



Williamson County Innovation Zone 2015

Building Services Pipeline, Improving Quality

Williamson County is located in southern Illinois. Its county seat is Marion, a city with a population of approximately 18,000 residents. As of 2013, more than 50 percent of the 4,643 children age five-and-under in Williamson County live in low-income families. The Williamson County Innovation Zone (IZ) is implementing strategies to build community systems that support families to increase the number of low income/high risk children enrolled in high quality early childhood education programs, with the goal that children age five-and-under in the Williamson County IZ will be better prepared and eager for school success.

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. Williamson County is one of eleven Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Innovation Zones in Illinois.

IDENTIFYING CHILDREN'S INDIVIDUAL NEEDS AND CONNECTING THEM TO PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

This comprehensive undertaking addresses the importance of identifying children with developmental delays and connecting these children to additional programs and services to help them succeed in school. Coordinating a county-wide screening effort, with oversight from a cross-sector member Screening Collaborative, has led to an increase in the number and quality of consistent developmental screenings of children in the Williamson County community.

During 2015, the Williamson County Screening Collaborative:

- Finalized interagency MOUs, which led to development and implementation of system-wide screening protocols and forms for parent education.
- Established consistent cross-sector procedures for referrals for further assessment, strengthening linkages between early learning programs, Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education.
- Created a Community of Practice to support the screening efforts of childcare center staff, and provided laptops and Think Pads to programs to expand their technology capacity to better administer screening and collect data.
- Utilized results from a county-wide 2014 Kindergarten entry survey and expanded outreach efforts to connect with hard-to-reach families and promote Child Find Events.
- Participated in the county's Child Find event, assisting with screening of children ages birth-to-three years of age.

Through this work, the Screening Collaborative discovered that programs were using a variety of screening tools and there were many variations (in terms of knowledge and skills) among programs responsible for developmental screening. To address this, the Collaborative enlisted its partner Child Care Resources and Referral (CCR&R) to provide Ages and Stage Questionnaire (ASQ) and developmental screening training to early childhood professionals. Training, with coaching and technical assistance, helped professionals become competent and self-sufficient in administering screening within their own programs. Procedures for collecting information and data with uniform practice and community needs were developed. To track screening efforts, the Collaborative utilizes an online central database (ASQ Online) that includes a child's screening history and results.

The early learning program partners of the South Illinois Coalition for Children and Families (the group that oversees Williamson County IZ activities) are responsible for administering the devel-



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opmental screening. As a result of the partners' hard work in 2015:

- Successful communication strategies and approaches that build interest and participation from families have been identified.
- Twelve early learning programs are now using ASQ online.
- More than 1,500 screenings were completed and child profiles entered into ASQ online, meeting the Innovation's 2015 goals (65 percent of all three and four year olds and 30 percent of all children ages birth to five are screened and data collected in the ASQ online system).

Building on this success, CCR&R and the Southern Illinois Coalition for Children and Families received grant funding from the Illinois Children's Healthcare Foundation to expand its work into other counties beginning in January 2016. In addition, the grant provides resources to begin building more formal linkages between the early learning and medical communities.

IMPROVING QUALITY EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS

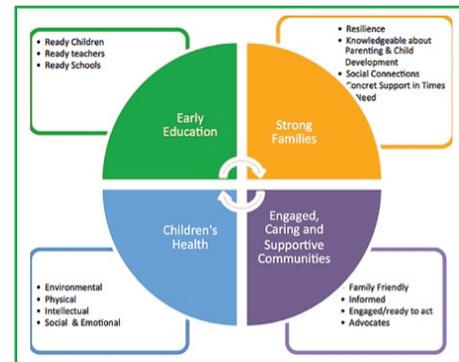
The regional nature of southern Illinois means that many families travel outside the county for employment and educational opportunities, creating barriers for enrolling their children in traditional high quality, part-day early learning and development programs. Children of working families need full-day, full-year solutions. During 2015, the Williamson County IZ implemented a number of strategies to align and strengthen teaching practices in the county's early learning programs, resulting in an increase in the number of childcare centers with an ExceleRate Illinois Circle of Quality recognition.

During 2015, the Williamson County IZ:

- Hosted a county-wide Early Childhood Teacher Institute in August, with participation from 121 professionals from Pre-K, Child Care and Head Start. The Institute provided consistent messaging and content to a cross-sector audience and built a stronger, more cohesive early childhood workforce. Testing a possible CCAP exception, child care programs were able to close for the day so staff could attend the Institute during the regular work week. Parents received ample notice to make alternate arrangements, understood its impor-

tance and the impact having well trained staff would have on their child, and were very supportive and invested in the quality of their child's program.

- Partnered with CCR&R and reallocated resources to promote and support teacher credentials. One hundred forty eight (148) teachers participated in the Class of 2015 and received a new Gateways to Opportunity credential.
- Developed a shared services technology infrastructure to coordinate and integrate professional development opportunities/ collaboration across systems.



EDUCATING AND EMPOWERING FAMILIES TO BE ENGAGED IN THEIR CHILD'S LEARNING

Parents are a child's first and most important teachers. During 2015, the Williamson County IZ continued its efforts to educate, empower and engage families in their children's early learning to support school readiness and later academic success. A Family and Community Engagement Specialist provided resources to early learning programs to support their efforts to engage and empower families. In addition, families were connected to resources and information through its outreach campaign called *SI Families Connect*. The Innovation Zone and its partners developed a communication infrastructure that connects families with valuable information and resources. The infrastructure includes a family-friendly website, www.sifamilies.org, with a comprehensive calendar of family-friendly events throughout southern Illinois. This is accompanied by an active social marketing site which reaches, on average, more 2,500 people each week. The marketing plan for *SI Families Connect* includes strategies that involve and engage community and business members in a new way, supporting families and promoting early learning.