

Executive Summary

Creating Inclusive Preschool Services at the Community Level Through Community Inclusion Teams (July 2024)

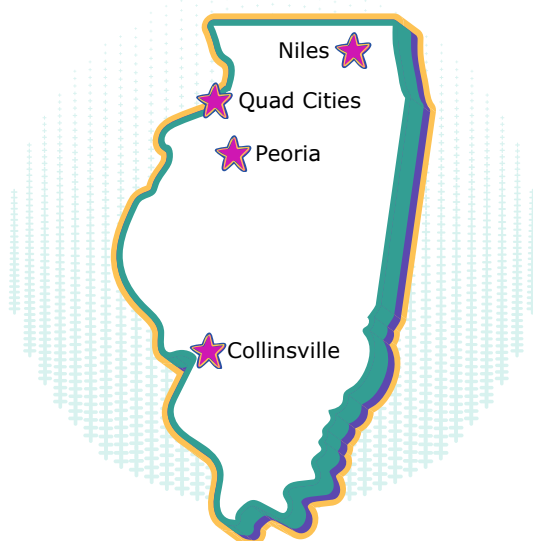
Overview

In 2020, Illinois and Early CHOICES were chosen as one of two states to pilot the *Implementation of Inclusion* project through a partnership with the Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTA). Building on the *Implementation of Inclusion* project, Early CHOICES was awarded with Preschool Development Grant B-5 funds to continue the work of engaging communities and programs to adopt, implement and sustain high-quality inclusion services, policies and practices. The growing preschool inclusion movement and evolution became the [Advancing Inclusion in Community-Based Early Childhood Education Settings](#) project. This project led to the development of Community Inclusion Teams (CITs) across the state of Illinois.

Community Inclusion Teams (CITs) Defined

Community inclusion teams (CITs), with support of an inclusion specialist from Early CHOICES, bring service providers and families together to build community-wide awareness and vision of the importance of early childhood inclusion. Early CHOICES created supporting documents to facilitate understanding and bolster recruitment for the local CITs. The [overview document](#) explains the larger project and the [CIT Fact Sheet](#) provides specific details for the basics of a CIT. To support communities building teams and beginning dialogue Early CHOICES also created this [Getting Started Toolkit](#).

CIT Sites SY23-24



Key Points

- Aligned vision for inclusion supports collaboration across community systems,
- Community collaboration increases access to inclusive placements,
- Early childhood community leaders collaborating builds communication across the system, and
- Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion guide the work of each CIT.

Lessons Learned



Need for Support

Effective project implementation required strong technical assistance from Inclusion Specialists. Their support helped in planning meetings, building facilitation strategies, overcoming resistance, and ensuring alignment with the vision.



Access to Resources

Ensuring the CIT had access to necessary resources, including data, research, and facilitation was critical. Lack of resources lead to delays and lower the quality of outcomes.



Time Matters

Setting achievable deadlines and realistic timelines is a challenge. Overly ambitious schedules led to burnout and frustration, while overly lax timelines result in procrastination and loss of momentum.



Building Relationships

Strong relationships within the team and across entities are vital. Regular communication, team-building activities, and a collaborative culture helped in building trust and effective teamwork within the CITs.



Professional Learning

Encouraging continuous cross-systems learning and professional development helped in keeping the team updated on best practices and created an increased sense of efficacy with respect to implementing inclusive practices.



Building Capacity & Partnerships

Collaborating with community partners, such as providers, school districts, and CBOs, provided additional expertise and resources to each CIT member. This collaboration has helped to gain broader support and ensure that the CIT efforts align with the needs and expectations of the wider community.

Recommendations



Policy Support

ISBE and the new Early Childhood agency should implement policies that mandate inclusion in CBOs and provide funding for training and infrastructure improvements to support this work.



Resource Allocation

Allocate specific funding for technical assistance, itinerant services, and professional development for all providers. Assure school districts have additional funding to implement itinerant model alongside existing school-based inclusion efforts.



Community Engagement

Foster partnerships within communities to promote awareness and acceptance.



Increase Community Inclusion teams with State Level Support

Creating a sustainable teaming structure requires incorporating inclusion and equity throughout the process as well as time and support. The community inclusion team alone cannot change the larger system. A state level implementation team that focuses on inclusion is critical to this work.



Research & Evaluation

Conduct regular evaluation and research to identify gaps in current practices and measure the impact of CITs