



Elgin Innovation Zone 2015

Building Pipelines, Improving Communications

In 2015, Illinois designated Elgin 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.

The Elgin Innovation Zone (IZ) is located in the northern region of Illinois, thirty-five miles northwest of Chicago, and spans both Cook and Kane Counties. In this community, 40 percent of children entering kindergarten meet the literacy benchmark and nearly 53 percent of children younger than five are from low-income families. Only one in three children under five has access to early childhood programming with the limited number of preschool and family child care spots available as of the beginning of 2015.

ABOUT THE ELGIN COMMUNITY

The Elgin IZ is focused on addressing several challenges within the community:

- High needs children ages birth-to-five who are linguistically and/or physically isolated in Elgin have low enrollment in high quality early childhood programs.
- The community lacks support for enrollment due to awareness challenges and systemic barriers with referrals, registration and transportation.
- Cultural barriers need to be addressed to help overcome the existing fear and anxiety of enrolling children in early learning programs, taking them away from in-home child care provided by grandparents or relatives.



INNOVATION ZONE:

VISION AND GOALS

The Elgin Innovation Zone is being led by the Elgin Partnership for Early Learning (EPEL), a birth-to-five cross-system collaborative based in Elgin. EPEL was formed to engage the community in preparing young children to succeed in school and in life. Through a collaboration with more than 40 community partners, EPEL works to increase access to high quality early learning programs and increase the percentage of Elgin children meeting kindergarten readiness benchmarks.

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

Contact Us: Casey Amayun
EPEL Collaboration Director
847.452.2457
camayun@elginpartnership.org

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 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 Elgin IZ team has chosen to start with the following strategies:

- Increase cross-system coordinated referrals between the early childhood system, health care system and social service agencies.
- Facilitate outreach, enrollment and attendance of low income and physically isolated families using the Give Me Five campaign to distribute and connect families to resources including special events, school enrollment and early learning education information.
- Facilitate outreach and enrollment of high needs children through a parent ambassador approach that engages families in areas of high need and supports enrollment.
- Develop resources for families and professionals, such as a mobile preschool access to family access childfind in hard-to-reach areas, and build a comprehensive early childhood website focused providing Elgin families and professionals with access high quality activities and materials.

Stakeholder engagement:

- The EPEL brought together diverse leaders from healthcare, social services and early learning to become early learning champions. About 45 people attended the meeting to gain interest in and support of the Innovation Zone ideas. The stakeholders were excited to support the coordinated referral process and the creation of a centralized referral phone number.

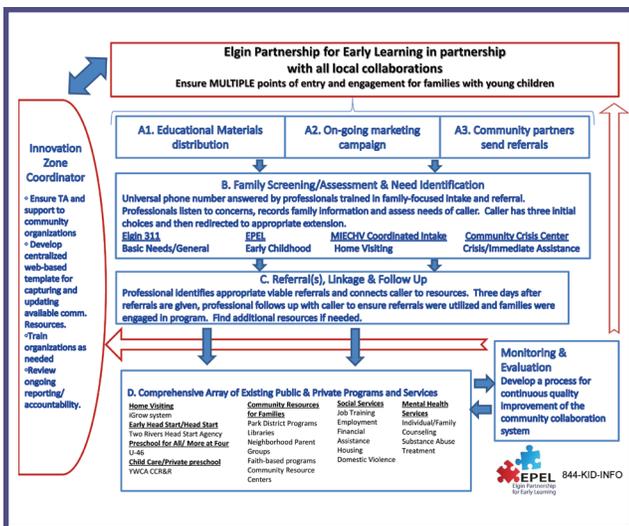
Community resource development:

- The team built a relationship with the Elgin 311 information line and developed a referral line for families, 844-KID-INFO. The referral line will connect the high needs, priority population to the right resources and enroll more children in early learning programs.
- A website is being developed to provide both parents and professionals with information about services and resources they need to support early learning for children, including educational materials, early childhood activities, videos and data for community partners.

“The IZ referral line is a true marker of progress in education for Elgin. It is going to help so many more children and families access Early Childhood programs and other important services that the community has to offer.”
 – Gisela Lopez-Lauderdale,
 Two Rivers Head Start

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/



During 2015, the team completed several important steps toward achieving the Elgin IZ goals:

