

INNOVATION ZONE CASE STUDY



Williamson County • Southern Illinois Coalition for Children and Families

Williamson County, located in southern Illinois, has a population of approximately 18,000. As of 2013, more than 50 percent of the 4,643 children age five-and-under in Williamson County lived in low-income families.

Southern Illinois Coalition for Children and Families serves as the “backbone” agency for quality improvement among early learning programs in Williamson County. It provides the big picture view, technical assistance and access to a wide range of professionals in Williamson County, that individual childcare providers lack the time and other resources to obtain for themselves. Southern Illinois Coalition for Children and Families brings together community leaders, school districts, early childhood learning and development programs and community agencies to work collaboratively to build an early childhood system that will, ultimately, improve outcomes for Williamson County’s children. The Coalition’s primary goal is to develop a strong, effective infrastructure that promotes positive outcomes for children and families in Southern Illinois.

Through the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant, the Coalition led the Williamson County Innovation Zone initiative and, in partnership with 35 members of the Southern Illinois Coalition

for Children and Families, Child Care Resource and Referral at John A. Logan College coordinated the Innovation Zone activities.

INCREASING QUALITY

The Coalition identified the greatest needs within the Williamson County community and repurposed existing resources to best inform the processes for building quality and sustainable solutions. One of the team’s goals was to review the credential process and develop ways to incentivize early childhood learning and development programs to achieve or improve their Excelerate quality standing.

Williamson County already had a strong system in place to support this work and the team emphasized recognition of centers’ achievements by repurposing “recognition dollars” to increase awareness among parents and the greater community. Banners and plaques were created for centers to hang on-site to share their Excelerate status with parents and visitors, which led to parents asking questions about the centers’ credentials (such as, “Why did you receive that plaque?”) and providing recognition of center staff among parents.

VISION: The Coalition’s primary goal is to develop a strong, effective infrastructure that promotes positive outcomes for children and families in Southern Illinois.

Creating a Professional Development Institute

The Coalition also created a cross-sector professional development “institute” to provide training to early childhood learning and development professionals, from public school Pre-K teachers to child care center staff. To ensure child care center staff would be able to attend, the team got permission from the Illinois Department of Human Services to allow child care centers to close for the day yet still be able to count the day as an eligible billing day. Permission was granted with the stipulation that a minimum of 80 percent of staff at a center participate in the training. To help the centers manage closing for a day, the team helped them inform parents of the date and need for back-up child care; none of the centers received a call from a parent to complain or express concern about the closing.

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Scheduling the institutes was a challenge. The Williamson County school district preferred that the institutes be held prior to the beginning of the school year, which some Pre-K teachers resisted because this is when they

traditionally prepare their classrooms for the arrival of students. Some Pre-K teachers also viewed the institute as “basic training” and expressed concern about participating along with child care staff in the same event, often because they did not perceive center staff as at the same professional level as Pre-K teachers.

“The most valuable learning from the institutes was that parents were able to plan alternative child care when the events were scheduled in advance and they were aware of the dates their center would be closed,” said Lori Longueville, Williamson County Innovation Zone director. “Parents were very supportive. They understood the importance of professional training that could benefit their child and didn’t mind paying for that day even though they needed back-up care.”

Child care center participants were coached prior to the events to emphasize that the institutes were professional events and providing guidance about appropriate dress and expectations. And, by being trained together with Pre-K teachers, child care center

staff gained an improved sense of professionalism, according to the event evaluations.

Holding the professional development events on a single day for all provided several benefits. It saved money, did not have a financial impact on child care centers since parents were paying for that day, and allowed staff from centers to be together as a team and acquire necessary training in the same place at the same time, rather than having to pursue it individually on evenings and weekends when they were not working. They also provided Pre-K teachers an opportunity to meet and learn alongside other Pre-K teachers, an opportunity which they expressed as a benefit.

Subsequently, professional development institutes were scheduled for twice a year, helping to institutionalize professional development—helping teachers and child care center staff view participation in training as part of their job, and beneficial to their careers and the quality of early childhood learning and development programs.

SUPPORTING COMMUNITY-WIDE DEVELOPMENTAL SCREENING

Delays in children are often undetected until age five, when a child enters elementary school. Early learning programs should screen children before age five to help ensure they have healthy and bright futures. The Williamson County team decided to take community-wide action because of the importance of recognizing and intervening as early as possible.

The team created the Screening Collaborative steering committee to guide the work and develop universal forms, policies and protocols with representatives from Pre-K, Head Start, Child Care, Early Intervention, Special Education and Mental Health. Child Care Resource and Referral provided training.

As of Dec. 31, 2016, 3,277 child screening results were in the region’s ASQ database with a goal of having 5,000 children screened and data entered by June 2017.

After an assessment of the current screening practices, it was clear that Pre-K, Head Start and

Early Intervention programs had well-established procedures already in place. However, data was not collected in any systematic way and aggregate data inclusive of all three systems was not available for identifying gaps, or informing future funding and program needs. Conversely, only some child care centers were administering screening with consistency, and little or no data was available from them.

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To address the need for systematically collecting data, the Collaborative chose Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) online as its database because of its cost, ease of use and utility. Since not all screening partners in the collaborative were using ASQ as

their primary screening tool, members developed alternative procedures for collecting child profile data and entering it into the ASQ online database. These organizations used a Permission to Screen form, signed by families, which allowed data to be input into ASQ and aggregate data shared with members of the Collaborative.

In the first trials of the community-wide effort to establish a system of screening in child care settings, center staff received training to administer the screenings within their programs. In some cases, they were assisted by early childhood partners. Concerns about parent engagement, consistency issues related to staff turnover, sustainability and reliability led the Collaborative members to adapt a new screening strategy. With encouragement from the medical community, ASQ was implemented as it was originally designed: with parents completing the screening questionnaire at home or online. The questionnaires were then reviewed by parents and teachers together, working as a team to guide a child’s development.

“Previously, everyone thought that teachers needed to do the screenings for them to be accurate,” said Longueville. “The thought was that if teachers do them, the data would be objective and if parents did it, the data would be biased. But by combining what parents

already know about their child with what their teacher observes in class, the screening data provides a more complete picture of the child.”

New tools were developed to assist programs in this effort. During the first round, one center had only 20 percent participation with parents returning the screening forms. After revising the letter to parents about the screening, the responses increased to 100 percent participation. Teacher-led screening efforts are now conducted in a targeted way, following up with families where further monitoring or a referral is indicated.

The Collaborative exceeded their goals of screening 80 percent of all 3-4 year olds and 50 percent of all children ages birth- 5 in Williamson County by June 2016. During FY 16 alone, 1,447 children ages three to four-and-a-half years old were screened, which represented about 93 percent of all Pre-K-age children in the county.

Building on this success, Williamson County secured funding from Illinois Children’s Healthcare Foundation to expand efforts to other counties in the region and include new partners from the medical community. A complete assessment of screening practices in the early childhood and medical practices in fifteen southern Illinois counties has been completed. A pilot program with the Jackson County Health department is being implemented and the expanded Screening Collaborative committee has developed a new three-year work plan to guide the continuation of their efforts. As of Dec. 31, 2016, 3,277 child screening results were in the region’s ASQ database with a goal of having 5,000 children screened and data entered by June 2017.

Through formalizing community-wide screening and collaborative efforts, partners in Williamson County transformed the way work was done in their communities, and parents and child care center staff have increased knowledge about child development. By building a common language based on different perspectives, trusting relationships among partners have been strengthened and a coordinated system for developmental screening is in place to serve children and families for many years to come.

SUSTAINABILITY

The Innovation Zone work in Williamson County is continuing beyond the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant through the Southern Illinois Coalition for Children and Families, and Child Care Resource and Referral at John A. Logan College. Included in this ongoing work are:

- The coordination of a county-wide screening effort to increase the rates of developmental screening of all children and a central repository/ database for tracking of screening history and results.
- A strategic vision for 2017 among the Coalition's

lead agencies that uses the goals/ initiatives from the Race for the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant and focuses on expanding the work to the remainder of the region.

- Launching ASQ-SE and linking to the region's mental health and childhood trauma initiatives.
- Expanding the Screening Collaborative beyond into other counties in the region, including piloting ASQ online in the Health Department, including additional data from Southern Seven Head Start and expanding screening in 15 additional child care centers.

In 2012, Illinois was awarded a Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant to strengthen early childhood systems and kindergarten readiness for Illinois children. Illinois Action for Children coordinated statewide Innovation Zone activities to help the state test strategies to increase the enrollment of children with very high needs in high quality early learning and development programs. Illinois Action for Children supported each Innovation Zone in planning and implementing activities. The Innovation Zone model uses action learning cycles, an iterative process, to quickly learn and adapt strategies for immediate use in each community. www.actforchildren.org/for-providers/innovation-zones/.