

# Illinois School Readiness Initiative

Key Strategies for Young Children in the  
Child Welfare System



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## Illinois School Readiness Initiative: Key Strategies for Young Children in the Child Welfare System

Quality preschool is crucial in getting children ready for school and supporting social and emotional development. It is especially important for children in the child welfare system, who need extra help getting ready for school due to the trauma and stigma they often face. As of 2004, approximately half of 3-to-5-year-olds in Illinois were enrolled in such a program. The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) has undertaken a new School Readiness Initiative to:

1. **Within one year, achieve 100-percent enrollment of 3-to-5-year-olds** in Head Start, state-funded pre-Kindergarten, or—when one of these options is not available—an accredited early care and education program, for at least part of the day
2. **Keep those educational placements as stable as possible for as long as possible**, even as children change foster care placements and achieve permanency
3. **If children must move, assist with the transition** by having caseworkers and teachers help them say goodbye, take along artwork, etc.

In addition, the School Readiness Initiative is planning for the future by:

4. **Articulating best practices in child welfare for children 0 to 3**

IDCFS and its partners have adopted several key strategies which are at the center of the School Readiness Initiative. These strategies are distinctly different from those employed recently in locations where school readiness initiatives have not been successful.

### 1. Framing the Initiative as Education Entitlement

The single most important strategic choice in placing children in Head Start, Pre-K, and accredited early care and education centers is to differentiate between child-care and education. In the past, early care and education has been viewed primarily as a service that is necessary for working parents. The School Readiness Initiative in Illinois is acknowledging this need, but spreading the message that regardless of the foster parents' work situation, all wards need quality preschool.

The initiative is making education—not just childcare—a part of the service plan for each child involved in the child welfare system. As described below, a work group is drafting policies to implement that shift in service planning requirements, and stakeholders are reviewing and giving feedback on these policies.

### Key Action Steps

- Forge an agreement with Head Start organizations resulting in more wards being enrolled in Head Start programs (see below).
- Create a logic model defining school readiness as “comprehensive child development,” which includes physical, social, emotional, and cognitive well-being.
- Cite research from the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Strengthening Families Through Early Care and Education Initiative ([www.cssp.org/doris\\_duke/](http://www.cssp.org/doris_duke/)) showing that these measures of school readiness are strengthened by quality preschool.

## 2. Planning for Change

Before enacting a policy that increases placements in quality preschools, it is vital that child welfare agencies and their partners begin shifting child welfare and early childhood practices in the direction of the desired changes. When this is done successfully, by the time policy mandates take effect: (1) stakeholders have already modified their practices and do not feel that they are being asked to make drastic changes without sufficient preparation, and (2) all stakeholders and policy-setters have worked out the “kinks,” resulting in policies that can be realistically implemented. One year is a reasonable timeframe for setting goals and shifting practices prior to the introduction of policy mandates.

### Key Action Steps

#### Policy

- Education must be part of the service plan for all children 3 years of age and older. (In Illinois, this mandate previously began at age 6, with first grade, although children involved in early intervention services could be required to be in preschool.)
- Caseworkers no longer may write “DNA” [“does not apply”] in the education section of a child’s service plan.
- Innovative performance-based contracts for all child welfare agencies provide for full compensation only when the agencies include education in each service plan.

## Training and Technical Assistance

- Convene a work group from the state's childcare, Head Start, and education departments to draft guidelines for caseworkers in placing children.
- Conduct a needs assessment to determine what frontline caseworkers need in order to place children in quality preschool.
- Enlist the child welfare system's training department to develop desk aids and an implementation manual, and use these in required caseworker training.
- Identify staff resources within the department to provide TA and support caseworkers in implementation. For example, in Illinois: (1) IDCFS already employed staff to provide educational support for foster parents and children starting with Kindergarten; now, these liaisons start earlier, by helping families locate quality preschools. (2) Early childhood services coordinators are troubleshooting special cases. (3) Licensing staff are including quality early childhood education practice in the training and licensing of daycare / preschool providers. (4) Contract monitors are ensuring that contracted child welfare agencies are creating and following through on educational plans for all wards.

## Communications

- Disseminate a key message that stresses education / school readiness.
- Provide consultation to case workers regarding education; disseminate the message that education starts at age 3.
- Tap the communications department to launch an internal awareness campaign that is tailored to workers and foster parents. In Illinois, key components were: (1) a message from the IDCFS director prominently posted on the Web page that all staff log onto daily and (2) a brochure circulated to all stakeholders, with the message "Our Kids Deserve a Fair Start: Enroll Them in a Quality Preschool Today."

## Data

- Each child entering the system has an "educational passport"—a database record that the child's case worker, teachers, and other preschool staff and service providers use to make and carry out his or her educational plan.

## 3. Working from the Bottom Up and the Top Down

To successfully enroll all wards in quality preschool, it is necessary to simultaneously (1) issue a mandate from the child welfare agency's top leadership and (2) have those who will be implementing the plan construct it.

### Key Action Steps: Bottom-Up

A hallmark of IDCFS's School Readiness Initiative—and a strategy that has been absent from other initiatives seeking to enroll wards in preschool—has been the convening of a group of stakeholders from the very beginning in order to build support and buy-in. Stakeholders include foster parents, supervisors of private agencies, department supervisors, deputy directors, educational liaisons, and early childhood services coordinators. Partnerships with these stakeholders is necessary in enhancing the capacity of early childhood centers to care for children who have experienced trauma and to work with families. Seven state child welfare departments (including IDCFS) are engaged in statewide collaborations through Strengthening Families through Early Care and Education.

### Early Childhood Community

- Work with the state's Network of Child Care Resource and Referral agencies to support caseworkers in placing children: In Illinois, IDCFS staff met with all of the state's major early childhood education advocates and organizations to apprise them of the initiative and the anticipated changes in IDCFS policy and practice. They encountered resistance because many of these advocates and organizations (1) did not understand that the state's role is that of a parent to all wards and (2) were reluctant to differentiate between programs that provide quality early care and education ("quality preschools") and those that do not ("daycare" or "childcare" programs).
- Sign agreements with Head Start agencies and programs: IDCFS is signing collaborative agreements with local Head Start programs across the state. These agreements result in more wards ages 0 to 3 being enrolled in these programs rather than programs that do not emphasize education. The groundwork for these agreements was set when a statewide memorandum of understanding was signed among the

Illinois Head Start Association, IDCFS, and the Illinois Department of Human Services Collaboration Unit (Region V). The state's regional Head Start offices initiated this memorandum.

- Ensure communication and collaboration between the child welfare system and early childhood education providers statewide: This enables providers and child welfare staff to work together to carry out service plans for wards. Providers need to get information from child welfare staff on wards (both in general and in specific cases) so that they can work to keep them safe. And the child welfare system needs to know the capacity of specific programs to care for wards. Either existing collaborations or a new statewide collaborative body can be used to achieve these results.

### Foster Parents

One challenge facing school readiness initiatives is the issue of who is responsible for placing children. When childcare was the only required placement for children 0 to 3, foster parents were the decision makers and had complete responsibility for making childcare arrangements. When quality preschool is a requirement, the responsibility for implementing that policy shifts to caseworkers. The process of explaining and negotiating this shift can be difficult and requires a good deal of diplomacy, which can be aided by the following steps:

- Present the initiative to the Foster Parents Advisory Council.
- Develop and send a brochure to foster parents with payments.
- Work with caseworkers to clarify the role of foster parents.
- Provide incentives for taking part in the new process.
- Negotiate issues such as transportation of wards, part-day schedules, etc.

### Senior Child Welfare Managers

- Get buy-in from all deputy directors early in the process.

### All Stakeholders

- Before the policy is implemented, meet with stakeholders to inform them of the changes, discuss their roles and their concerns, and—in the case of partners outside the child welfare system—forge collaborative agreements.

- Start with a general message (such as “education starts at age 3”) and, as stakeholders become more experienced with early care and education, increase the amount of detail communicated to them.

### Key Action Steps: Top-Down

IDCFS Director Bryan Samuels started the initiative by making a bold declaration of the School Readiness Initiative's goal of 100-percent enrollment in one year. The department is backing up this declaration with executive-level guidance and oversight.

- Convene a work group to oversee the initiative across the agency's service area. In Illinois, IDCFS's six Regional Administrators (RA's), who oversee all child welfare staff statewide, are members of the group; they assigned their staff and contractual agencies the responsibility of gathering the needed data on early education placements.
- Assemble a work group to develop a school readiness plan on the local level: In Illinois, this group includes RA's, quality assurance staff in charge of relationships with contract child welfare agencies (where 80% of children are served), staff in charge of licensing and educational services, and administrators in the director's office.
- Staff the work group with a consultant with executive-level experience in early childhood programming.

### Conclusion

The effectiveness of quality care and education programs in keeping children safe from abuse and neglect makes these programs a priority for any child welfare system. The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services is enacting a plan to place all wards ages 3 to 5 in quality early care and education, keep them stable and ease their transitions in these placements, and create best practices for wards ages 0 to 3. The IDCFS approach of framing these activities as educational entitlement, planning for change, and working from the bottom up and the top down provides a precedent from which child welfare systems nationwide can learn.

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