

Creating Inclusive Preschool Services at the Community Level Through Community Inclusion Teams



June, 2025

Overview

Illinois has demonstrated a clear commitment to inclusive special education services in preschools, Head Start and child care programs. In 2020, Illinois and Early CHOICES was chosen as one of two states to pilot the *Implementation of Inclusion* project through a partnership with the Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTA). ECTA developed [Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion](#) to guide implementation, sustainability, and scale-up of high-quality inclusive preschools. These indicators, which constituted the basic structure of the project, address inclusive policies and practices at the four levels of a state system: state, community, program, and early care and education environment.

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. Once the PDG B-5 grant ended a state grant through ISBE to West40 supported the effort.

Implementation teams have been called a lever for organization change in education. Research has shown that, without the use of implementation teams that keep a focus on implementation infrastructures, it takes an average of 17 years to achieve full implementation in only 14% of sites. However, with the support of implementation teams, we can reach full implementation in 80% of sites, in only 3 years. And that difference of 14 years is the full career of a generation of students. Research shows that it typically takes about 2-4 years to make those significant changes with implementation teams in place. (Higgins, Weiner, 2012, Fixsen, Blase, Timbers, & Wolf, 2001, Balas & Boren, 2000, Wallace, Blasé, Fixsen, Naoom, 2008).

State Grant Funds 2024-25

Early CHOICES had used previous PDG B-5 to reconvene the Advisory Group for [Advancing Preschool Inclusion in Community-Based Early Childhood Education Programs](#) to review direct plans to implement the recommendations within the report. The project was funded by PDG B-5 grant and supported by the Illinois State Board of Education and Start Early.

Early CHOICES recruited applicants to create Community Inclusion Teams in three communities starting in 2023-24. In 24-25 we expanded beyond the initial three CITs to continue the work. Each program received funding of \$25,000 each from the state grant through West40. Early CHOICES worked closely with West40 to support the CITs and provide technical assistance to each community to best meet their needs.

Early CHOICES and West40 engaged with the CITs to support them with planning, data and professional development when needed. We also hosted a monthly Community of Practice (COP) for Leadership that most CIT leaders joined in on. We had excellent feedback but did not gather formal evaluations since the COP was truly responsive to the needs of the group and driven by their inquiries.

Community Inclusion Teams 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 created tools to build the capacity of communities to equitably serve preschool children with disabilities in inclusive learning environments. [The Inclusive Inquiry Cycle Self-Study and Planning Guide – Community Inclusion Teams](#) was created to support CITs to begin implementing. To organize resources we also created this [Livebinder](#) of tools to support teams at each step. The mixed service delivery model in Illinois creates more opportunities for children with disabilities to attend and receive services in community based early childhood education settings (CBOs). This model does not replace existing inclusive models that are established in many public preschool programs but expands using an itinerant model to reach beyond the public school district programs.

Community Inclusion Team Highlights

- 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.

Communities

Collinsville CUSD 10

Collinsville School District has had a Community Inclusion Team (CIT) since 2020, consisting of local agencies that touch the lives of young children and their families. The CIT has committed to a working vision, annually determined ratings using the CIT Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion and developed an action plan based on those indicators. The team has developed press releases and maintained a [Facebook page](#) and [website](#), both of which house the vision statement, historical information, and success stories. The CIT has developed several community awareness documents to promote this work in their community.

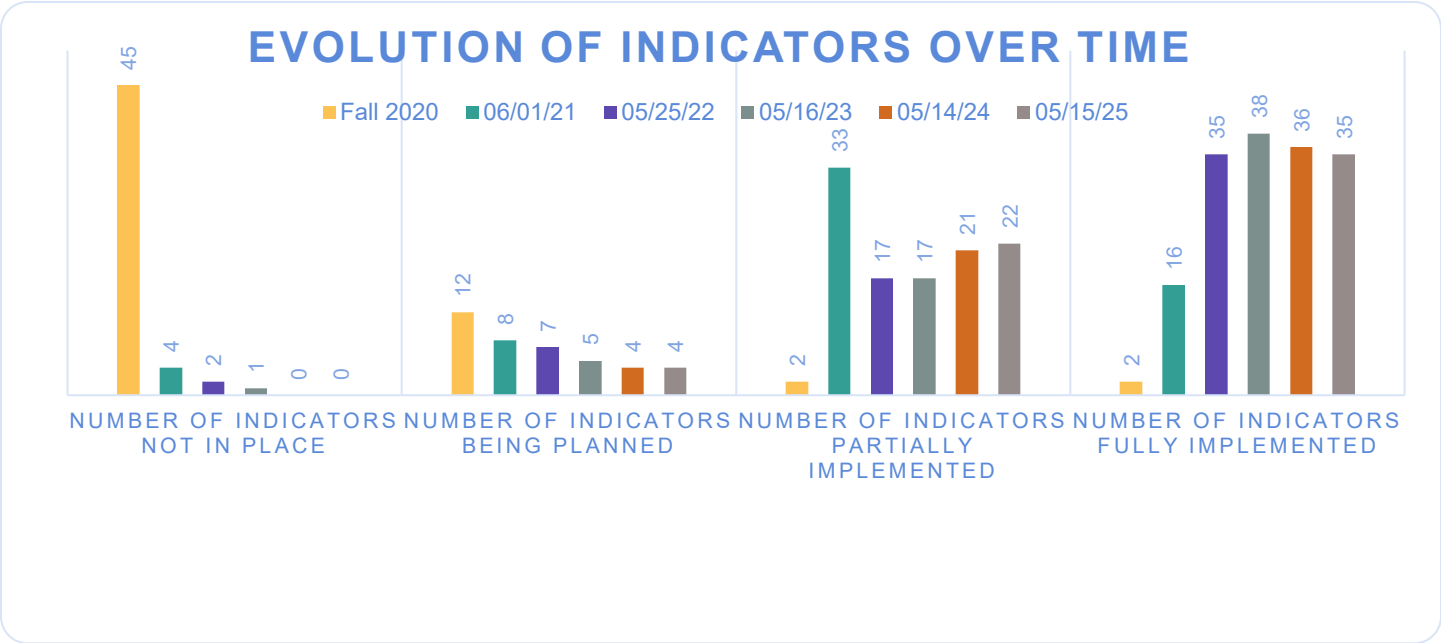


In 2023-2024, the Collinsville Community Unit School District 10 and Collinsville Head Start developed a collaborative model of service delivery for children in Head Start who had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). An itinerant teacher from the district provided special education to the children at Head Start in their classrooms with services and interventions embedded in the routines and activities of the day. The itinerant teacher supported the classroom team in understanding and implementation of these interventions. This eliminated unnecessary disruptions and transitions for the children with IEPs having to be transported between service providers and locations. In 2024-2025, the district developed a contractual job description for the itinerant teacher, however, they were unsuccessful in filling that position.

In 2024-2025, the district continued to receive funding and technical assistance to make continual progress on community inclusion planning and implementation. Additional classrooms underwent observations using the Inclusive Classroom Profile resulting in individualized coaching goals and targeted professional development. The CIT held a full-day professional development with Dr. Paula Kluth, consultant, teacher, author, advocate, and independent scholar. The CIT also added new community members, including staff from an additional local childcare and Child Care Assistance Program, thus strengthening the community and support for children with disabilities and their families. Inclusion books and neurodiversity kits were purchased for

classrooms. Finally, CARA’s Kits were purchased for classroom staff to help in making effective adaptations for the children with disabilities.

As depicted in the graph below, at the onset of their work, the Collinsville CIT only had place 3% of the Community Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion fully implemented and now they have 57% fully implemented with another 36% partially implemented.



The district continues to have a strong commitment to inclusion. CIT work for the school year 2025-2026 will include additional family member recruitment and updating the public awareness and implementation plan. The childcare organizations will be encouraged to collect Local Program Indicators and complete a professional development survey. An additional press release will be created and social media postings will be scheduled based off the public awareness plan. The CIT will also conduct a book study in the Fall of 2025 and attend the Sharing A Vision 2025 conference.

Rock Island County

Throughout the 2024-2025 school year, the Rock Island County Community Inclusion Team (formerly named Quad Cities) has remained committed to their efforts to improve inclusive practices for children across the community. Two CIT Coordinators continued to facilitate monthly meetings while finding innovative ways to engage members.

The Rock Island CIT began fine tuning their communication plan to ensure that all community partners are working together to support children and families who are receiving special education services. This plan is intended to provide guidance around communication across different entities including families, administrators across both school districts and community-based organizations, and even related service providers.

CIT members have been interested in replicating an itinerant model for the community and were able to explore and reflect upon key resources that would be helpful in supporting this change in practices across the community. One of these resources is the Resource Guide for Early Childhood Collaborative Itinerant Teaching Model created by Early CHOICES and the Illinois State Board of Education. A second important resource is "Coaching and Consultation Practices in Early Childhood" by Laurie Dinnebeil and William F. McInerney. As part of their monthly meetings, CIT members reflected on components of this book that would prove to be helpful in developing their plan of action. In addition to these tools, the Rock Island CIT hosted members of the Illinois State Board of Education to answer questions and provide other helpful resources for future discussions and planning.

As always, the Rock Island CIT continues to revisit their attitudes, beliefs, and biases about children with disabilities and how this can negatively impact their collective efforts. Reflective activities, including revisiting mandates around Least Restrictive Environment, are often facilitated in meetings to remind members that mindset is a critical component of this work.

There has been significant growth in the Rock Island CIT this past year. School districts and community-based organizations have continued to improve their communication with one another. There is increased awareness within the community-based organizations to find strategies for embedding services and supports for children within their program. CIT members have a stronger understanding of not only available resources that can support change, but also the legal foundation for inclusion. Through the EC LRE Consortium, the Rock Island CIT has connected with other CITs and plans to connect again in the future to exchange additional ideas and strategies.

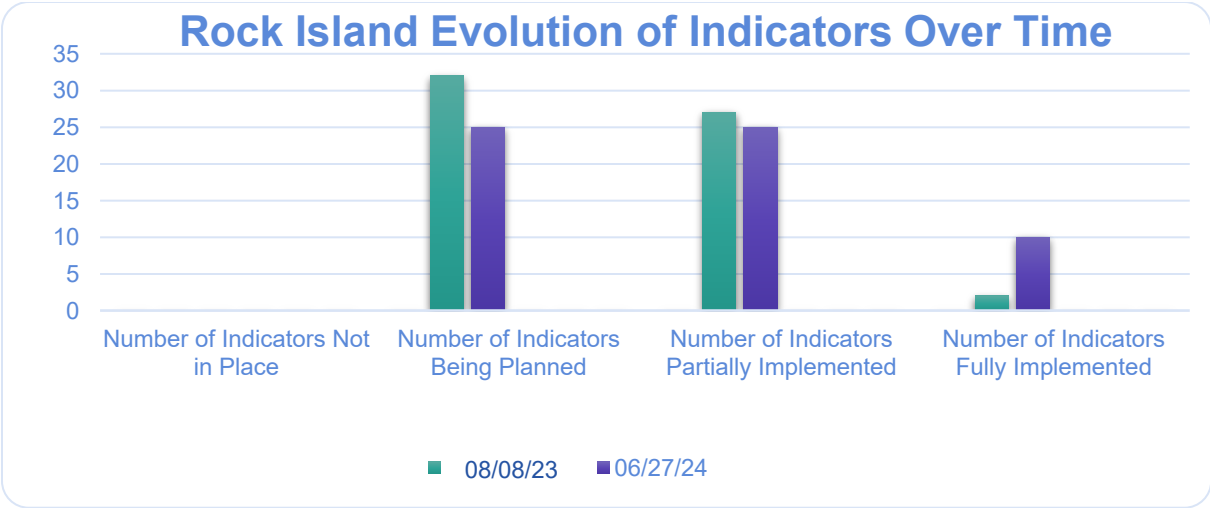
CIT members will be provided a Google Form in late June to complete regarding Inclusion Community Indicators. This will provide meaningful data around achievements from the year and areas of further growth for the future.

In planning the 2025-2026 year, the Rock Island CIT has determined several next steps in planning. First, the CIT will be hosting an in-person workshop to solidify their action plan for the next school year. This workshop will give members the opportunity to choose a smaller sub-group and create action steps for more specific areas of focus. Smaller group topics include finalizing an interactive communication toolkit, building a template for providing services in community based childcare settings, and having additional advocacy efforts to raise awareness about high quality inclusion in the community.

In person professional development days about inclusion, specifically around classroom practices and collaborative efforts, has been scheduled for the Fall 2025. These events have been created in collaboration with Early CHOICES, STARNET, and East Moline Early Childhood Center.

The Rock Island CIT is hopeful to pilot two families across two school districts in mitigating the common barrier of having to choose between special education services and full day childcare opportunities. Being able to work specifically with families in a new way will increase communication between key CIT members (such as school district and childcare administrators), while establishing replicable steps for all future families facing similar challenges.

The growth of the Rock Island CIT work is reflected in the following graphic illustrating the Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion at the Community level. There is a sizable increase in the number of Indicators fully met in the short time from the Fall, 2024 to the Spring, 2024.



Peoria County

Peoria County Community Inclusion Team (CIT) began in 2023. Members from several school districts and community programs partnered to perform this work. Members from Peoria already had many pieces in place before beginning a Community Inclusion Team. The Special Education Association of Peoria County (SEAPCO) met with Bright Futures, the local Preschool For All provider, monthly to discuss the needs of the children as well as provide speech therapy services. Peoria Public Schools had an agreement with the local Head Start to provide some specialized services. Several other local districts, including a special education cooperative, had not collaborated until the CIT was formed. The county also has an Early Childhood (EC) Forum of Central Illinois that talked about issues related to early childhood with partners from the public schools and other community service providers. The Peoria CIT narrowed the focus of their work to inclusion of children with disabilities and brought together providers across multiple systems with this vision statement:

All children in Peoria county will receive high quality inclusive early childhood education through partnerships with families and community providers for full participation and optimal learning.

In 2023-2024, the initial focus was on creating a well-balanced CIT and the group worked to assure that families were represented as well as early interventionists. With the multiple collaboration efforts in the county such as the EC Forum, Birth to Five Illinois Action and Family Councils, and the Local Education Agency (LEA), the CIT could highlight the intersections of the work for children with disabilities and their families. The CIT created a survey and gathered information from community based organizations to find out how many children are being served and what the needs are in the community-based organizations (CBO). At the same time, the CIT examined the Indicator 6 preschool environment data for the school districts in the county with the realization that they needed to increase inclusive options within school district programs, as well as supporting children served in CBOs. Members from this CIT also coordinated the first successful community screening. This allowed for successful planning for placement of children in community programs.

In 2024-2025, new CIT members were added with a renewed mission of providing inclusive education for children with disabilities. Based on a review of the Community Indicators for High-

Quality Inclusion, three subgroups were formed to focus efforts on specific community needs: resource, professional development, and community screenings.

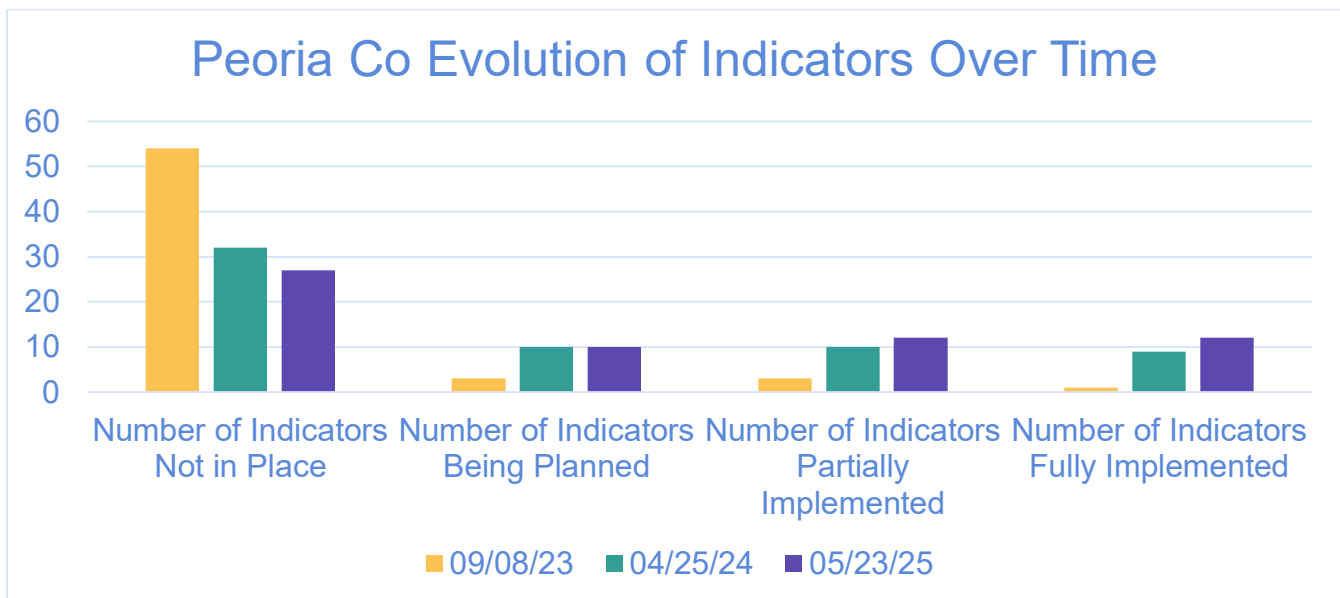
Members from the resource workgroup created a, “Choosing A Childcare”, resource document for parents of children with disabilities. This document outlined suggested steps to take when looking for a childcare in the community and included questions that may be helpful as parents navigate the early childhood system in the Peoria area.

The professional development workgroup members focused their efforts on soliciting information and feedback from families, community agencies, and other stakeholders about their knowledge of high-quality inclusion. Survey results have been gathered and are in the process of being analyzed.

With one successful community screening completed, this workgroup built off of that success and targeted ways to share information across programs to eliminate a family’s need to complete multiple enrollment documents, including screenings. This workgroup created a document containing information about early childhood programs in the community in addition to a screening consent.

Challenges from the previous year continue. The CIT is comprised of large systems that have much bureaucracy to work through to get decisions made. The funding has helped keep some partners engaged but it is a challenge to find a common meeting time and reach partners that are not currently involved in the work.

Within two years, the Peoria CIT has increased the percentage of Community Indicators of High Quality Inclusion that are fully implemented by 18% and decreased the number of Indicators not in place by 45%.



The CIT intends to build upon the good working relationships between key partners and spread that work throughout the community. All programs are [Pyramid Model](#) programs and the CIT intends to build upon that strong foundation as they continue to move forward in this work.

In 2025-2026, the results from the Community Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion will be used to help members revise their Action Plan that will be drafted this summer when the CIT meets for a one-day retreat. The team will also be attending the Summer Inclusion Institute in June of 2025 and Sharing A Vision in October of 2025.

Niles Township

Niles Township District for Special Education (NTDSE) applied to form a Community Inclusion Team in partnership with local school districts and two community-based organizations (CBOs). Although their initial application was not funded through the Preschool Development Grant Birth–5 (PDG B-5), Early CHOICES was able to fund this CIT using the ISBE Early CHOICES State Grant (399-CC). Partners include Skokie School Districts 73.5, 68, and 69, as well as Mosaic Early Childhood Center and Swift Child Care Early Childhood Centers. These organizations are longstanding collaborators through the Niles Township Early Childhood Alliance, which focuses on broader early childhood initiatives.

SY23-SY24

The CIT held its first meeting in November 2023 and adopted the Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion as the framework for its work. Early in the process, the team developed the following vision statement:

To advance inclusion in our community by ensuring all children with specialized learning needs and their families have access to high-quality, inclusive programs across all early childhood settings, which results in full participation and optimal learning.

The team began by identifying a need for more data to understand local inclusion practices. During the 2023–2024 school year, they reviewed Indicator 6a and 6b data and created surveys for families, CBOs, and district staff to explore support for children with disabilities, access to services, and why families might decline services not offered in their preferred setting. Before the end of the school year, the team distributed surveys and collected/analyzed data from school districts.

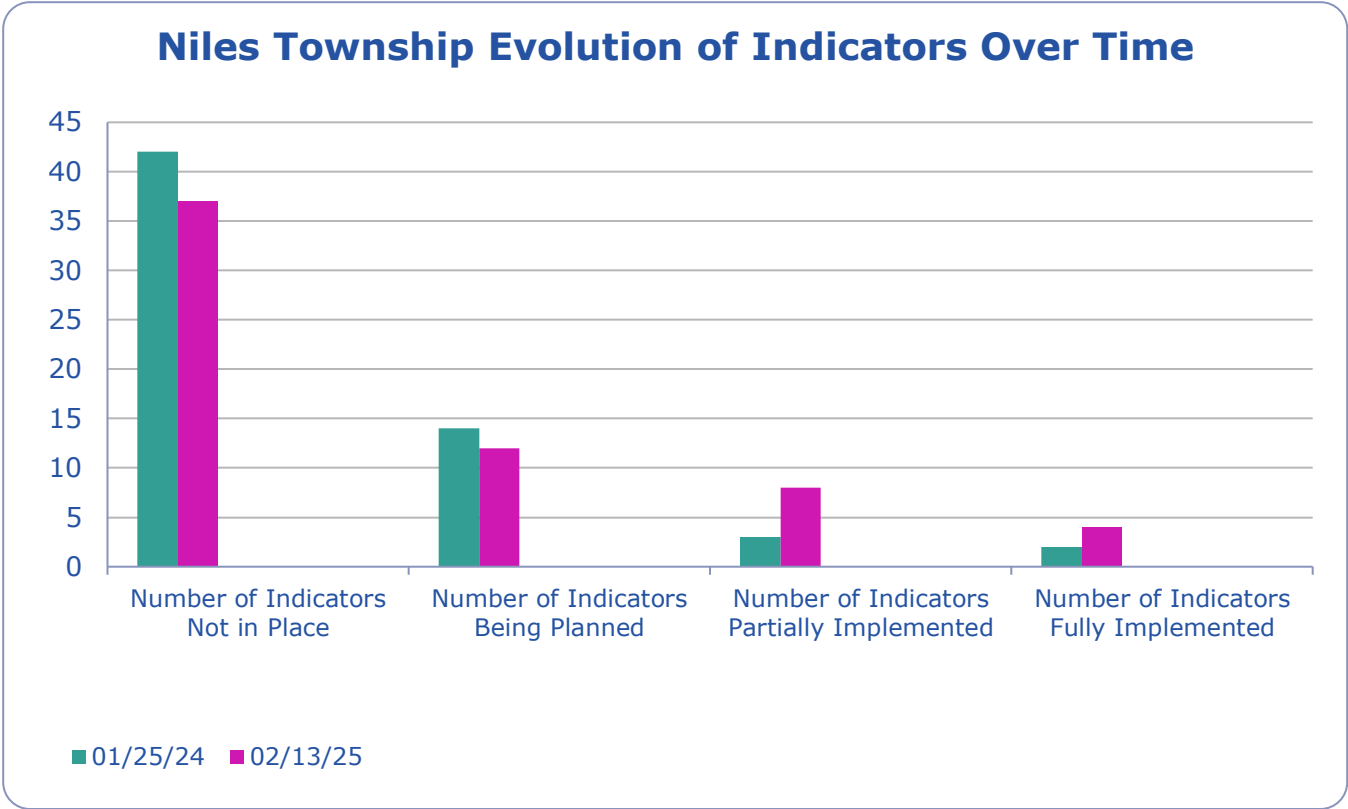
SY24-SY25

Beginning the 2024–2025 school year, the team finalized and distributed surveys to CBOs and families. Later in the school year, the team redistributed the district survey to compare year-over-year data. They also consulted legal experts on service obligations in CBOs and connected with other Illinois communities to learn from existing inclusive models. Alongside data collection, the CIT built awareness by sharing updates at director meetings and expanded partnerships to include the Skokie Park District, Oakton Community College, and privately-owned childcare centers. The team experienced some challenges around inconsistent member attendance. However, they were still able to make significant progress on their priorities.

SY25-SY26

Looking ahead to the 2025–2026 school year, the CIT will move from planning to development. They will continue analyzing Indicator 6 data, hold focus groups to better understand community needs, and design a pilot for an inclusive service model. The team also plans to create an IEP addendum documenting when families decline school-based services, recruit new partners—

particularly families navigating service decisions—and explore funding strategies while engaging policymakers to support long-term investment in inclusion.

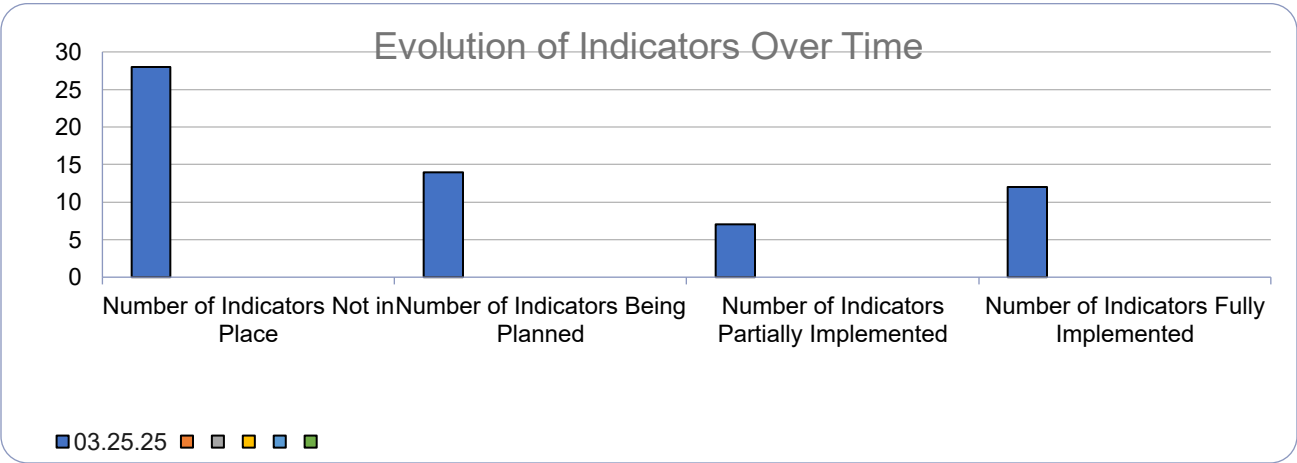


Bunker Hill CIT

Bunker Hill CUSD 8 has been serving children with disabilities in general education classrooms for several years with support and technical assistance from Early CHOICES and STAR NET Region IV. In recent years, program wide classroom observations using the Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP) for purposes of program improvement were completed. Results of the observations resulted in specific coaching outcomes. Bunker Hill CUSD 8 has exceeded the statewide target for Indicator 6: Preschool Environment data, with District administrators continuing to encourage the serving of children in the least restrictive environment.

Bunker Hill is located in a rural part of the State, and as is the case in many rural areas, has mostly been working in a silo from other early education and care programs. The Principal, with support from the Superintendent, determined that community inclusion work was the next step in providing care for children and families in the area. In 2024-2025, The Bunker Hill Community Inclusion Team (CIT) was formed with key stakeholders from the school district, early intervention, the local library, regional Birth to Five Illinois members, childcare programs, and parents. The CIT first met in January of 2025 and developed a shared vision.

The graph below depicts the work that the Inclusion Team did before starting a Community Inclusion Team. 20% of the Community Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion had been implemented.



The CIT members used the CIT Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion to identify community barriers and possible solutions. Monthly meetings have resulted in a team consensus as to targeted work for 2025-2026. The CIT developed five goals with three subcommittees addressing specific action items.

Within one month, the CIT fully implemented six elements of the Community Inclusion Team Indicator and four elements of the Family Engagement and Partnerships Indicator. The CIT plans to create and distribute resources to targeted stakeholders, host a community resource fair, and create a resource library consisting of materials that families could use in their homes.

New Community Inclusion Teams

These new CITs are receiving technical assistance from Early CHOICES but they are not receiving any funding through West40 or Early CHOICES.

Valley View 365U

Valley View 365U began working with Early CHOICES in 2024-25. They created a CIT by launching a community information meeting in January. The district did outreach to all the CBOs in the community to build relationships. The first CIT meeting was held in March, 2025. The CIT members include local CBOs, school district, legislators and families. The initial focus has been on creating a vision and building relationships. The district is already planning to serve 9 classrooms in the community in 4 programs in 2025-26 school year. The district conducted a survey of the CBOs and used information to create professional development plan for the community programs and Early CHOICES is providing the training from June, 2025 to October, 2025. The CIT has started to use the Community Indicators of High Quality Inclusion but has only completed half the indicators so there is no baseline data to share yet.

Lake County

In spring 2025 Lake County invited stakeholders together to convene a Community Inclusion Team. Early CHOICES provided information on Community Inclusion Teams and helped the community plan the first meeting. STAR NET and START Early also took lead roles to help the CIT host a first meeting. The team includes several school districts in the county, Birth to 5 Council, two Head Start providers, the CCR&R, EI Providers and the Regional Office of Education director. The group is just beginning to form a vision of inclusion for the county and is exploring strategies to determine a facilitator to lead the group. The CIT plans to meet monthly starting in fall 2025.

Overall Lessons Learned:

Community-based organizations serve as important hubs for early childhood education, socialization, and support for children with disabilities. These organizations include preschools, childcare centers, Head Starts, and family childcare. School districts receive funding through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to provide specially designed instruction, supports and services to children with IEPs. Bringing together the various CBOs and school districts along with families and other community partners to deliver services wherever young children are served is the goal of this work. Significant challenges persist. Many CBOs lack the resources, training, and infrastructure to effectively include children with disabilities. Common barriers include lack of inclusive mindsets, inadequate staff training on inclusive practices, and limited access to specialized support services from school districts. School districts lack the funding and flexibility to be able to reach multiple CBOs and have varying levels of inclusive mindsets and implementation within their school based programs. We have learned the first step to solving these issues is creating a community space to have these discussions and that is the Community Inclusion Team.

- **Importance of Collaborative Planning**

- Successful CITs prioritize involving diverse stakeholders such as school districts, Head Start providers, CCR&R, EI providers, families, and local organizations.
- Community Inclusion Teams benefit from shared vision-setting, which creates a unified direction and establishes buy-in from all members.
- Consistent planning leads to stronger relationships between stakeholders.

- **Data-Driven Decision Making**

- Regular use of tools like the Inclusive Classroom Profile and Community Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion supports targeted improvements.
- Surveys and Indicator 6 data analysis provide actionable insights for identifying gaps and opportunities in inclusive practices.

- **Value of Community Engagement**

- Building community awareness through press releases, social media, and public events strengthens buy-in and promotes inclusivity.
- Inclusion resources like CARA's Kits, neurodiversity kits, and resource guides foster better understanding and advocacy.

- **Professional Development as a Catalyst**

- Professional learning opportunities, such as workshops with experts does enhance skill sets and support inclusive practices.
- Reflective activities addressing mindsets and biases help CIT members maintain focus on the principles of least restrictive environments.
- Providing support for CIT leaders has helped to cross pollinate ideas and strategies beyond each CIT.

- **Challenges in Sustained Collaboration**

- Finding common time to meet and engage all stakeholders is an ongoing challenge.
- Consistent participation by all CIT members is not always possible.
- Uncertainty related to ongoing technical assistance and funding challenges the momentum of the CITs.

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. This includes the structures to support time for planning and reflection on practice as multidisciplinary teams serving children. 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. Focusing the teams' work on inclusion leads to a stronger system for all children and families and more buy-in from all sectors as the community members learn about each entity's scope of work, priority goals and ways of working. Continue to offer tailored professional development on specific aspects of inclusion, such as itinerant teaching models and adaptive strategies. Incorporate regular reflective practices to address implicit biases and strengthen the community's commitment to inclusion.

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. In systems change efforts, implementation teams at each level of the system can facilitate alignment and reduce silos. Each implementation team in the system shares the same goal and can share similar frameworks but each community's resulting implementation will be unique to them. A state level implementation team that focuses on inclusion is critical to this work.

Early CHOICES will continue to provide leadership Community of Practice for leaders to support them in building member engagement, planning and dealing with challenges. Facilitate knowledge-sharing opportunities between CITs to replicate successful models and strategies.

Leveraging statewide conferences like Sharing A Vision, Early CHOICES Summer Inclusion Institute as well as using the EC LRE Stakeholder Consortium meetings will inspire collective growth.

Research and Evaluation

Conduct regular evaluation and research to identify gaps in current practices and measure the impact of CITs. Collect comprehensive data, including community surveys, and local data to inform planning. Pilot innovative solutions like inclusive service models based on identified community needs.

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