



Great East St. Louis Innovation Zone 2015

Aligning Practice, Policy and Investments

Poverty rates for children are highest among those under age six, especially for children in Greater East St. Louis where 68 percent of the 0-5 child population live in deep poverty and less than 2 percent of children receive early intervention or special education services. Early childhood poverty can be harmful for cognitive, social-emotional, and health outcomes later in life. Deep poverty exposes children to toxic stressors, which can be harmful, and are best addressed in the early childhood years, by screening and enrolling more children and families with high needs in effective, high-quality, two-generation services, as defined by our state's early childhood vision.¹ The gap in school readiness is costly and difficult to address when children have limited exposure and experiences in early learning, which leads to even wider gaps in achievement.

Greater East St. Louis was selected as one of 11 Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Innovation Zones in Illinois, selected based on the level of concentrated need, presence of providers with a demonstrated interest in quality improvement, a history of collaboration and strong local support to strengthen early childhood systems and kindergarten readiness. Greater East St. Louis is program rich and offers a variety of early learning opportunities including Head Start/Early Head Start, Preschool for All (PFA), Prevention Initiative (PI), Healthy Families Illinois, Parents Too Soon, Healthy Start, Early Learning Readiness, and State licensed centers and family child care homes. The Greater East St. Louis Innovation Zone (GESTL-IZ) & Early Learning Partnership envisions a community where every child has the knowledge, skills and disposition for kindergarten success.

"This has been the most rewarding, yet challenging work of my career. The shifts in thinking and behavior have been incredible."

– J. Moenster



Lifting each child: **We ALL play a role**

The GESTL-IZ has two overarching goals focused to engage the hardest to reach, most at-risk, five-years-old and under children in high quality early learning opportunities:

1. Develop a community-wide systemic approach designed to increase awareness, access to and utilization of developmental screenings for children 0-5 years of age.
2. Create a community where all early childhood programs are invested and participate in ExceleRate Illinois, demonstrating their commitment to high quality early childhood experiences, resulting in prepared and successful early learners, and family and community engagement.

CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

In November 2015, early learning programs set a goal for 16 Greater East St. Louis early learning programs to achieve an ExceleRate Circle of Quality by 2016. This shared goal has generated momentum and progress toward incremental and sustainable continuous quality improvements. Quality improvement strategies included:

- Increasing Gateways Registry memberships, which supports access to grants, scholarships and online learning;
- Providing cross-sector professional development and leadership training opportunities in the community;
- Creating intake and enrollment systems that support data collection;
- Assisting programs and practitioners with applications that has resulted in scholarships and grant awards
- Aligning program policies and procedures with ExceleRate requirements and the administration of the Ages and Stage Questionnaire 3 (ASQ-3).

The GESTL-IZ offers a monthly community of practice or "gathering" called, *What's on Your Mind*. Program directors and emerging leaders explore relevant and meaningful topics that

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directly and indirectly effect quality. At the gatherings they share information, ask questions, and learn about supports that can help their program and staff attain ExceleRate benchmarks. Caregiver Connections and CCR+R Quality Specialists facilitate the community of practice. *What's on Your Mind* has generated excitement, unity, buy-in and the creation of a community-wide shared agenda toward ExceleRate among all early childhood programs.

As a result of these collaborative quality efforts, 67 percent of Greater East St. Louis early learning programs (child care centers/PFA/Head Start) have earned an ExceleRate Circle of Quality and 22 percent have earned a Gold Circle of Quality. The ability to attain Gateways Credentials, an ExceleRate requirement, is a concern of program administrators. In response, the GESTL-IZ submitted a practice innovation that was approved by the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development and the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies. The practice of bundling completed ExceleRate trainings toward Gateways Credentials will be pilot tested during 2016.

ALIGNING PRACTICE, POLICY AND INVESTMENTS

In June 2015, the GESTL-IZ implemented a community-wide, coordinated, developmental screening and registration campaign called "*Look What I can do...Let's Find Out*," promoting the importance of Child Find, regular developmental screening and early learning. Cross-sector partners involved in the planning and implementation included:

- **Education:** East St. Louis School District 189 and Lessie Bates Davis Neighborhood House (PFA), Preschool Expansion More at Four-Metro East Preschool and SIUE Early Head Start/Head Start, Child care Centers.
- **Home Visiting:** Lessie Bates Davis Neighborhood House (PI) and Child and Family Connections #21
- **Government:** East St. Louis police department
- **Faith:** Six local churches
- **Parent Ambassadors:** Parents United For Change

Partners came together to define and identify the highest need populations using data and information from the GESTL-IZ, SIUE Head Start

Community Needs Assessment, Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM) and recommendations from the Illinois Preschool Expansion grant. Shared documents were developed by the partners including marketing flyers, an intake application, family interview protocols, a weighted risk/scoring rubric, an early learning program options matrix to support family decision making and a family experience evaluation. Parent Ambassadors were integral in helping partners develop an intake process and family-friendly marketing materials.

Cross-sector partners used their social capital to promote the campaign and resources were blended and braided. Throughout, implementation partners adapted to changing conditions resulting in:

- 306 high-needs children receiving screenings
- 19 referrals to Early Intervention or the School District
- 44 children who required further monitoring of their development received re-screens within a two month period
- 100 percent of the families strongly satisfied or satisfied with their experience

ABOUT US

The Greater East St. Louis Early Learning Partnership & Innovation Zone is the anchoring early learning coalition of the community's emerging cradle-to-career collective impact effort, known as East Side Aligned. The community's effort engages many stakeholders and constituency leaders. United Way of Greater St. Louis and Children's Home + Aid provide backbone support for this effort.

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/

¹Heckman, J.J., Moon, S.H., Pinto, R., Savellyev, P.A., & Yavitz, A. (2010). The Rate of Return to the HighScope Perry Preschool Program. *Journal of Public Economics*, 94(1-2), 114-128.

