

Research Notes

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Program Characteristics Associated with Utilization of Early Childhood Professional Development Funding

In 2005-06, the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership conducted an evaluation study of the Illinois Great START and T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® professional development initiatives. The purpose of the research was to examine the program characteristics associated with utilization of these two professional development initiatives.¹ Great START is a wage-supplement program that compensates eligible practitioners for educational attainment in early care and education that exceeds the minimum required by licensing standards. T.E.A.C.H. provides scholarships to teaching staff, directors, and family child care providers to enhance their professional qualifications. Great START was designed as a complement to T.E.A.C.H. to attract and retain practitioners and help them advance along a career path in early care and education.

Design of the Study

Forty Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) site-contracted early care and education centers were included in the sample; 20 that had a high utilization of Great START funds and 20 that did not use or had a low utilization of these professional development funds. The sample included public and private as well as for-profit and nonprofit programs. The average licensed capacity of programs was 121 children. Five research questions guided the data collection and analysis:

- Are there differences in the quality of classroom teaching practices for programs that have a low vs. high utilization of Great START funds?
- Are there differences in the quality of administrative practices for programs that have a low vs. high utilization of Great START funds?
- How does a center's utilization of Great START funds relate to accreditation status, rate of teacher turnover, or geographic location in the state?
- How does a center's utilization of Great START funds relate to the program's source of funding (e.g., Head Start, parent fees)?
- What are directors' perceptions of the impact of utilizing Great START and T.E.A.C.H. funds as well as the obstacles encountered in accessing funds?

"These programs are a win/win for everyone—the state, the children, families, and teachers!"

Data were collected in a total of 42 infant-toddler classrooms, 70 preschool classrooms, and 20 school-age classrooms. The *Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised* (ITERS-R), the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised* (ECERS-R), and the *School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale* (SACERS) were used to measure the quality of learning environments and teaching practices in infant-toddler, preschool, and school-age classrooms. The *Program Administration Scale* (PAS) was used to measure the quality of leadership and management practices at all sites. An additional questionnaire was developed to gather data about funding sources, annual staff turnover, accreditation status, center type, licensed capacity, program options, and ages served.

Findings

The data collected as part of this study provided insight into program differences as they relate to teacher-child interactions, the quality of classroom learning environments, leadership and management practices, staff turnover, funding source, accreditation status, and the factors that support or inhibit utilization of professional development funds.

Quality of classroom teaching. In preschool classrooms, notable differences in the level of program quality were found as measured by the ECERS-R. Those centers classified as high utilization of Great START funds consistently demonstrated higher quality teaching practices. Statistically significant differences were found in mean scores between the low- and high-utilization groups in subscales relating to space and furnishings, personal care routines, and activities ($p < .05$). Statistically significant differences were also noted in the total ECERS-R subscale scores and the average subscale scores (see Table 1).

In infant-toddler and school-age classrooms, higher quality teaching practices were also found in centers with higher utilization of Great START funds as measured by the ITERS-R and SACERS. Because of the small sample size in these settings, however, these differences were not statistically significant.

Continued on back page

Quality of administrative practices. In 22 of the 25 PAS items, the total PAS score, and average PAS item score, there were notable differences in the quality of administrative practices between those centers classified as high vs. low utilization of Great START funds. Those classified as high utilization consistently demonstrated higher leadership and management practices. Statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) were found between the two groups in five items: compensation, screening and identification of special needs, strategic planning, lead teacher qualifications, and apprentice teacher qualifications.

Accreditation status, teacher turnover, and geographic location. More than two-thirds (68%) of the programs in the high-utilization category were accredited by NAEYC while one-fifth (21%) of the programs in the low-utilization category had achieved accreditation. The differences in teacher turnover were slight: Programs in the high-utilization category experienced an average of 14% turnover during the previous year vs. an average of 19% teacher turnover for programs in the low-utilization category. There were no discernable differences in levels of Great START utilization across the geographic regions of the state.

Program funding sources. Programs classified in the high-utilization category derived a larger percentage of their funding from Head Start and ISBE State Pre-K funding than did those programs in the low-utilization category. The data revealed that 27% of the programs in the high-utilization category received Head Start funding versus 10% in the low-utilization category. Likewise, 14% of programs in the high-utilization category received ISBE State Pre-K funding compared to 7% in the low-utilization category.

Directors' perceptions. Directors reported that teachers used the wage enhancements for a wide range of purposes; among others to cover monthly living expenses, secure health insurance, and further their own education. Directors' perceptions of the obstacles encountered in using these professional development funds demonstrated their concerns about the required salary increase or bonus for T.E.A.C.H. scholarship recipients. In several instances, directors cited reluctance on the part of their governing boards or agency executives to authorize participation in the T.E.A.C.H. program for this reason. Directors also expressed concern that teachers who only work nine months a year were not able to access T.E.A.C.H. scholarships or Great START wage supplements.

When asked about the impact of these professional development initiatives on their own competency and the competency of their staff, many agreed that the increased knowledge and enthusiasm of staff contributed to new ways to help children and families. Other directors cited increased job satisfaction as a benefit. The positive impact of Great START and T.E.A.C.H. funding was summed up by one director, when she stated, *"These programs are a win/win for everyone—the state, the children, families, and teachers!"*

Summary

The results of this study confirmed important differences between programs with a high versus low utilization of Great START funding in both preschool classroom quality and overall administrative practices. Those centers classified as high utilization consistently demonstrated higher quality preschool teaching practices as well as higher leadership and management practices. In several areas, these differences were statistically significant. Programs in the high-utilization category were also over three times more likely to be accredited as low-utilization programs.

Early childhood program administrators in Illinois recognize both the benefits and the challenges associated with utilizing Great START and T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Illinois funds. Directors clearly appreciate the impact that Great START and T.E.A.C.H. have had on their ability to retain staff. Both directors and teachers commented on improved staff morale, increased professionalism, and enhanced teaching practices as a result of these professional development funding initiatives.

1. This research was conducted in partnership with the Illinois Department of Human Services and the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies. To learn more about Great START and T.E.A.C.H., visit www.ilchildcare.org or www.ilgateways.com.

Table 1. Comparison of ECERS-R Mean Subscale Scores for Programs with Low vs. High Utilization of Great START Funds

ECERS-R Subscale	Low Utilization N = 19		High Utilization N = 19	
	M	S.D.	M	S.D.
1. Space and Furnishings	3.09	.73	3.73	.73
2. Personal Care Routines	2.12	.54	2.96	1.14
3. Language-Reasoning	3.30	.74	3.86	1.08
4. Activities	2.78	.71	3.28	.83
5. Interaction	3.48	1.13	3.69	1.57
6. Program Structure	3.51	1.43	4.05	1.64
7. Parents and Staff	4.05	.99	4.71	1.11
Total ECERS-R Subscale Score	22.35	5.13	26.28	6.47
Average ECERS-R Subscale Score	3.19	.73	3.75	.92

For further information about research conducted by the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership, call 800-443-5522, ext. 5060. Funding for the Center's Research Notes is provided by the McCormick Tribune Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and the Illinois Department of Human Services. Individuals may photocopy and disseminate freely.