

Innovations for High Quality, Aligned Early Childhood Educator Preparation



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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Background

Early Childhood Educator Preparation Program Innovation (EPPI) grants were awarded to partnerships of two- and four-year institutions to develop new models and innovations for early childhood educator preparation. This qualitative study is based on interviews with project personnel in 17 partnerships.

Catalysts

The study identified four primary catalysts that 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 costs to students.

Innovations

Seven broad categories of EPPI innovations found in the study are described below. The full report discusses catalysts, examples, common features, challenges, and lessons learned from each of these innovations.

Articulation arrangements. Some new articulation models viewed high schools as part of the continuum, often allowing students to earn college credits prior to enrollment. Other models developed licensure pathways that included early identification of two-year students who planned to transfer to 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, and leveling bridge courses worked to remedy course differences between the two- and four-year levels. Early Childhood Education (ECE) 2+2 articulation agreements and holistic Associate of Applied Science (AAS) transfer programs were also used to allow transfer students to complete a bachelor degree in an additional two years.

Alignment of assessments. One of the most ambitious assessment innovations implemented through this project was the cross-institutional assessment system, which incorporates the Gateways Credentials as well as other state and national standards. Bridge assessments were also used to match competencies being taught at the two- and four-year levels. The City Colleges of Chicago each use similar course documentation in order to align assessments and facilitate the completion of Gateways Credentials. One partnership used shared assignments to ensure that courses at the community college were aligned with those at the four-year program.

Advising and supporting students. Cross-advising involved four-year faculty and advisors meeting with potential transfer students at the two-year site to inform them about degree requirements and provide a contact point to ease transitions to the four-year environment. Many partnerships also created advising guides to help communicate—to both students and advisors—degree and credential requirements and pathways between two- and four-year institutions and careers. Innovations to improve access focused on meeting students' needs for flexibility in scheduling and addressing financial and academic barriers.

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

English Language Learner instruction. Almost all of the programs embedded Illinois' bilingual/English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching endorsement in their ECE programs through either their undergraduate or graduate ECE coursework. Many partnerships also reported that they require all ECE candidates to take ESL courses and student teaching required by ISBE. Another innovation was a focus on professional development for in-service educators working with English Language Learners in ECE.

Infant and toddler 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.

Quality field experiences. Increased networking was used to improve both the quantity and quality of field placement sites. Most partnerships also indicated a desire to increase the number of field experiences with English Language Learners. Some partnerships sought to improve field experiences by adopting a more intentional approach in site selection or providing training and support to mentor teachers at the placement sites. To encourage participation as a placement site and serve as a signal of quality, one program has been piloting a Gateways Technical Assistant credential to help them to identify educators who would be high quality mentors for field placements, and another is developing criteria for home day care placements.

Challenges

The report also identifies seven broad challenges that cut across the innovations and are described in more detail in the full report. These include lack of alignment and communication between institutions; 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.

Conclusions

Five prominent themes emerged from these findings and frame the conclusions. These themes are listed below, along with associated implications for policy and practice.

Improving communication and alignment within and between institutions. 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.

Understanding and acting on data about the ECE students and the ECE workforce. Early childhood educator preparation programs should create structures to 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.

Improving the quality of early childhood educator preparation to meet the educational needs of all students. Amidst efforts to improve the postsecondary experiences of students preparing to become early childhood educators, programs should not lose sight of improving the educational experiences all young children.

The vital role played by state and national policy initiatives. 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. Learning from other institutions' experiences can facilitate implementation and ensure the scalability and sustainability of reforms. Institutions across the state and nation can 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 change with fairly small grant awards in a relatively tight timeframe. However, it is important to note that the data used in this have not been triangulated with other 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 investment in those strategies that have proven successful and have the potential to be scaled statewide.