should look like, a high level of support from both the governor and the legislature on the importance of early education, a readiness among schools and community based organizations in most of the state to substantially expand services, and significant public support for high quality early learning programs.

The one factor that diminishes Illinois' readiness to launch Preschool for All is the current state budget crisis. Although revenues have increased somewhat over the past two years, there remains a significant budget shortfall. Thus, finding a way to fund a dramatic increase in early childhood education is a substantial challenge for the coming year.

DISCUSSION: STEPS AHEAD AND ROLE OF BUILD

Opportunities and Challenges. The Birth to Five Project has enjoyed tremendous success over the past 18 months. Looking ahead, there are significant opportunities for further success over the next few years. The Governor and General Assembly are very supportive of a wide range of early childhood programs and services, and there is consensus that early learning services in particular need to be expanded and improved. The Early Learning Council is developing a comprehensive plan for Preschool for All that represents the consensus of multiple stakeholders, including advocates, providers, policymakers and "unusual suspects" such as law enforcement and the business community. Strong advocacy capacity has been developed, with an impressive array of individuals and organizations endorsing the Early Learning Illinois agenda.

At the same time, the Birth to Five Project faces significant challenges in its efforts to substantially increase high quality birth to five services. Foremost among these is the current budget crisis in Illinois. The state's economy has been slow to recover from the latest recession, and state revenues have grown more slowly than expenditures over recent years. The state's tax structure is poorly matched to the state's current economy, such that growth in the economy does not result in proportional growth in state revenues. This structural tax deficit is politically difficult to address, and presents a significant barrier to improving and expanding services.

Despite widespread support for early learning in Illinois, early childhood programs remain in competition for funding with the even more widely supported and understood K-12 and higher education systems, both of which claim the

need for dramatic increases in funding. A key temptation the Birth to Five Project and its allies will need to guard against in the coming year is implementing Preschool for All “on the cheap”—a lower cost, lower quality version of the program that is unlikely to produce the desired effect of preparing children to succeed in school and in life.

With the tremendous push for Preschool for All that will happen over the next year, the Birth to Five Project will likely find it challenging to keep momentum up on the many other aspects of its’ strategic plan. Close collaboration with the various partnerships and advisory groups that address these issues will be critical to ensure continued progress.

Value of Build’s Public/Private Partnership Approach and Flexibility to Set Own Agenda. The Build Initiative has been an excellent fit for the Birth to Five Project. Because the Project had always been conceived as a private/public partnership, Build funding allowed it to efficiently and effectively expand to cover services for children ages three to five and their families. The flexibility that Build allowed the Project in setting its own agenda has been especially valuable, as it has allowed the Project to maintain a multi-faceted approach to building an effective birth to five prevention system in Illinois. Illinois has received funding from other foundation or government sources that focus on specific aspects of systems building, such as health, mental health, or early education. The Build funding provided critical “glue money” to keep the many other initiatives coordinated and working together, while allowing the Project to address areas that were not already targeted by any existing efforts.

Value of Outside TA, Learning Community. The Birth to Five Project has benefited from services provided by the national Build team, including the technical assistance that has been provided by through Build funding. The outside experts that Build has brought to national meetings and/or convened conference calls with have provided the Project staff with new perspectives that have proven helpful in moving our work forward. For example, through the Build Learning Network, Illinois received helpful consultation from the Center for Law and Social Policy.

Similarly, belonging to the Build Learning Network has been helpful to the Project. At national meetings, members of the Birth to Five Project Steering Committee have connected with their counterparts in other states, and have shared lessons learned on a wide range of issues, including tiered reimbursement systems for child care, program evaluation models, and use of the Early Learning Left Out methodology for highlighting the need for greater early childhood spending. In addition, as a result of contacts made through Build, the Illinois Early Learning Council Quality and Workforce Development Committees invited representatives from Michigan and New Jersey to share lessons learned around effective strategies for implementing a higher level of qualifications for early childhood teachers.

Value of Incorporating Evaluation into Team Planning Process. Having a local evaluation partner as part of the Birth to Five Project team from the beginning has proven useful because the evaluator was able to help the steering committee articulate the measurable outcomes for which it expected to be held accountable. There was no mystery about how the Project would be evaluated, and the Project's logic model helped provide focus to the work of the committees. Having the evaluation partner at the table has ensured that data about how the system is functioning is regularly reviewed by the Project's committees.

SUMMARY

The past 18 months have been a very successful period for the Birth to Five Project in Illinois, in which many of the strategic objectives of the Project have been accomplished. The coming year presents a critical juncture, full of opportunities and challenges as Illinois strives to create a greatly expanded and more effective system of early learning services for very young children and their families. The Birth to Five Project remains an important driving force to accomplish these changes.