

Early Childhood Action Partnerships Final Report, June 2013

The Early Childhood Action Partnership (ECAP) project was a one-year campaign to encourage the development and growth of Illinois collaborations. Funds from the State Advisory Council grant to the Office of Early Childhood Development (OECD) enabled Illinois Action for Children (IAFC) to design a time-limited (11.5 months) program of mini-grants, technical assistance and training to support local partnership capacity building from May 2012 through April 2013.

Data for this final report come from a variety of sources, including ongoing documentation of activities as well as the following evaluative processes:

- Illinois Action for Children's Research Department developed a 33-question online survey for ECAP Managing Partners to evaluate the effectiveness of the Technical Assistance and Training model. This survey was sent to the Managing Partner (or Partners, for grantees in Kankakee, Whiteside, and Addison) for each ECAP community in April 2013. Twenty-five of 27 surveys were returned; a 93% response rate.
- Self-reporting by ECAP Managing Partners on grant deliverables and impact
- Data from the Early Childhood Coalition—Monitoring and Assessment of Progress, an online tool of the National Center for Children in Poverty Pathways project.

PART I: THE ECAP MODEL

ECAP Approach

The ECAP approach was to “meet communities where they are”, accepting local definition of “partnership” (within a set of parameters) and self-defined community area. Following the framework laid out by IAFC in the guide that accompanied the application, applicants self-assessed their partnerships in terms of “strength of vision” and “ability to execute”. The four categories on this assessment grid were: 1) getting started; 2) strengthening execution; 3) building vision and strategic direction; and 4) model partnership. Embedded in this framework were the critical factors of leadership, organizing and engagement of key stakeholders, and advocacy. The ECAP Selection Committee used this grid to ensure a developmental range for the project as well as for communities to articulate their strengths and challenges as a developing partnership.

The ECAP approach sought to achieve a balance between nurturing “organic” partnership development and providing a specific blueprint for collaboration development. IAFC was approached by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) and a partnership was soon formed to incorporate the Pathways to Early School Success theoretical framework and related tools. The Pathways resources provide evidence-based guidance for communities working towards the six Pathways goals, which support healthy development and learning.

Given the short time frame for this project and with full knowledge that true systems change on the local level would require more than a small grant technical assistance within a limited time frame, the ECAP project also aimed to change the conversation in Illinois from a “program focus” to a “systems focus” and to build the field of community systems development experts statewide.

Selection of Communities

An *ad hoc* committee, including staff from IAFC and representatives from the Illinois Office of Early Childhood Development and the Community Systems Development Sub-Committee (of the Illinois Early Learning Council) developed selection criteria for the award of up to 16 grants of \$9,999. Because of the unexpected volume of applications as well as the compressed time frame for the expenditure of funds, the committee decided to create two additional grant categories. "Partial Grants" of \$5,000 were awarded to five communities with existing, fairly robust partnerships to pursue a specific strategy. "Micro-grants" of \$1,000 were awarded to an additional six communities that demonstrated high need and community readiness, but not the capacity needed to fulfill project requirements. Twelve full grants were awarded in 11 communities (see list, Appendix A and Map, Appendix B). The Illinois Department of Human Services was responsible for the fiscal administration of these grants.

The grants were awarded to the Managing Partner in each community. Kankakee, Addison, and Whiteside County each had two Managing Partners, for a total of 26. Two complementary grants were awarded in East St. Louis. Managing Partners included:

- Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (7)
- Incorporated early childhood collaborations (4)
- United Way (4)
- Child Care Center (3)
- School district or Regional Office of Education (2)
- Social service or other community based agency (5)
- Junior League (1)

To ensure full accountability, Managing Partners were required to develop detailed work plans, submit two reports on progress towards deliverables, and file expenditure reports with the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS).

Technical Assistance, Training, and Mini-Grants

Communities that were selected for ECAP grants were offered a range of technical assistance and training opportunities to complement and support their funded projects. These included: two conferences; Managing Partner Training day; webinars; a menu of training options; web-based planning tools; and community-specific consultation.

ECAP grantees were given flexibility for using their mini-grant funds, but were required to submit a budget and expenditure reports. Grantees used funds for staff support, meeting expenses, travel for staff development, printing, consultation services outside the scope of what ECAP could provide, and community events.

Each ECAP grantee was required to develop a project work plan, which included the identification of technical assistance needed to meet the articulated project goal. The Managing Partner for each grant worked with ECAP project staff to determine the TA plan and to be "matched" with a technical assistance consultant.

To deliver a coordinated system of technical assistance, IAFC cast a wide net to identify, recruit, and develop a cadre of consultants from across the state. More than 50 professionals from across the early childhood system attended one of two Facilitator Training days that included an orientation to the NCCP Pathways approach and toolkit as well as facilitation skill building and practice.

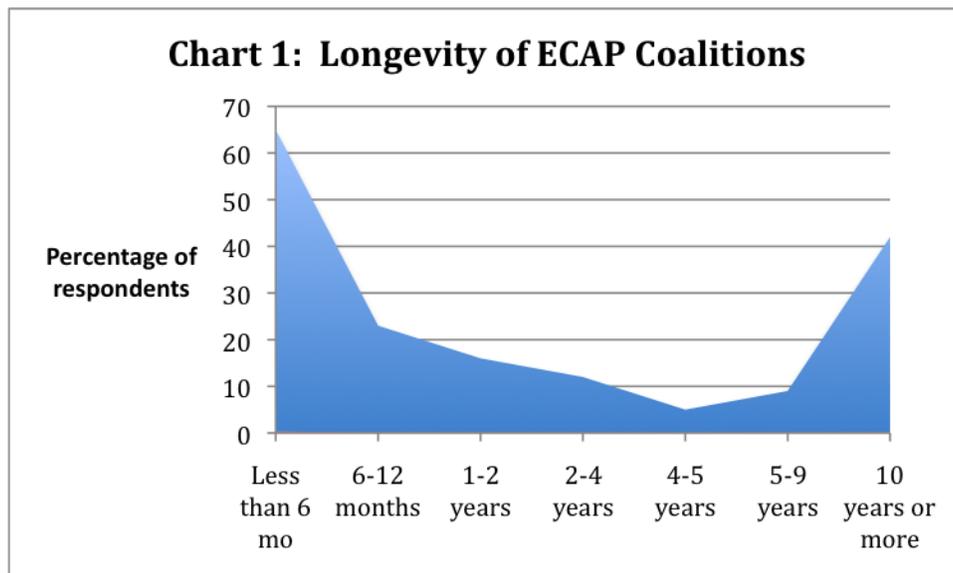
PART II: LEARNING FROM ECAP

Current Landscape of Partnerships

Illinois does not have a systemic approach to local early childhood collaboration nor is there is a centralized point to collect information about the scope of local partnerships. As part of the ECAP project, Illinois Action for Children sought to gather data to better understand the collaborative landscape across Illinois.

Each of the ECAP coalitions was required to have its members complete the Pathways tool, Early Childhood Coalition Monitoring and Assessment of Progress (ECC MAP). This survey gathered basic information about each individual coalition for its own capacity building purposes and has been collated across grantees to gain a better understanding of the current collaborative landscape in Illinois.

- **“Age” of Coalition:** Nearly two-thirds of the respondents to the ECC MAP indicated that they belonged to a coalition that was formed within the past six months. It is interesting to note that the second highest response was “10 years or more”. These data align with anecdotal evidence that coalition start up (developing vision and goals and engaging new stakeholders) is *relatively* simple, but that *maintaining* a coalition during implementation of those priorities is significantly more challenging. Chart 1 illustrates the distribution of coalition “age” among ECAP grantees.

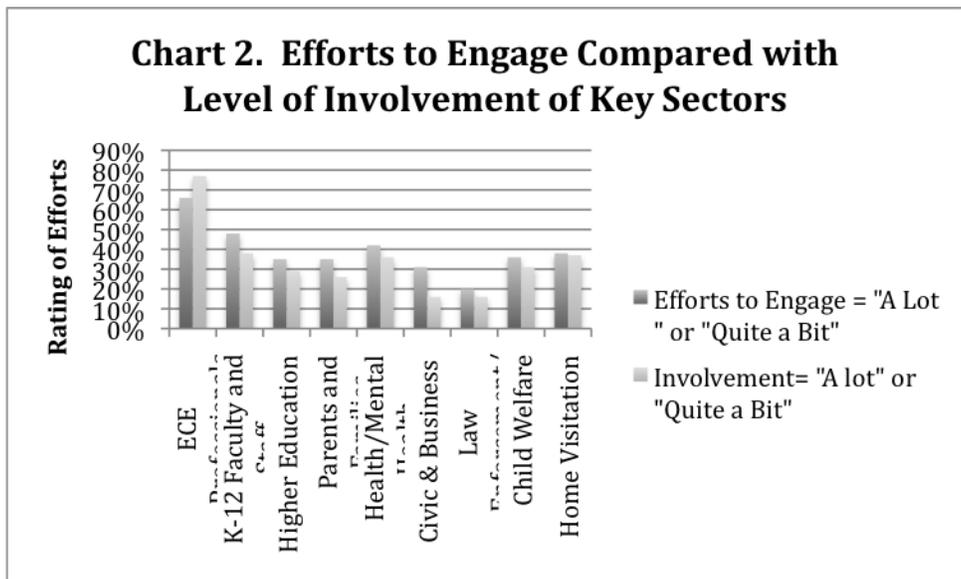


- **Vision:** While virtually all coalitions report having an articulated vision statement, approximately 60% of respondents reported that their coalition had measurable outcomes tied to that vision.

“Vision brings synergy particularly during moments of conflict when partners are protecting their turf or not trusting one another” (An ECAP Managing Partner)

- **Stakeholder engagement:** When asked about the level of involvement by key sectors in their partnership, Managing Partners ranked the participation of Early Care and Education (ECE) Providers highest. Chart 2 shows the dominance of ECE professionals in the coalitions. These professionals were about twice as likely to participate in the early childhood partnerships “A lot” or “Quite a bit” as the next highest sectors—home visitation, health/mental health, and K-12 faculty and staff.

Chart 2 also compares the actual involvement of the different sectors to efforts to engage them in the coalition. Early Care and Education professionals were the only group to participate at higher levels than the effort to recruit them. Business and civic leaders as well as law enforcement and judges ranked low in terms of involvement. However, efforts by the partnerships to engage those sectors were also least likely to be reported.



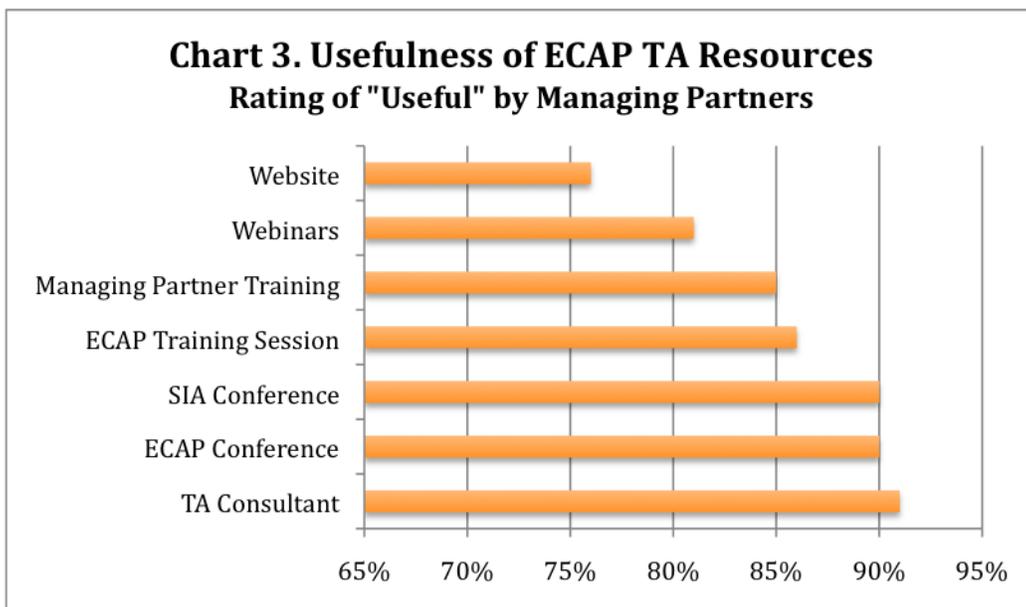
Usefulness of ECAP Resources

Evaluation data from the Managing Partners supports the ECAP approach. Assessing the overall approach that ECAP took, 21 of 23 respondents indicated that the approach fit with the community's goals and expectations. One community did not feel that the ECAP approach was well articulated to them.

"The process of strengthening a partnership and moving them from a project-focused group to a system focused-group is a long and time-consuming process. The ECAP approach has been helpful, but additional time, training, and hand-holding would be beneficial." (An ECAP Managing Partner)

ECAP Managing Partners also evaluated specific features of the technical assistance and training program. Nearly two-thirds reported that the mini-grant opportunity was "very much" an incentive for developing their partnership, and 83% rated the ECAP mini-grant a very effective resource for building a community partnership. The survey indicated that the mini-grant itself was slightly less of an incentive than the technical assistance that was offered. Several Managing Partners reported that the receipt of the mini-grant gave them "credibility" within the community and demonstrated the value of their efforts to form collaborations.

ECAP Managing Partners also assessed overall usefulness of resources offered by ECAP. Highest ratings were for the two ECAP conferences and the Technical Assistance Consultant. Lowest ratings were for the Partner Plan Act website and webinars. ECAP grantees cited networking and peer-learning opportunities at the conferences to be the most valuable resources. (See Chart 3.) . The value of peer-to-peer networking and learning was also communicated in interviews with Managing Partners.



Incorporation of the NCCP Pathways approach and web-based planning tools had mixed results. The ambitious timeline for the ECAP project, coupled with unanticipated technical problems in web expansion on the part of NCCP, resulted in a delay in the full launch of the toolkit. ECAP grantees found the Pathways approach and tools “somewhat useful” (rating a “6” on a scale of 1-9). However, evaluation comments, final reports and conversations with Managing Partners indicate that web-based planning tools that allow virtual collaboration are not fully embraced by early childhood coalitions.

While Managing Partners valued ECAP technical assistance and training resources, the compressed timeframe (approximately 6 months) for completing ECAP-funded activities made it challenging for them to take full advantage of all available resources. Additionally, the time-limited access to technical assistance pressed communities into an accelerated stakeholder engagement and planning process. While for some communities, this acceleration was a much-needed impetus for partnership development and collaborative planning; others felt frustrated that they were not able to complete the entire strategic planning process during the funded period.

Impact: What Has Changed as a Result of ECAP?

Despite a compressed time frame, most of the ECAP grantees made significant progress. Nine new partnerships were formed and three existing collaborations successfully “rebooted” their partnerships through the development of a vision and strategic priorities. Eleven existing partnerships pursued specific collaborative capacity-building strategies that included:

- Integration of authentic parent voice into systems change initiatives
- Development and implementation of internal and external communications strategies
- Formation of core leadership
- Implementation of cross-system strategies to promote children's healthy development across all domains and in all early childhood settings.

In addition to making progress towards community-specific goals, ECAP grantees indicated changes within their collaborations that point to greater capacity to plan for, implement, and sustain systemic change.

Community Engagement: Two-thirds of ECAP Managing Partners report a significant increase in new organizations joining the partnerships, with half reporting that organizational participation is at multiple levels (vertical engagement).

Several grantees cited examples of community engagement being 1) more challenging and time-consuming than anticipated; and 2) of greater benefit than expected. A good example of this is found in one of the rural ECAP communities, where the newly formed partnership created the opportunity to build awareness of available resources among the organizations brought to the table. While this process took longer than planned, it resulted in a higher level of trust and greater sense of shared purpose among stakeholders.

New Opportunities: Two-thirds of ECAP Managing Partners report having pursued new opportunities as a result of ECAP. Examples include leveraging of philanthropic funding and making business connections. A quote from the final report of one grantee illustrates this growth:

ECAP offered us a chance to find structure for our group. That structure has created a solid foundation upon which we feel capable and comfortable

enough to pursue additional funding sources, as well as actively promote our group and mission to other community agencies and businesses.

Connection: More than 4 out of 5 Managing Partners report that they feel more connected to systems-building efforts, advocacy, and the larger early childhood community in Illinois as a result of their participation in ECAP.

Leadership: Half of the ECAP Managing Partners reported that new organizations have taken on a leadership role in their community during the ECAP project and 60% report that leadership is representative of the full system. The following is a comment from a Managing Partner on the evaluation:

Everyone now feels they have a role within the collaboration based on the goals we set. More members are stepping up to be leaders within their goal areas and taking on more responsibility.

Sustainability: An overwhelming majority (85%) of ECAP Managing Partners indicated that because of ECAP, their partnership was “more likely to survive another year”. They also identified key elements of sustainability beyond funding, including:

- Active engagement and participation of members
- Leadership that is diverse, coordinated, solution-focused, motivated, values broad input, and shared across agencies.
- Celebration of small wins
- Ability to balance and articulate needs of individual organizational/program needs with community/collective needs
- Respectful relationships and commitment to common purpose
- Tangible benefits of participation

PART III: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

(1) There is clear and immediate need for Illinois to develop a more systemic approach for local collaboration

Cross-system local collaboration is imperative for the effective delivery of comprehensive services for young children, particularly for those with high need and who may be hard to reach and have complex service needs. In Illinois, however, programs and services for young children and their families are funded categorically through dozens of bureaus across multiple state agencies. The consequence of this practice is a fractured service delivery system and reduced opportunity to realize collective impact towards improved child outcomes. One ECAP Managing Partner referred to the “well-structured silos” that have been built to protect discrete funding streams.

Across Illinois, dozens of coalitions have formed in attempt to develop the local infrastructure to weave together the multiple programs, services, and resources for young children and their families. Most of these coalitions developed organically and there is wide variation in terms of purpose, activities, governance/structure, and geography.

As previously discussed, the ECAP program supported community-specific interpretations of what a “local early childhood partnership” looks like and what it does. The limitations of this approach were evidenced in many ECAP communities and point to issues that Illinois should explore as it aligns and integrates programs for young children through the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge initiative. Specifically, Illinois should engage in a process to

- Articulate a statewide vision for what it means to be a “local early childhood system”

- Provide a clear framework for local collaboration building that includes accountability mechanisms
- Define geographical boundaries of “local early childhood systems” in alignment with service delivery areas of early childhood sub-systems (such as CCR&Rs and CFCs) and existing collaborative infrastructure where appropriate
- Identify resources to support local collaborative infrastructure

(2) Prioritize and support the development and implementation of systems-change strategies.

An important goal of the ECAP project was the opportunity to explore the distinction between “program-focused” and “system-focused” strategies in order to improve child outcomes at the community level. As an example: a “typical” activity of early childhood collaboration in Illinois is to create a resource directory or plan an event such as a health fair. The ECAP project challenged grantees to be more intentional in the development of cross-system strategies and to ensure that each activity or event is tied to a measurable outcome that connects to the larger vision of the collaboration. Access to information about best practice across Illinois and nationwide and support for planning and implementing these strategies is critical for local systems building.

The very short ECAP project period makes it challenging to evaluate the extent to which communities successfully implement systems-change strategies. Evaluation data, however, reveals that there may be significant room for growth in this area. After rating their implementation of system change strategies in specific areas rather high, Managing Partners gave relatively few examples of changes within the community.

(3) Continue and expand opportunities for technical assistance and support for local collaborations.

High demand for the ECAP mini-grants, technical assistance, and training opportunities are evidence of unmet need for local systems building support. The compressed timeframe, however, prevented many grantees from taking full advantage of the resources.

Through multiple evaluation mechanisms, specific TA and support needs were identified as priorities for ECAP communities:

- Outcome-based planning, tied to vision and using available data to measure progress
- Team-building that focuses on the development of “soft skills” such as building trust, and excellent communication
- Engagement and development of leaders, including those in sectors under-represented at collaborative tables (e.g., civic and business, law enforcement and judges, child welfare)
- Communication planning (both external and internal)
- Opportunities for peer learning and access to best practice for local systems building
- Support for extended planning time/network capacity building.

(4) Build the field of “systems thinkers” and develop broad leadership at all levels—in local communities, in service delivery intermediaries, and at the state level.

The need to build a cadre of “community systems developers” is of growing interest, not just within the ECAP project but also in MIECHV, All our Kids Networks and among members of the Early Learning Council Community Systems Development Sub-Committee. Defining what a “community systems developer” should know and be able to do and creating professional development opportunities is an emerging priority. Communities designated as “Innovation Zones” in the Race to the Top project, Child Care Resource & Referral agencies, Child & Family

Connections should be included in future efforts as they are well-situated to lead and support cross-system efforts at the local level.

While there appears to be broad agreement that leadership is a sustainability strategy, nearly one-third of the ECAP grantees indicated that developing new leaders is “somewhat” or “not at all” a priority. Given that the critical importance of developing broad leadership was a key theme of ECAP, it worth exploring why this is not prioritized within some collaborations and pursue system strategies to promote and support leadership development.

(5) Understand the limitations of technological tools for local systems building while continuing to explore technological solutions that advance goals for collaboration.

Developing and encouraging the use of web-based resources including planning tools and training webinars were objectives of the ECAP project with the belief that these tools would facilitate collaboration, particularly in areas of the state where regular meeting is travel-intensive. There was, however, wide variation among communities in terms of their comfort level with technology. As an example, in several communities, rather than asking coalition partners to complete the Pathways tools online, grantees administered paper surveys and then inputted data manually. Several grantees reported to ECAP that their members were not “tech savvy.”

While there is little doubt that smart use of technology can facilitate collaboration, future efforts using web-based tools and online learning events should be planned and implemented in a way that aligns best practice with community practice.

(6) Mini-grants were effective as a catalyst for some partnership development and galvanizing interest in systems building, but are insufficient to establish and sustain local collaborative infrastructure over time.

Through survey data and in interviews with ECAP grantees, it is clear that the potential to receive mini-grant funds propelled many communities into action in order to take advantage of the opportunity and provided solid rationale for collaboration building. As one grantee noted, “getting the ECAP grant gave our coalition credibility in the community”.

Awarding mini-grants also provided a unique opportunity to scan the landscape of community partnerships across Illinois. To ensure full accountability for the use of the ECAP funds, IAFC and IDHS required communities to develop work plans and budgets and make regular reports. These mechanisms had the additional benefit of providing significant information about the partnerships, their work, and their ongoing needs.

However, developing and maintaining that accountability structure for very small grants over a very short time period, proved challenging and more costly in terms of staff time at IAFC, IDHS, and OECD than anticipated. Moreover, several communities found it challenging to expend a full grant in the allotted time period while also taking advantage of available technical assistance resources and training opportunities. In some communities, the conversation about how to sustain momentum after mini-grant funding expired overshadowed the work itself.

The ECAP experience clearly points to the need in communities to develop resources to build and sustain collaboration over time, for both one-time costs for a specific project (such as printing a resource directory, production of developmental awareness materials, or to engage a specialized consultant) and for ongoing staff costs of collaboration management. The continual budget troubles at the state level, and in many other governmental bodies, challenge emerging collaborations to find new financial resources.

In order for local collaborations to be sustainable over time, the collaboration itself must have the capacity to leverage resources within the community towards shared goals and demonstrate measurable community-level outcomes. Without local investment, there is reduced likelihood of local “ownership” of those shared goals and accountability for outcomes. This investment need not be solely financial. As an example, several communities that intended to use some ECAP funds for printing a resource directory (using a commercial printer) discovered that their school district collaborators could do the printing in house with substantial savings. This is not only an example of leveraging local resources towards a common goal, but of building a collaboration of true partners sharing fully in the cost and benefits. While “doing more with less”, “maximizing resources”, “being creative with limited funding” are familiar concepts in the early childhood field, local collaborations need guidance and support to develop sustainability strategies that leverage local and private resources, as well as state and federal, towards community-level outcomes.

PART IV: THE NEXT CHAPTER

The high demand for technical assistance and training and the overwhelming interest in training and resources for local systems building encouraged the Office of Early Childhood Development to designate some continuation funding from the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grant. Early Learning Challenges funds will be used to launch the Consortium for Community Systems Development (CCSD) charged with the following goals over the next four years:

- Lead the creation of a vision, goals, and actionable plan for community system development
- Support local early childhood partnerships statewide to advance along a continuum
- Develop a statewide support system and cadre of local specialists to provide ongoing TA and training through existing systems

Appendix A
Technical Assistance and Mini-Grants
Community and Managing Partner(s)

Full Grants

East St. Louis (Children's Home + Aid, AOK Network)
East St. Louis (East St. Louis Early Learning Committee)
Kankakee County (United Way of Kankakee County)
Champaign County (Junior League of Champaign-Urbana)
Chicago-Austin (Austin Coming Together)
Chicago-Logan Square (Logan Square Neighborhood Association)
Henderson and Warren Counties (Regional Office of Education)
Whiteside County (4-C; Community Coordinated Child Care & Sinnissippi Centers)
Addison (YWCA of Metropolitan Chicago & Positive Parenting DuPage)
Southern 15 Counties (John A. Logan Community College, Child Care Resource & Referral)
Elgin (United Way of Elgin)
Ottawa (Easter Seals of LaSalle and Bureau Counties)

Partial Grants

Aurora (SPARK, Fox Valley United Way)
Oak Park (Collaboration for Early Childhood)
Evanston (Childcare Network of Evanston)
Rock Island County (Early Childhood Coalition of the Illinois Quad Cities)
Lake County (Lake County Child Care Coalition/United Way of Lake County)

Micro Grants

Coles County (Eastern Illinois University, CCR&R)
Jefferson County (Project CHILD, CCR&R)
South Suburban Cook (SPEED)
Logan County (Christian Child Care)
Adams County (Adams County Children's Mental Health Partnership)
Belvidere/Boone County (First Step Learning)

Early Childhood Action Partnerships

Technical Assistance and Mini-Grant Program, 2012-13

- ECAP-supported early childhood coalition
- ECAP-supported early childhood coalition specific to town/neighborhood

