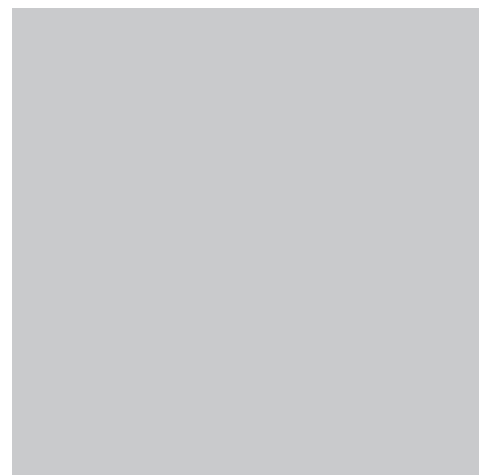


# Breaking It Down and Building It Out:

Enhancing Collective Capacity  
to Improve Early Childhood  
Teacher Preparation in Illinois

Executive Summary



Celina Chatman Nelson, Catherine  
Main, and Jennifer Kushto-Hoban,  
with Members of the *Appraising  
Early Childhood Teacher Preparation  
in Illinois* work group

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University of Illinois at Chicago  
College of Education

June 2012

# **About Appraising Early Childhood Teacher Preparation in Illinois**

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Funded by The Searle Funds at The Chicago Community Trust, Appraising Early Childhood Teacher Education in Illinois (AECTP-IL) builds on and extends a collaborative undertaking by the 22 members of the Council of Chicago Area Deans of Education (CCADE) to document and improve their teacher preparation programs, work that was also supported by the Trust. The objectives for AECTP-IL were to (1) conduct in-depth analysis of Illinois's early learning landscape for quality teaching of children, ages birth to eight years, and (2) use this analysis to recommend an ambitious teacher education action agenda for Illinois early childhood stakeholders. AECTP-IL project staff worked with the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development and the Workforce Development Committee of the Illinois Early Learning Council to identify key members of the state's early childhood care and education community, whom the project invited to participate in a work group to carry out the project objectives.

# **Breaking It Down and Building It Out: Enhancing Collective Capacity to Improve Early Childhood Teacher Preparation in Illinois**

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## **Introduction**

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In 2004, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education's (AACTE) Focus Council on Early Childhood Education concluded that "a miscellany of institutions has historically carried out the preparation of ECE teachers and caregivers, resulting in fragmentation among multiple constituents." This miscellany of institutions is in large part a result of the more complex landscape of early childhood education (ECE) as compared with that of K–12 education. Whereas public K–12 education overwhelmingly occurs in schools, is regulated by state boards of education, and is administered by local education agencies, public early childhood education is much more decentralized. Early learning experiences are provided to children in schools as well as private homes, privately owned child-care centers, community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, and other settings; these programs are funded, administered, and regulated (if at all) through a variety of local, state, and federal government agencies or an other entity altogether. Our work in *Appraising Early Childhood Teacher Education in Illinois* (AECTP-IL, funded by The Searle Funds at The Chicago Community Trust) breaks down the complexity of early childhood education, identifying key challenges and issues in the preparation of the workforce and making recommendations for improvement (the full report describing this work can be downloaded at [www.education.uic.edu](http://www.education.uic.edu)).

### **Recruiting, preparing, and supporting a high-quality ECE teaching workforce**

Our work in AECTP-IL yielded a set of key challenges in ECE teacher preparation in Illinois with regard to a three-part central objective assumed to be shared among the miscellany of institutions involved:

- 1. RECRUITING** the best candidates (both in terms of academic achievement and experience/disposition) into teacher education programs.

**2. PREPARING** candidates for high-quality and effective teaching in all ECE settings.

**3. SUPPORTING** candidates and new teachers in developing and improving their skills.

This overarching objective converges with the stated goal of the Workforce Development Committee of the Illinois Early Learning Council (ELC) to “ensure an adequate and stable supply of diverse, well-prepared ECE professionals by focusing on a wide range of professional development needs.”<sup>1</sup> AECTP-IL’s work complements that of the ELC, focusing more specifically on teacher preparation and development, especially within institutions of higher education.

### **The bottom line: Strengthen partnership to build collective capacity**

For institutions of higher education to be key suppliers of high-quality ECE teachers, there needs to be better coordination and collaboration across all entities involved in preparing and developing the workforce. Key in this process is meaningful coordination with K–12 education reform efforts. While federal and state policies focused on reforming K–12 education and strengthening early childhood care and education both remain high on our nation’s agenda, the respective initiatives are being carried out in the context of two separate dialogues. In order to best serve America’s children and their families, each of these two systems must better understand the other to enhance their mutual efficiency and effectiveness.

### **Key challenges and recommendations**

AECTP-IL identified several key challenges across the areas of recruitment and retention, preparation, and support, and ways that institutions can work better together to build collective capacity for improvement.

**1. Recruiting the best candidates (both in terms of academic achievement and experience/disposition) into teacher education programs.** Like teachers of older children, ECE teachers must have the ability to observe and record children’s learning, transform written curricula into effective practice, use interactive routines to engage children, engage in thoughtful reflection that improves their ability to meet students’ learning needs, and behave in ways that are highly professional.<sup>2</sup> In addition, however, ECE teachers must possess a disposition that facilitates positive rapport and interactions with both young children and their families from diverse backgrounds. Many ECE teachers work in the communities where they live and, therefore, bring into their classrooms a wealth of community cultural knowledge, but many of them have not had the opportunity to acquire more formal knowledge about child development and children’s learning. For these teachers—who make up the majority of the ECE workforce—there are many barriers to access teacher education and advance their careers.

<sup>1</sup>Illinois Early Learning Council (2011). Workforce development committee. [www2.illinois.gov/earlychildhood/Pages/workforce.aspx](http://www2.illinois.gov/earlychildhood/Pages/workforce.aspx).

<sup>2</sup>Kagan, S.L., Kauerz, K., Tarrant, K. (2008). The early care and education teaching workforce at the fulcrum: An agenda for reform. New York: Teachers College Press.

“A miscellany of institutions has historically carried out the preparation of ECE teachers and caregivers, resulting in fragmentation among multiple constituents.”  
--AACTE

## RECRUITMENT: Key challenges and recommendations

Challenges	Recommendations
While <b>ENTRY REQUIREMENTS</b> for teacher education programs (especially certification programs) are difficult to attain for many ECE practitioners, they are at the same time too varied and too low.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overhaul selection process, including recruiting talent from the field and helping them meet entrance requirements.</li> <li>• Administer assessments earlier.</li> <li>• Collaborate with secondary schools to create pipeline.</li> <li>• Pool resources within and among institutions of higher education to meet student needs.</li> </ul>
Problems with <b>ARTICULATION AND TRANSFER</b> from one college or university program to another threaten the supply of teachers for ECE classrooms and contribute to inequalities within the workforce.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build better collaborative models among academic departments within institutions and between institutions.</li> <li>• Build on and support existing efforts to improve articulation and transfer.</li> </ul>
<b>MATRICULATION SUPPORTS</b> aimed at retaining students throughout the successful completion of teacher preparation programs, including financial, social, and academic supports, are insufficient.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partner with other academic units and with businesses and foundations to redesign programs to fit the unique needs of ECE teachers.</li> <li>• Design and implement innovative supports, such as cohort models.</li> <li>• Institute centralized systems of student support that corral internal and external resources within and among institutions of higher education.</li> </ul>

Many ECE teachers work in the communities where they live and, therefore, bring into their classrooms a wealth of community cultural knowledge, but many of them have not had the opportunity to acquire more formal knowledge about child development and children's learning.

## 2. Preparing candidates for high-quality and effective teaching in all ECE classrooms.

Beyond recruiting the best candidates into programs and retaining them in the face of so many personal challenges, ECE teacher preparation programs face difficulties around how best to prepare all teachers for all classrooms. These challenges include gaps in preparation, a lack of sufficient resources and capacity to ideally deliver instruction and provide high-quality mentoring and supervision for students, and a disconnect between what students learn in the classroom and what they encounter in their fieldwork.

### PREPARATION: Key challenges and recommendations

Challenges	Recommendations
<p><b>GAPS IN PREPARATION</b>— These gaps include content in the areas of infants and toddlers; program management and administration; and working with families, communities, and other adult staff.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop alternatively structured programs to accommodate critical content, such as clinical rotations.</li> <li>• Redesign programs to incorporate critical content through supplemental materials and advanced technology.</li> <li>• Institute a tiered licensing/certification process with approvals and endorsements in critical content areas.</li> </ul>
<p><b>LACK OF CAPACITY</b>—ECE teacher preparation programs typically suffer from too few financial resources and faculty and too little time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make greater investments in faculty hiring and development.</li> <li>• Pool resources within and among institutions of higher education, and between them and other early childhood care and education entities—e.g., coteaching, onsite teacher education courses in child-care and preschool settings.</li> </ul>
<p><b>DISCONNECT: COURSE WORK AND FIELD APPLICATION</b>—Course work is often too theoretical and not linked to field experiences, practices taught in preparation programs sometimes are not supported within ECE settings, and field placements often are too brief.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer fieldwork early.</li> <li>• Rotate field placements.</li> <li>• Collaborate with provider sites to plan field experiences.</li> </ul>

Course work may instruct preservice teachers in theories about child development, learning, pedagogy, and even best practices, but cannot possibly prepare them for all that they will encounter once they begin full-time work as teachers of young children.

**3. Supporting candidates and new teachers in developing and improving their skills.** In order to become effective, preservice and beginning teachers need opportunities for practice. Course work may instruct them in theories about child development, learning, pedagogy, and even best practices, but cannot possibly prepare them for all that they will encounter once they begin full-time work as teachers of young children. Ideally, preservice teachers should have ample opportunities for observing good practice in action in model settings, applying their own new knowledge and skills in the classroom, and being exposed to children and families of various backgrounds and abilities.<sup>3</sup> In addition, they should be exposed to a variety of early care and education settings to provide them with a broader range of experiences, including some that might present unanticipated challenges. Exposing candidates only to model settings presents the risk of leaving them underprepared for dealing with such challenges when they leave the structured environments of their preparation programs.

**SUPPORT: Key challenges and recommendations**

Challenges	Recommendations
Lack sufficient <b>HIGH QUALITY PLACEMENTS</b> for diverse field experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better align goals and expectations between preparation programs and provider sites.</li> <li>• Implement common application and matching process for potential field sites, across institutions.</li> </ul>
Lack sufficient structures for <b>HIGH-QUALITY MENTORING AND SUPERVISION</b> of preservice and new teachers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a system-wide database of mentor teachers across institutions.</li> <li>• Implement common application and evaluation for mentors with built-in incentives.</li> <li>• Implement application process for prospective mentors, with incentives and continued training.</li> </ul>

The miscellany of institutions involved in preparing the ECE workforce must identify the points of intersection among their many and varied initiatives and leverage them to avoid duplication and hasten progress in improving young children’s learning and development.

<sup>3</sup>Neuman, S.B., & Kamil, M.L. (2010). Preparing teachers for the early childhood classroom: Proven models & key principles. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

## **Building collective capacity to improve teacher preparation**

In Illinois, several initiatives exist to address issues related to recruitment and retention of high-quality ECE teachers, such as the Early Learning Council's Workforce Development Committee, Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies' (INCCRRA) Gateways to Opportunity, and the Grow Your Own initiative. The challenge, however, is in identifying the points of intersection among these many and varied initiatives and leveraging them to avoid duplication and hasten progress in improving young children's learning and development. AECTP-IL's recommendations offer solutions for how institutions of higher education and other entities might strengthen coordination, cooperation, and collaboration to enhance their collective capacity for addressing key barriers in preparing and developing ECE teachers to work with all young children and their families across a variety of settings.

## **Acknowledgements**

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