



Austin Innovation Zone 2015

Building Pipelines, Strengthen Family Engagement

In 2015, Illinois designated Austin as one of eleven Early Childhood Innovation Zones – communities with strong leadership and collaborative relationships along with an interest in serving the highest need children. In these Innovation Zones, programs that touch the lives of young children plan and test creative ways to enroll children from “Priority Populations” to meet their needs through high quality educational services. Illinois Action for Children supports local Innovation Zones in planning and implementing activities. The Illinois Education Research Council will evaluate the strategies chosen by the community. Funding is being provided by the federal Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant and local philanthropies.

ABOUT THE AUSTIN COMMUNITY

The Austin Innovation Zone (IZ) is located on the west side of Chicago, in the city’s largest neighborhood.

- As of 2014, 55 percent of children under the age of five in the Austin live with families experiencing poverty or deep poverty (50 percent Federal Poverty Level).
- A 2009 study by Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI) found that many children living in Chicago’s poorest communities (including Austin) lack access to quality early learning for two reasons: 1) parents are misinformed and/or mistrustful of the child care options available to them; 2) parents find the process of enrolling their children in early education programs daunting due to several barriers (including language and cultural barriers).

The Austin IZ is focused on addressing two specific challenges within the community:

- Children ages birth-to-five-years old who are living in families at or below the Federal Poverty level are not connected to resources and high quality early learning and development programs.

- High-needs children lack access to high quality early learning centers in the Austin community.

INNOVATION ZONE:

VISION AND GOALS

Austin Coming Together is the lead agency coordinating this work. The vision of the Innovation Zone work is that *every child birth to five – and especially children with high needs – is experiencing high quality early education with strong support from family, and ready access to health care and social services*. Following this vision, Innovation Zones are encouraged to develop goals in any of four areas:

- 1. Quality improvement in early learning programs.** This goal is measured by tracking the number of programs rated Gold in ExceleRate Illinois, the state’s new quality rating and improvement system, as well as the number of programs that move up from any quality level to a high quality status.
- 2. Serving more children from Priority Populations.** This goal is measured by tracking the number of children currently served from the designated Populations and the changes in that number over time. The Priority Populations are: homeless children, children of teen parents, children in the DCFS system including foster children, children with disabilities, children in poverty or deep poverty, children in home-based childcare who need supplemental early learning services and children whose families experience language isolation.
- 3. Engaging families across the community.** Innovation Zones are encouraged to find ways to offer guidance and support to parents whose children are not yet enrolled in formal early education development programs and who face barriers in accessing available programs for their young children.
- 4. Developing networks of social and health services.** Individual early learning programs



Austin Coming Together

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cannot meet all of the needs of the families they strive to serve and they are encouraged to develop networks with other service providers to help serve their communities.

The Austin Innovation Zone team has developed strategies to address each of these four goals. The strategies include:

- Increase understanding of the current rate of participation in early learning and development programs by children under the age of five.
- Facilitate outreach, enrollment and attendance of priority population children in early learning and development programs.
- Increase cross-system, coordinated referrals and intake systems between the early childhood system, health care system and social service agencies.
- Facilitate outreach and enrollment of high needs children through a parent leader approach that engages families in areas of high need and supports enrollment.
- Build a network of early childhood education partners to join a community of practice, and improve the quality of early learning programs through professional development and shared knowledge.

During 2015, the team completed two important steps toward achieving the Austin IZ goals:

- The Austin IZ established an initial set of pipeline partners for both referring and refer-to agencies. Two organizations agreed to test the intake process and materials with their clients and two high-quality childcare centers agreed to serve as refer-to agencies.
- A Parent Ambassador team will be developed in early 2016 to facilitate weekly parent support groups and refer interested parents to a coordinated intake system. They will also leverage existing partnerships to facilitate outreach and enrollment of parents.



Early Learning MATTERS!

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Early Learning Matters will help you....

- Determine your childcare assistance eligibility
- Identify the best learning center for your child
- Enroll your child in the program of your choice

Our goal is to ensure that all of Austin's children have access to early learning programs.

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DID YOU KNOW...

Early Learning Programs can:

- Build your child's social skills
- Build your child's love of learning
- Help your child become more self-confident
- Help your child become ready for Kindergarten



Make sure your child is on a path to success!

ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD

INNOVATION ZONES

Illinois Action for Children supports each Innovation Zone in planning and implementing activities, while the Illinois Education Research Council will evaluate the success of the strategies chosen by each Zone. The Innovation Zone model uses action learning cycles, an iterative process, to quickly learn and adapt strategies for immediate use in each community. The federal Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant and local philanthropies provide funding.

www.actforchildren.org/for-providers/innovation-zones/



The Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Innovation Zones initiative is a collaboration between the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development and Illinois Action for Children.

