PRESCCHOOL DEVELOPMENT GRANT EXPANSION

A Descriptive Study in Illinois
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PRESCHOOL DEVELOPMENT GRANT EXPANSION

A Descriptive Study in Illinois

Executive Summary
In 2015, the State of Illinois was awarded the Preschool Development Grant — Expansion (PDG-E) from The United States Department of Education’s Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) to enhance its infrastructure to provide high-quality preschool programs and to expand high-need communities’ capacity for high-quality full day preschool programs for four-year-old children who live in families with an income at 200% of the federal poverty level or below. The award provided $20,000,000 per year for four years from the federal government. As part of this grant award, the State of Illinois committed to contributing $50 Million each year over the four-year period as matching funds for the project as part of the state’s overall investment in the Early Childhood Block Grant (funding for programs for children from ages 0 to 5). The Preschool Development Grant — Expansion (PDG-E) was awarded to Illinois to enhance its infrastructure to provide high-quality preschool programs and to expand high-need communities’ capacity for high-quality full-day preschool programs for four-year-old children. The state proposed to reach an additional 13,760 eligible children by the end of 2018 by building upon existing components of Preschool for All (PFA). The PDG-E program was specifically designed to:

Address the needs of children with the highest need, including children in poverty or deep poverty, those who are homeless or involved with the child welfare system or children who have multiple other significant risk factors, such as parents who have low education or disability.

The Illinois proposal was submitted to focus on serving young children whose needs aligned with those that the PDG-E program had identified as priority selection factors.

In June 2018, the Early Childhood Education Team at the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and the Illinois Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development (OECD) invested in a rigorous external study of PDG-E conducted by Northern Illinois University’s P-20 Research Collaborative. The evaluation took 18 months and included: interviews with all subgrantee program directors; focus groups with teachers and family members in two identified high-need communities; electronic surveys of a number of stakeholders including PDG-E teachers and paraprofessionals, families with preschoolers enrolled in a PDG-E program during the 2018–2019 school year, and statewide program support specialists; a review of records data related to classroom quality, compliance checklists, and Continuous Quality Improvement Plans (CQIP); and an analysis of relevant data from the Illinois State Board of Education’s Student Information System (SIS). Major findings are highlighted below.

High-Quality Preschool Programming in Illinois

The PDG-E high-quality program model built upon the 20 quality indicators of PFA programs by adding additional high-quality elements. Illinois focused PDG-E resources in 28 underserved, high-needs communities. As a result, over 11,000 four-year-olds were able to participate in full-day, full-year preschool programming under a new, comprehensive high-quality program model over the grant period. Demographic data from the State Student Information System database confirmed that children enrolled represented the priority factors: over 2016–2018, 91% were low income, 12% had Individual Education Plans (IEPs), 8% of students were involved with Child Welfare, and 6% were homeless.

In developing the PDG-E model, Illinois utilized research-based best practices. Program designers also were mindful of the program requirements that defined successful existing programs across the nation. Regardless of how PDG-E was implemented, each subgrantee was required to implement their new high-quality program with a high degree of fidelity, adhering to the description of the model articulated in the proposal submitted to the United States Department of Education. The model implemented in Illinois delineated a broad set of program requirements; some of which were already required in the PFA program, plus additional new high-quality elements specifically for the PDG-E program model.
The following are required for both PFA and PDG-E:

- Class sizes of no more than 20 students with a staffing ratio of no more than 1:10.
- Classes led by a teacher holding a Professional Educator License (PEL) with an endorsement in Early Childhood Education and an additional endorsement in Special Education if the teacher is servicing students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs).
- Classes supported by a Paraprofessional Educator with appropriate ISBE certification.
- Appropriate instructional supports for emergent bilingual children.
- Transitional Bilingual classroom teachers must speak the language of the majority of the children AND hold a Bilingual Endorsement.
- For a Transitional Program of Instruction, teachers were required to hold an ESL Endorsement.
- Developmental screenings required in all domains (physical, social, emotional, language, and cognitive development) to identify possible developmental delays or disabilities, including: Screening of English Proficiency and physical health, mental health, vision, and hearing screenings.
- Adoption of a research-based curriculum and assessment system aligned with the IELDS and WIDA English Language Standards and Early Spanish Language Standards.

Additional PDG-E high-quality program elements:

- The inclusion of children with disabilities is a priority factor for enrollment in PDG-E, and it is required that a classroom with children having Individual Education Plans (IEPs) must be staffed by an early educator who has a Professional Educator License (PEL) for the appropriate student grade levels along with a Special Education Endorsement.
- Provision of family engagement services designed to meet the cultural and linguistic demands of the community and focused on the seven Child and Family Outcomes described in the Head Start Family & Community Engagement Framework, including language support services.
- Enhanced family engagement services including a family educator who holds a bachelor’s degree, and who, to the maximum degree possible, reflects the language and culture of the community.
- Contract with or hire a mental health consultant to provide consultation to early childhood staff to support the social and emotional needs of children.
- Meals and snacks as appropriate for the length of the program day following the guidelines of the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).
- A full-day program, defined as at least as long as the first grade school day in the local school district.
- Recruitment and enrollment of children with multiple, significant risk factors.
- Provision of universal and targeted supports for children’s positive behavior and social and emotional development.
- Enhanced support for families to obtain needed health, mental health, dental, and social services through well-articulated partnerships with other service providers in the community.
- Hiring salaries for teachers that are comparable to the salaries of local K-12 instructional staff.
- Provision of at least 60 minutes of daily physical activity in the full-day program.
- Hiring of new instructional leaders (master teachers, curriculum coordinators, etc.) with specific early childhood expertise and expertise in serving culturally and linguistically diverse children, in a ratio of no more than one per ten classrooms, whose primary responsibility is to provide embedded professional development and implement a professional learning community focused on instructional excellence.

The PDG-E program elements built upon existing PFA requirements and focused on enrolling the states’ most vulnerable young children. Major findings of this comprehensive evaluation follow.
**Major Findings from High-Quality Program Design Requirements.** Elements related to program design include length of the school day, meals provided, ongoing comprehensive continuous improvement, and rigorous compliance of any subcontractors.

*Evaluation data indicates the PDG-E program was transformational. While many subgrantees had provided Preschool for All through the half-day model, the new program model elevated the complexity, scope, and expected outcomes for children and their families. It required school districts to rethink how they provided other early education programming within their districts, and it required all programs to consider how they extend their collaborative relationships with other community-based programs.*

- The full-day component was perceived as essential to meeting children’s increased needs due to the prevalence of the priority factors. In 10 of the programs, a full day program was identified as the greatest “win” for the community due to the PDG-E program.
- Evaluation findings suggest the need to adjust the child to staff ratio. Twenty-five percent of the programs, representing more than 4,000 of the children in the program statewide, identified trying to meet the needs of 20 children with one or more priority factors in a classroom with just two staff members as a concern. This was also expressed by stakeholders (teachers, directors, support specialists) throughout the various data collection components (surveys, interviews, focus groups).
- Continuous improvement processes increased the quality of programs as was evidenced by the score improvements between the baseline review of all programs in 2016 and a subsequent second review.
- Families were empowered within their schools and communities to engage in new resources and programs due to the comprehensive program requirements and enhanced family engagement.

**Major Findings from Enrollment and Eligibility Requirements.** Elements related to enrollment and eligibility include a weighted eligibility criteria established by the state to prioritize children who are most at risk of academic failure, implementation of a comprehensive recruitment strategy designed to identify and enroll the most at risk children and families, actively seeking out and enrolling children with special needs, and that services to children with IEPs are coordinated with local partners and integrated across the school day.

*PDG-E met the goal of identifying and enrolling children with the priority selection factors — 91% of students were classified as low income, 12% of students had Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and 6% of students were classified as homeless under the McKinney-Vento Act.*

- Students with IEPs were provided services in accordance with their IEP by licensed special education teachers.
- Four programs identified that the greatest win for the PDG-E program was having students enrolled who would otherwise be at home without services and their families would not have connections to the PDG-E and community resources.
Major Findings from Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction Requirements. Elements related to curriculum and assessment include provision of universal and targeted supports for children’s positive behavior and social and emotional development, integration of physical activity appropriately into the curriculum, and Birth to Grade Three alignment.

Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) ratings indicate that the observed quality of PDG-E classrooms ranged from moderately high to high.

- Programs demonstrated consistently high ratings in the areas of Language and Reasoning, Interactions, and Program Structure. Areas measuring below programmatic means were identified for further improvement in the rigorous Continuous Quality Improvement (CQIP) cycle and showed improvement in future monitoring.
- The on-site instructional leader was highly valued by teachers and program directors. Staff survey participants rated the training provided by instructional leaders as particularly effective in the areas of child development, learning environment, standards, data collection tools, and connecting with families.
- Every one of the program directors reported that the PDG-E children and families participated in kindergarten transition activities including visits, teacher connections, family evening events, reports on individual readiness skills, seamless enrollment, curricular alignment, and more.
- Data is shared between early prevention programs, preschool programs, and kindergarten teaching staff to support the successful transition of individual children from Birth to Grade Three.
- Increased curricular alignment has incorporated increased play-based curricular elements in kindergarten through second grade classroom environments in at least four programs.

Major Findings from Community Partnerships and Comprehensive Services Requirements. Elements related to community partnerships and comprehensive services include actively collaborating and engaging with the local Head Start grantee and early childhood collaboration groups to advance outcomes for children and families, actively partnering with regional DCFS liaisons, McKinney-Vento homeless liaisons, food pantries, homeless shelters, libraries, museums, or other community institutions to provide a comprehensive spectrum of supports and opportunities to children and families, and providing comprehensive services to support the development of the whole child, including in the areas of medical, dental, and mental health.

Early education has been elevated as a focal point for collaborative activity, increased resources, and system-building across organizations within most (70%) communities.

- Program directors reported that community collaboration has been strengthened among multiple organizations in communities, with a specific focus on supporting high-quality programming and resource referral for young children and their families.
- Program participants greatly valued the mental health supports and at least six of the program directors stated they could benefit from additional mental health resources.
- Seven program directors stated that comprehensive services with community-based organizations was the greatest benefit that communities had gained due to PDG-E. This included connections to medical, dental, mental health, and special education services.
Major Findings from Personnel and Professional Development Requirements. Elements related to personnel and professional development include teaching staff receiving relevant and appropriate professional development to drive instructional quality and a qualified instructional leader supporting teacher development and instructional quality.

Almost all (92%) teachers and paraprofessionals surveyed believe they are making a difference in the lives of the preschoolers they serve.

- Staff reported 94% of the professional development topics were effective, with the program instructional leaders being the primary developers of the professional development in more than two-thirds of those topics.
- ISBE consulting staff were always accessible and responsive in supporting subgrantees both through the intensive first steps of implementing their grant and throughout the length of the PDG-E initiative.
- Program support specialists provided focused, individual support throughout periods of transformative change required by the PDG-E program model.
- Study participants found the monitoring and Continuous Quality Improvement Plan (CQIP) process a valuable component of the program model, especially in terms of professional development planning.
- Most program directors found that the Continuous Quality Improvement Plan (CQIP) process increased the level of internal collaboration within their organizations, which included vertical collaboration between teaching staff and administrators and horizontal collaboration among teachers. Program directors typically viewed high levels of collaboration as critical to making the CQIP successful.

Major Findings from Family Engagement and Empowerment Requirements. Elements related to family engagement and empowerment include providing comprehensive services to address the needs of families and help families set and achieve ambitious goals, qualified family educators supporting family engagement in the program and leading family education and family support efforts, engaging as family members as leaders and maintaining an active Parent Advisory Council inclusive of a diverse range of perspectives, designing family engagement activities to support families in meeting the needs of their children, and achieving family goals and actively supporting families in transitioning their child to kindergarten.

Families have greater access to community-based services. The family educator works with families to build relationships, gain the trust of parents and other family members, and assess family needs. Survey shows 89% of participants reported that they can talk to the family educator, 86% reported that the family educator gave them information about community resources and 85% reported that the family educator gave information about community programs that would help their family.

- Almost all (94%) families surveyed said the program was as good or better than expected and 38% said the quality of the program was the “best they could imagine”.
- Families reported that they were offered, and participated in, several activities regarding their child’s well-being. This includes 58% who participated in activities related to parent and child relationships, 51% related to social and emotional learning, and 51% related to child dental services.
- Almost half (48%) of program directors shared that family engagement was the biggest “win” for the community as a result of PDG-E. Overall, family engagement successes have meant that families are empowered to be more actively involved in the education of their children and in connecting with helpful community resources.

Concerns expressed by multiple stakeholders across surveys and interviews

- The ratio of students to adults in each classroom needs to be reduced to increase program effectiveness.
- Additional resources and supports are needed to meet the mental health needs of the children and families.
- Continuing supports for monitoring are needed to ensure that results are used to build collaboration, to increase program effectiveness, and plan staff professional development.
- Programs would not be able to sustain PDG-E if funding decreases. For some programs, challenges also include limited space and finding well-qualified teachers due to teacher shortages.
Expanded high-quality programs for thousands of early childhood students

PDG-E has changed early childhood education in Illinois. The focus on high-quality programming, a comprehensive scope of services, and a robust program of family engagement provide a mechanism for preparing young children and their families for later success in the K-12 educational system. The success of the PDG-E initiative has increased expectations for high-quality preschool programming throughout communities in Illinois. The five-year process of implementation has demonstrated how excellence can be scaled for successful replication in urban, suburban, and rural contexts. As with any initiative, there are areas of the program model that can continue to be developed. With the demonstrated success of the Continuous Quality Improvement Plan (CQIP) process, the PDG-E program model has built-in structures to ensure ongoing improvement.

The PDG-E has been successful in delivering a high-quality, learning-focused comprehensive preschool model, which has come to life in 28 sites throughout Illinois. Considering the strength of the program, Illinois has supported a strong foundation for future success in school and beyond for 11,227 four-year-olds.
Program Overview and Background
In 2015, the State of Illinois was awarded $20,000,000 per year for four years from The United States Department of Education’s Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE). As part of this grant award, the State of Illinois also contributed matching funds of $50,000,000 annually over the four-year period. The Preschool Development Grant — Expansion (PDG-E) was awarded to Illinois to enhance its infrastructure to provide high-quality preschool programs and to expand high-need communities’ capacity for high-quality full-day preschool programs for four-year-old children.

The grant ran from January 1, 2015, to December 31, 2018. Additionally, a no-cost extension was granted through December 31, 2019. The state proposed to reach an additional 13,760 eligible children by the end of 2018 by building upon existing components of Preschool for All. The PDG-E program was specifically designed to:

Address the needs of children with the highest need, including children in poverty or deep poverty, those who are homeless or involved with the child welfare system or children who have multiple other significant risk factors, such as parents who have low education or disability.

The PDG-E program is a high-quality preschool model that retained many of the program characteristics of the federal Head Start model. The Illinois proposal was submitted in the context of a population of young children that was changing in ways that mirrored the social change in many urban, suburban, and rural communities across the United States. The proposal from the State of Illinois to the federal government for PDG-E was specifically focused on working to engage hard-to-reach children and families through the program.

When Illinois submitted its grant proposal, there were approximately 170,000 four-year-old children, and over 68,000 of these children lived in families with incomes below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level. Approximately 16,500 four-year-old children across the state were members of families living in extreme poverty, with incomes below 50% of the Federal Poverty Level. Estimating the number of children who face a combination of multiple risks to their healthy development (e.g., low parental education, single parent household, low birth weight, parental mental illness, etc.) was difficult given the manner in which such population-level data is typically collected and reported.

Based on the best evidence available at the time, the State estimated that 20–25% of Illinois children under age five experience three or more significant risk factors. Research has shown that these children are especially in need of high-quality early learning and comprehensive services if they are to be prepared to succeed socially, emotionally, and academically when they enter kindergarten.

Perhaps the most dramatic changes in population demographics occurred across many smaller urban and suburban areas throughout the state. Illinois’ suburbs have experienced a dramatic rise in poverty over a period of 10–15 years. While children in the suburban counties were less likely to live in a poor family than children in the City of Chicago, the number of young children in poverty in the suburbs nearly doubled between 2000 and 2015, while growing less than 5% in the City of Chicago during that period. As a result of this rapid demographic shift, the suburbs lacked high-quality, affordable early learning and comprehensive services for young children and their families, and suburban areas were also less prepared to support at-risk families with well-developed systems of community-based services.

PDG-E subgrantees were given the option of implementing the comprehensive program model in two ways. Existing Preschool For All programs (PFA) were allowed to offer additional services to four-year-old children by establishing new full-day classrooms. Subgrantees were also given the option of converting existing part-day (2-1/2 hour) classrooms into full-day classrooms. Subgrantees implemented PDG-E in a variety of ways. Some sites were established in a more distributed modality in conjunction with existing Preschool for All sites and/or in existing neighborhood schools and in community-based centers.
The following is a list of subgrantees who participated in the PDG-E program in 2018 and/or 2019 and were participants in this evaluation:

- Addison School District 4*
- Aurora East Unit School District 131*
- Aurora West Unit School District 129*
- Berwyn North School District 98*
- Berwyn South School District 100*
- Cahokia Community Unit School District 187
- Chicago Public School District 299
- Children’s Center – Cicero-Berwyn*
- Children’s Home and Aid Society*
- Collinsville Community Unit School District 100*
- Community Unit School District 300*
- Decatur School District 61*
- Dolton School District 148*
- Dolton School District 149*
- Elgin School District U-46*
- Freeburg Community Consolidated School District 70
- Harvey School District 152*
- Lansing School District 158*
- Lessie Bates Davis Neighborhood House*
- McLean County Unit School District 5*
- Metropolitan Family Services
- Mount Vernon School District 80*
- North Chicago School District 187*
- One Hope United - Northern Region*
- Posen-Robbins Elementary School District 143.5*
- Rock Island Regional Office of Education*
- Rockford City Head Start
- Rockford Public School District 205*
- Valley View Community Unit School District 365U*
- West Chicago Elementary School District 33*

*represents sites that were Preschool for All (PFA) prior to starting their PDG-E program

Characteristics of the high-quality program model

In developing the PDG-E model, Illinois utilized research-based best practices. Program designers also were mindful of the program requirements that defined successful existing programs across the nation. Regardless of how PDG-E was implemented, each subgrantee was required to implement their new high-quality program with a high degree of fidelity, adhering to the description of the model articulated in the proposal submitted to the United States Department of Education. The model implemented in Illinois delineated a broad set of program requirements, some of which are already required in the PFA program, plus additional new high-quality elements specifically for the PDG-E program model. The following are required for both PFA and PDG-E:

- Class sizes of no more than 20 students with a staffing ratio of no more than 1:10.
- Classes led by a teacher holding a Professional Educator License (PEL) with an endorsement in Early Childhood Education and an additional endorsement in Special Education if the teacher is servicing students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs).
- Classes supported by a Paraprofessional Educator with appropriate ISBE certification.
- Appropriate instructional supports for emergent bilingual children.
- Transitional Bilingual classroom teachers must speak the language of the majority of the children AND hold a Bilingual Endorsement.
- For a Transitional Program of Instruction, teachers were required to hold an ESL Endorsement.
- Developmental screenings required in all domains (physical, social, emotional, language, and cognitive development) to identify possible developmental delays or disabilities, including: Screening of English Proficiency and physical health, mental health, vision, and hearing screenings.
- Adoption of a research-based curriculum and assessment system aligned with the IELDS and WIDA English Language Standards and Early Spanish Language Standards.
Additional PDG-E high-quality program elements:

- The inclusion of children with disabilities is a priority factor for enrollment in PDG-E, and it is required that a classroom with children having Individual Education Plans (IEPs) must be staffed by an early educator who has a Professional Educator License (PEL) for the appropriate student grade levels along with a Special Education Endorsement.
- Provision of Family engagement services designed to meet the cultural and linguistic demands of the community and focused on the seven Child and Family Outcomes described in the Head Start Family & Community Engagement Framework, including language support services.
- Enhanced family engagement services including a family educator who holds a bachelor’s degree, and who, to the maximum degree possible, reflects the language and culture of the community.
- Contract with or hire a mental health consultant to provide consultation to early childhood staff to support the social and emotional needs of children.
- Meals and snacks as appropriate for the length of the program day following the guidelines of the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).
- A full-day program, defined as at least as long as the first grade school day in the local school district.
- Recruitment and enrollment of children with multiple, significant risk factors.
- Provision of universal and targeted supports for children’s positive behavior and social and emotional development.
- Enhanced support for families to obtain needed health, mental health, dental, and social services through well-articulated partnerships with other service providers in the community.
- Hiring salaries for teachers that are comparable to the salaries of local K-12 instructional staff.
- Provision of at least 60 minutes of daily physical activity in the full-day program.
- Hiring of new instructional leaders (master teachers, curriculum coordinators, etc.) with specific early childhood expertise and expertise in serving culturally and linguistically diverse children, in a ratio of no more than one per ten classrooms, whose primary responsibility is to provide embedded professional development and implement a professional learning community focused on instructional excellence.

Additional program goals and supports

To better support the professional development of program administrative staff, the state also invested in intensive supports for PDG-E subgrantees and through consultation service provided by program support specialists employed through the Early Childhood Center for Professional Learning. Program support specialists assisted with on-site and remote support to programs for topics such as program design, staff development, enrollment and recruitment, curriculum and assessment, support for administration, community partnerships, family supports, and supports for exceptional students.

To augment the PDG-E initiative, the state also established a Preschool to Third Grade Continuity Project in collaboration with Illinois State University designed to support alignment and integration of curriculum and comprehensive services among preschool providers and K-3 schools in the funded communities. In order to support the improvement and quality of preschool programs, the state expanded its PFA monitoring, professional development, and coaching programs to accommodate the growth in PDG-E services and promised to conduct an evaluation of the PDG-E initiative. All subgrantees participated in ExceleRate Illinois, the state’s existing Quality Rating and Improvement System for both school-based and community-based early education services.

Beyond expanding high-quality early education services and disseminating a comprehensive program model designed to better support the needs of children in poverty, the state sought to build into the initiative the overarching goal of supporting school readiness of children with high needs from across the state. Realizing that the success of the comprehensive initiative needed to be rooted in both state and individual communities, the state developed a broad-based network of stakeholders represented by advocacy groups, academic institutions, unions, and numerous local civic stakeholders.

Given the need to support the implementation at the state level, the state also created several new staff positions focused on supporting the needs of the PDG-E program. Staffing was developed at the state level to support both the early learning role of the program and also the comprehensive services dimension of the program, including meeting children’s and families’ physical health, mental health, and social service needs.

Finally, the state invested in an evaluation for the initiative intended to identify the achievements of the initiative as well as inform needed changes for later stages of state-funded expansion of the PDG-E model.
Preschool Enrollment Context During the Period of the Grant

Enrollment in PDG-E

The state has two preschool programs: Preschool Development Grant — Expansion (PDG-E) programs and Preschool for All (PFA). Following the end of the PDG-E grant, the state continued funding the program as the Preschool for All Expansion (PFAE) grant. Figure 2.1 shows the periods of funding for each of these programs. The tables and figures included in the remainder of this section are inclusive of the 28 PDG-E subgrantees in this report. Figure 2.2 shows statewide trends in preschool enrollment in these state-funded programs during 2012-2018. These programs are required to submit data to ISBE. Please note that preschool programs which are not state funded are not required to send data into the Student Information System. Some school districts send data in for preschool programs that are otherwise funded.

Figure 2.1. Periods of funding for each grant program.

![Figure 2.1](image1)

**Figure 2.2.** Overall Preschool Enrollment trends using SIS Data from ISBE in programs receiving PDG-E funds.*

![Figure 2.2](image2)

*The data contained in this table represents only the children served in the PDG-E subgrantee sites. This data does not represent state-wide early childhood education or PFA totals across all programs.*
Table 2.1. Overall Preschool Enrollment trends using SIS Data from ISBE in programs receiving PDG-E funds.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School year</th>
<th>PDG-E</th>
<th>PFA</th>
<th>Total Enrollment in PDG-E &amp; PFA*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>32,177</td>
<td>32,177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>32,540</td>
<td>32,540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>29,998</td>
<td>29,998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>28,579</td>
<td>28,579</td>
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<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>2,766</td>
<td>26,257</td>
<td>29,023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>3,724</td>
<td>24,970</td>
<td>28,694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>4,737</td>
<td>27,028</td>
<td>31,765</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11,227</td>
<td>201,549</td>
<td>212,776</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This does not include data from “other funded programs” since requirements regarding data collection of this field was unclear.
** The data contained in this table represents only the children served in the PDG-E subgrantee sites. This data does not represent state-wide early childhood education or PFA totals across all programs.

Enrollment of children with priority factors

Data regarding three of the four priority enrollment factors showed that the PDG-E programs enrolled children with these factors at a higher rate than the PFA programs. Priority factors included homeless students as defined by the McKinney–Vento Homeless Education Act, students identified for Individual Education Plans (IEPs), students with a family income at or below 50% of the Federal Poverty Limit, and current or recent child welfare involvement. Data for the last factor listed — current or recent child welfare involvement — is not included in the ISBE student information system and can’t be displayed. As for the other three factors, Table 2.3 shows the percent of students with the priority factors enrolled in PFA and Table 2.4 shows the percent of students with the priority factors enrolled in PDG-E.

Figure 2.3. Comparing rates of priority factors by funding stream in programs receiving PDG-E funds.*

* The data contained in this table represents only the children served in the PDG-E subgrantee sites. This data does not represent state-wide early childhood education or PFA totals across all programs.
Table 2.2. Proportion of students with priority factors funded in PFA in programs receiving PDG-E funds.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School year</th>
<th>Homeless</th>
<th>Low Income as defined by Free and Reduced Lunch Status*</th>
<th>Students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1.31%</td>
<td>64.37%</td>
<td>8.22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>1.81%</td>
<td>73.10%</td>
<td>8.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>2.23%</td>
<td>71.68%</td>
<td>10.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>2.18%</td>
<td>81.86%</td>
<td>11.46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>1.21%</td>
<td>74.36%</td>
<td>12.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2.63%</td>
<td>70.33%</td>
<td>12.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>2.62%</td>
<td>69.53%</td>
<td>15.55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1.98%</td>
<td>72.08%</td>
<td>11.19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Prior to the State introducing new data elements to collect data on low income status across Illinois State Board of Education-funded early childhood programs in 2018, low income data was based on federal free and reduced lunch status. Here it is used to consistently demonstrate the percentage of students whose families meet the low income status criteria.

** The data contained in this table represents only the children served in the PDG-E subgrantee sites. This data does not represent state-wide early childhood education or PFA totals across all programs.

Table 2.3. Proportion of students with priority factors funded via PDG-E in programs receiving PDG-E funds.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Homeless</th>
<th>Low Income as defined by Free-Reduced Lunch Status*</th>
<th>Students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>4.88%</td>
<td>91.50%</td>
<td>13.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>5.94%</td>
<td>87.48%</td>
<td>12.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>5.87%</td>
<td>92.53%</td>
<td>9.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5.65%</td>
<td>90.60%</td>
<td>11.56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Prior to the State introducing new data elements to collect data on low income status across Illinois State Board of Education-funded early childhood programs in 2018, low income data was based on federal free and reduced lunch status. Here it is used to consistently demonstrate the percentage of students whose families meet the low income status criteria.

** The data contained in this table represents only the children served in the PDG-E subgrantee sites. This data does not represent state-wide early childhood education or PFA totals across all programs.

Racial and ethnic representation of children in PDG-E vs PFA

Figures 2.4 and 2.5. Race and Ethnicity of PDG-E and PFA students totaled from 2016–2018 in programs receiving PDG-E funds.*

* The data contained in this table represents only the children served in the PDG-E subgrantee sites. This data does not represent state-wide early childhood education or PFA totals across all programs.
### Table 2.4. PFA enrollment percentages by student demographics in programs receiving PDG-E funds.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black/African American</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>13.81%</td>
<td>35.37%</td>
<td>43.34%</td>
<td>7.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>14.12%</td>
<td>33.99%</td>
<td>44.26%</td>
<td>7.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>14.65%</td>
<td>32.13%</td>
<td>45.39%</td>
<td>7.83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>12.69%</td>
<td>34.04%</td>
<td>45.84%</td>
<td>7.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>13.74%</td>
<td>32.53%</td>
<td>45.89%</td>
<td>7.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>14.16%</td>
<td>32.37%</td>
<td>43.62%</td>
<td>9.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>12.58%</td>
<td>30.50%</td>
<td>41.28%</td>
<td>15.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13.70%</td>
<td>33.08%</td>
<td>44.24%</td>
<td>8.98%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The data contained in this table represents only the children served in the PDG-E subgrantee sites. This data does not represent state-wide early childhood education or PFA totals across all programs.

### Table 2.5. PDG-E enrollment percentages by student demographics in programs receiving PDG-E funds.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black/African American</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>7.74%</td>
<td>41.43%</td>
<td>46.31%</td>
<td>4.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>6.05%</td>
<td>44.81%</td>
<td>43.71%</td>
<td>5.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>5.85%</td>
<td>44.09%</td>
<td>45.27%</td>
<td>4.79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6.38%</td>
<td>43.67%</td>
<td>45.01%</td>
<td>4.94%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The data contained in this table represents only the children served in the PDG-E subgrantee sites. This data does not represent state-wide early childhood education or PFA totals across all programs.
Evaluation Overview
Several important research questions were identified in order to study the progress of the Preschool Development Grant — Expansion (PDG-E) Program in Illinois.

**Research Question One: Has the Illinois Preschool Development Grant — Expansion Program:**

1.1 Ensured high-quality preschool programs, as measured by the 12 characteristics of High-Quality Preschool Programs (HQPP)?
1.2 Expanded HQPP in communities with priority populations?
1.3 Collaborated with each subgrantee to ensure a strong partnership?
1.4 Aligned the PDG-E program within a Birth through Grade Three continuum?
1.5 Contributed matching funds?
1.6 Supported a continuum of early learning and development?
1.7 Created new High-Quality Preschool Program slots?

**Research Question Two: How has the Illinois Preschool Development Grant — Expansion Program impacted communities:**

2.1 How has the expansion of High-Quality Preschool Programs, funded through PDG-E, transformed the lives of families, the capacity of service providers, and the commitment to sustaining High-Quality Preschool Programs at the community level?
2.2 How have grant-funded infrastructure improvements impacted implementation and sustainability of High-Quality Preschool Programs?

**Data sources, sample description, and measures**

The evaluation team completed this evaluation through the use of a mixed-methods approach. Original data were collected via surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Extant data were evaluated from classroom observations, monitoring documents, and through the state-level student information system data. All original data collection methods and materials were submitted to Northern Illinois University’s Office of Research Compliance and Integrity for approval prior to any data collection taking place. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted for all materials and methods described below. Student enrollment and demographic data was pulled from the Illinois State Board of Education’s SIS. To access that data, the NIU Research Team requested the data from ISBE, which was pulled as a comprehensive file at one time in February 2019. This resulting data set is used consistently throughout this report. For a variety of reasons, the resulting data is different, but within an accepted margin of error, from what has been previously reported by the Illinois State Board of Education.
### Evaluation Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Area</th>
<th>Sources of Information</th>
<th>Instruments Used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Implementation of PDG-E</td>
<td>Surveys, interviews, focus groups, monitoring documents, extant classroom observation data</td>
<td>Teacher survey, family survey, program support specialist survey, program director interviews, teacher focus groups, focus groups for parents/adult family members, Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (ECERS-3) data, and Continuous Quality Improvement Plan (CQIP) data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-Quality Preschool</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programming</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring</td>
<td>Surveys, interviews, focus groups, monitoring documents, extant classroom observation data</td>
<td>Teacher survey, family survey, program support specialist survey, program director interviews, teacher focus groups, focus groups for parents/adult family members, ECERS-3 data, and CQIP data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Partnership</td>
<td>Surveys, interviews, focus groups</td>
<td>Teacher survey, family survey, program director interviews, teacher focus groups, focus groups for parents/adult family members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment of Birth to Grade</td>
<td>Surveys, interviews, focus groups, monitoring documents, extant classroom observation data</td>
<td>Teacher survey, family survey, program director interviews, teacher focus groups, focus groups for parents/adult family members, monitoring documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Impact</td>
<td>Surveys, interviews, focus groups, monitoring documents, extant classroom observation data, Illinois State Board of Education Student Information System (SIS) data</td>
<td>Teacher survey, family survey, program support specialist survey, program director interviews, teacher focus groups, focus groups for parents/adult family members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>Surveys, interviews, focus groups, monitoring documents, extant classroom observation data, SIS data</td>
<td>Teacher survey, family survey, program support specialist survey, program director interviews, teacher focus groups, focus groups for parents/adult family members, SIS data</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Surveys

Three surveys were conducted with various stakeholders as part of the evaluation process. Each survey was rigorously developed with input from multiple sources. Members of the evaluation team developed survey questions by (1) consulting existing research about parent/family and teacher early childhood evaluations, (2) consulting with early childhood experts and survey experts at the National Opinion Research Center-University of Chicago (NORC), (3) examining other states’ yearly surveys, (4) reviewing Illinois-specific grant requirements, and (5) through consultation with representatives from the Illinois State Board of Education and the Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development.

Once survey items were created, a read-through of all survey items was conducted with parents who had a four-year-old in preschool and with preschool teachers. Through this process survey questions were tested for clarity and content. After multiple iterations of item improvement, representatives from Illinois State Board of Education and the Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development gave final approval for the surveys to be sent out electronically via Qualtrics, a commonly used electronic survey platform. Surveys were available in both English and Spanish and were delivered via an electronic link sent in an e-mail. Surveys could be completed on a computer, a tablet, a smartphone, or any internet-capable device.
The evaluation team created surveys that were completed by the following groups:

- A total of 157 families (out of 4,734 families surveyed) who had a child in a PDG-E classroom during the 2018–2019 school year completed a 49-item survey, which consisted of questions that required a Likert-type rating as well as open-ended questions where families could freely share their thoughts.
- A total of 139 teachers and paraprofessionals (out of approximately 450 possible teachers and paraprofessionals surveyed) who worked in PDG-E classrooms during the 2018–2019 school year completed a 36-item survey, which consisted of questions that required a Likert-type rating as well as open-ended questions where teachers and paraprofessionals could freely share their thoughts.
- A total of 6 State program support specialists (out of 9 possible surveyed) who worked with PDG-E programs during the 2018–2019 school year completed a completed a 16-item survey, which consisted of questions that forced-choice types of rating as well as open-ended questions where program support specialists could freely share their thoughts.

Program Director Interviews

Project staff worked with survey professionals at the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago (NORC) and Illinois State Board of Education and Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development consultants in the development of the program director interview protocol. Project staff developed an initial draft of the semi-structured interview protocol that was informed by the original PDG-E grant proposal and the PDG-E initiative manual developed to provide training to program sites on the program model. NORC staff provided input on the initial draft based upon their experience working nationally on evaluations of early learning initiatives. Project staff incorporated suggestions from NORC staff into a draft that was presented for review by Illinois State Board of Education and Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development consultants. Question testing was also completed with a non-PDG-E affiliated Preschool for All administrator. Upon the completion of question testing and a real time review with ISBE consultants, a final review of the protocol was completed and approved by the ISBE staff.

The program director interview protocol was submitted for review and approval to the Institutional Review Board at Northern Illinois University. Following IRB approval, the ISBE staff communicated the need to complete the program director interview to all PDG-E program sites. Evaluation team staff communicated with all PDG-E program directors directly to coordinate the completion of an on-site or telephone survey. All program directors or a high-level on-site designee participated in the individual interview with a member or members of the evaluation team. These interviews took place in-person or over the phone at the request of the program director. Each interview took approximately 90 minutes. Informed written consent was obtained from all program director interview participants for both the collection and analysis of interview data. Where prior written consent was obtained, interviews were electronically recorded for later transcription and analysis.
Focus Groups

Following the approval of the Institutional Review Board at Northern Illinois University, focus groups were conducted in two neighboring communities in the Northern Illinois region. Six different focus groups were conducted. These focus groups included two groups of each of the following: (1) community stakeholders, (2) teaching staff, and (3) parents/adult family members (one group in English and a second group in Spanish that included two way interpretation between Spanish and English with a bilingual interpreter working as a co-facilitator of the focus group). Focus groups ranged in size from two participants to eight participants. Those participating in the focus groups represented community stakeholders (seven people in roles such as a representative of the public library and a member of the community’s childhood task force), teachers (11 people), and family members (nine people).

Following notification by the ISBE project consultant to program directors in both communities, evaluation team staff worked with both program directors to identify both dates and locations for the groups. Program directors assisted in identifying and notifying both families and community stakeholders about the dates/times of the focus groups. Focus groups were conducted on separate days in both programs. Program administrators were not permitted to participate in the focus group activities.

Upon arriving at the focus group locations, participants were asked to read and provide their signature on the project’s informed consent form. Consent was obtained for both participation and digitally recording the focus group dialogue for later transcription. A signed copy of the consent form was provided to each of the participants. Following brief introductions, evaluation team members facilitated the discussion in the focus groups using a series of guiding questions designed to elicit important information and discussion about PDG-E programmatic activity in each district. The length of the focus groups varied between 60 and 75 minutes.

Following the completion of the focus groups, digital recordings of the focus groups were transcribed by a third-party transcription service with experience in the transcription of recordings with multiple speakers. Project staff completed the transcription and translation of the parent/family member focus group completed in Spanish. Following the completion of transcriptions, project staff reviewed all audio files with the transcription to establish the accuracy of each transcription. Transcript files were uploaded to the NVIVO qualitative analysis program for the completion of textual analysis alongside existing program director interviews.

Classroom Observations

The Illinois State Board of Education provided the evaluation team with classroom observation data collected from representatives from National Louis University, whom the state sub-contracted to conduct classroom quality assessments. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Revised (ECERS-R; Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998) was used by the outside evaluators from National Louis University to assess the classroom environment of all PDG-E programs during the 2016 and 2017 fiscal years.

The ECERS-R had 43 items that loaded onto seven subscales; Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Language-Reasoning, Activities, Interaction, Program Structure, and Parents and Staff. The State of Illinois did not assess Personal Care Routines. The ECERS-R was conducted via classroom observation, but scores could also be derived based upon teacher report. The ECERS-R was a widely used, highly reliable and valid observational tool to assess early childhood classroom quality.

While the ECERS-R was used during the 2016 and 2017 fiscal years, the assessment creators updated the tool, and as a result, Illinois switched to using The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition for the 2018 fiscal year and beyond (ECERS-3; Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2015). The same methodology was used with the ECERS-3; namely, outside evaluators from National Louis University utilized the ECERS-3 to assess the classroom environment of all PDG-E programs. The ECERS-3 is a 35-item assessment that is conducted as a classroom observation that takes places during a three-hour time sample. The 35 items are categorized into six subscales: Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Language and Literacy, Learning Activities, Interactions, and Program Structure. Note that Illinois does not assess Personal Care Routines; therefore, the total number of items...
in Illinois’ assessment is 31. One classroom is observed at a time and observers interact with the environment, and students within the environment, as little as possible. One significant change from the ECERS-R to the ECERS-3 is that only observation data are used to score assessment items on the ECERS-3, whereas in earlier versions teacher input was considered in scoring items. The ECERS-3 demonstrates high reliability and validity indices.

All PDG-E subgrantees were evaluated in 2016, unless the subgrantee was not a PDG-E recipient at that time. After that initial evaluation, one third of the programs were evaluated in 2017, one third were evaluated in 2018, and the final one third were evaluated in 2019. Table 3.1 below indicates which sites were evaluated during each year as well as the fiscal years in which the site has been a subgrantee in the program.

Table 3.1. Subgrantee Participation and Evaluation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subgrantee</th>
<th>Fiscal Years in PDG-E</th>
<th>Years Evaluated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Addison School District 400</td>
<td>2015–present</td>
<td>2016, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aurora East USD 131</td>
<td>2015–present</td>
<td>2016, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aurora West USD 129</td>
<td>2015–present</td>
<td>2016, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berwyn North SD98</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berwyn South SD100</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cahokia CUSD 187</td>
<td>2018–present</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children's Center-Cicero Berwyn</td>
<td>2017–present</td>
<td>2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Home and Aid Society</td>
<td>2015–present</td>
<td>2016, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collinsville CUSD100</td>
<td>2018–present</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CUSD 300</td>
<td>2015–present</td>
<td>2016, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decatur SD 61</td>
<td>2015–present</td>
<td>2016, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolton SD 148</td>
<td>2015–present</td>
<td>2016, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolton SD 149</td>
<td>2015–present</td>
<td>2016, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elgin SD U-46</td>
<td>2015–present</td>
<td>2016, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freeburg CCSD 70</td>
<td>2018–present</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvey SD 152</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lansing SD 158</td>
<td>2015–present</td>
<td>2016, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lessie Bates Davis Neighborhood</td>
<td>2018–present</td>
<td>2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McLean County USD 5</td>
<td>2015–present</td>
<td>2016, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan Family Services</td>
<td>2015–present</td>
<td>2016, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morton College District 527</td>
<td>2017–2018</td>
<td>2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Vernon SD 80</td>
<td>2015–present</td>
<td>2016, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Chicago SD 187</td>
<td>2015–present</td>
<td>2016, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Hope United-Northern Region</td>
<td>2015–present</td>
<td>2016, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posen-Robbins ESD 143-5</td>
<td>2015–present</td>
<td>2016, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock Island ROE</td>
<td>2015–present</td>
<td>2016, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Rockford</td>
<td>2015–2018</td>
<td>2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rockford SD 205</td>
<td>2015–present</td>
<td>2016, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valley View CUSD 365U</td>
<td>2015–present</td>
<td>2016, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Chicago ESD 33</td>
<td>2015–present</td>
<td>2016, 2017</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Monitoring Documents

In addition to classroom observations, each program was assessed using the Compliance Checklist, which contained 40 items. The PDG-E addendum comprised 20 of the items on the compliance checklist. Those 20 items were categorized into seven domains: (1) Program Design, (2) Enrollment and Eligibility, (3) Curriculum and Assessment, (4) Community Partnerships and Comprehensive Services, (5) Personnel and Professional Development, (6) Parent Engagement and Empowerment, and (7) Services to Children with Special Needs. Each domain has specific compliance indicators listed along with verification of documentation for each program. Once programs received the results of the Compliance Checklist and the ECERS summary report(s), program directors completed the Continuous Quality Improvement Plan (CQIP) and addressed any areas for improvement via observable, measurable goals. Programs completed a Continuous Quality Improvement Plan after their monitoring visits, and they provide updates annually on years when there is not a monitoring visit.

The evaluation team received all compliance checklists and Continuous Quality Improvement Plans from all subgrantees from FY2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019.

Other Data Sources

The Center: Resources for Teaching and Learning employs the PDG-E program support specialists. Monthly Technical Assistance Reports were used as a source for this report.

The Birth-to-Third Grade Continuity Project coordinated by Illinois State University hosted yearly conferences, and at each event, participants completed a brief evaluation regarding their perceptions of the effectiveness of the sessions. These evaluations were also used as part of this comprehensive report.

Approach to Data Analysis

Data was systematically analyzed from all data sources listed above in order to answer the research questions set forth. The interviews and focus groups were analyzed qualitatively, whereas descriptive statistics were conducted on the survey data. Extant data were culled for themes, and data from the Illinois State Board of Education’s Student Information System was used to provide a broader view of PDG-E program success.
High-Quality Preschool Programs — Strengths and Challenges
General Observations

Throughout the process of evaluating the PDG-E initiative, the evaluators observed generally positive impacts about the initiative. This feeling was reflected at all levels by program directors, teachers, family members, and community stakeholders.

Appreciation for the program was articulated by family members; as one parent said, “We are very happy with the preschool program for our son. He likes coming to school and socializing with his classmates. Most importantly is to teach children to socialize with those around them. The best place to do that, to start those socialization skills, is at school. The preschool program has given our children and ourselves that opportunity. In our experience that we’ve had, we are very happy with what has been done for preschool for our children.”

While some program directors may have voiced some criticism and/or concerns about the specific elements of the program, most embraced the additional resources that the program provided to children, families, and communities. As one program director states, “I’m — I’m so glad our district got to be a part of this grant and bring these programs to kids. I think it’s been a great addition. I think we need it. It’s nice that we can, you know just, these comprehensive services are just — it’s great. And some of the gains — just some of the things I’ve watched families go through, and — I mean there’s lots of stories tied to the grant. …”

Key Takeaways

A summary of strengths and challenges related to the PDG-E initiative is provided below. These findings capture primary areas that emerged as themes throughout the completion of program director interviews, focus groups with family members, teachers, paraprofessionals, and community stakeholders, as well as survey responses provided by program support specialists.

• The PDG-E program was transformational for many subgrantees in terms of how they conceptualized and delivered early education programming. While many had provided Preschool for All through the half-day model, the new program model elevated the complexity and scope of activities for both children and their families. It required school systems to rethink how they supported early education programming within their communities.
• The full-day, high-quality program model was perceived as a strength of the PDG-E initiative. More contact time with children provided greater opportunities for teachers to support them in preparation for kindergarten and the comprehensive nature of the program facilitated greater access to community-based resources for both children and family members.
• The PDG-E initiative has facilitated system development related to communities’ capacity to support high-quality preschool programming. The PDG-E initiative has also elevated early education as a focal point for collaborative activity and system building in some communities.
• While there may have been sporadic confusion related to programmatic expectations early in the PDG-E initiative, interview and focus group data indicate that ISBE consulting staff were always accessible and responsive in supporting the new subgrantees at the start and throughout the PDG-E initiative. Combined with the support provided by the Program Support Specialists, subgrantees were supported throughout periods of transformative change required by the PDG-E program model.
• PDG-E initiative requirements related to classroom enrollments were challenging for many subgrantees. Subgrantee staff in both focus groups and interviews expressed their difficulties in attending to an aggregate of 20 children per classroom, who were at risk because of their complex needs. Some staff expressed their desire for increased staffing in their classrooms in order to attend to the unique needs of each child.
• A few PDG-E sites expressed their desire for additional funding for transportation in order to facilitate increased program participation and attendance.
• Challenges to sustaining high quality preschool programs include fiscal, space, and personnel. Most of the programs stated that they could not sustain a program if funding was reduced. A few programs reported space challenges and many programs reported difficulties finding well qualified teachers due to teacher shortages.
This section explores in depth a subset of the PDG-E specific HQPP elements. However, the following table highlights where each of the twelve PDG-E specific elements receive attention throughout the report.

Table 4.1. Summary of findings for specific factors of High Quality Preschool Programs and location of further discussion in the report.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High Quality Preschool Program Factor</th>
<th>Brief Summary of Findings</th>
<th>Where It is Discussed in the Report</th>
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</table>
| Class sizes of no more than 20 students with a staffing ratio of no more than 1:10.                        | - Class sizes and staffing ratios were not directly verified in this evaluation.  
- Perceptions of having a class of high needs students with relatively few staff emerged as a consistent concern.                  | Section 5 “Impact of Class Size” p. 33–35;  
Section 5 “Additional Supports” p. 40.                                                                 |
| Inclusion of children with disabilities with the additional requirement that a classroom with children having Individual Education Plans (IEPs) must be staffed by an early educator who has a Professional Educator License (PEL) for the appropriate student grade levels along with a Special Education Endorsement | - More than ten percent of students enrolled in PDG-E had IEPs.  
- Credentials of staff were not directly examined in this evaluation.  
- Having high rates of IEPs within a single class with a typical staffing of two was raised as a challenge.  
- Program directors and program support specialists referenced the inclusion of children with disabilities in the classroom model. | Section 2 “PDG-E Enrollment” p. 11;  
Section 4 “Strengths and Wins” p. 23;  
Section 5 “Impact of Class Size” p. 35;  
Section 5 “Program Changes” p. 39;  
Section 5 “Teacher Support and Program Development” p. 39. |
| Provision of family engagement services designed to meet the cultural and linguistic demands of the community and focused on the seven Child and Family Outcomes described in the Head Start Family & Community Engagement Framework, including language support services | - Families of a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds cited their participation in and the strength of the PDG-E family programs and their connections with PDG-E staff members including the family educator and mental health facilitator.  
- Between 85 and 100% of families responded on a variety of specific topics that they felt supported and learned as a result of the family engagement services. | Section 8 “Services and Family Engagement”, pp. 55–68. |
| Enhanced family engagement services including a family educator who holds a bachelor’s degree, and who, to the maximum degree possible, reflects the language and culture of the community | - The family educator was a highly valued member of the PDG-E program team both by other program staff members and by the family members of children.  
- Family educators working in PDG-E funded sites were essential to the success of engagement with families and facilitating connections between the PDG-E program and comprehensive community-based services. | Section 8 “Services and Family Engagement”, pp. 55–68. |
| Hiring Instructional Leader with specific early childhood expertise and expertise in serving culturally and linguistically diverse children, in a ratio of no more than one per ten classrooms, whose primary responsibility is to provide embedded professional development and implement a professional learning community focused on instructional excellence. | - The instructional leader delivered between one-quarter and one-half of the professional development topics listed based on survey responses from teachers and paraprofessionals.  
- On nearly all professional development topics, with the clear exception of Behavior Management, approximately two-thirds to three-fourths of teacher and paraprofessional survey respondents stated that the professional development was somewhat-to-very effective. | Section 5 “Teacher Support and Program Development”, pp. 45–48. |
### High Quality Preschool Program Factor

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<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Brief Summary of Findings</th>
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<tr>
<td>Meals and snacks as appropriate for the length of the program day</td>
<td>• Discussion of this specific topic did not emerge in the data collection.</td>
<td>Section 7, “Benefits from Expansion Specifically”, p. 54.</td>
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<td>following the guidelines of the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)</td>
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<td>A full-day program, defined as at least as long as the first grade</td>
<td>• Using SIS data, it was verified that each PDG-E program offered a full-day program.</td>
<td>Section 7, “Benefits from Expansion Specifically”, p. 54.</td>
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<td>school day in the local school district, including at least 60</td>
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<td>minutes of physical activity daily</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recruitment and enrollment of children with multiple, significant risk</td>
<td>• Evidence existed that programs did enroll kids with the priority factors.</td>
<td>Section 5, “Impact of Class Size” pp. 33–35;</td>
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<tr>
<td>factors</td>
<td>• Some programs reported engaging with local early childhood programs to identify highest need children.</td>
<td>Section 5 “Program Changes” p. 39;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Challenges reported due to concentration of children with the priority factors in one classroom.</td>
<td>Section 6 “Building the Continuum” pp. 44–45;</td>
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<td>Section 7 “Benefits from Expansion Specifically” pp. 54.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provision of universal and targeted supports for children’s positive</td>
<td>• Evidence of teachers receiving professional development related to behavior and social and emotional development which was perceived to be valuable.</td>
<td>Section 5, “Impact of Class Size” p. 33–34;</td>
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<tr>
<td>behavior and social and emotional development</td>
<td>• Teachers report wanting more training to help with challenges.</td>
<td>Section 5 “Table 5.1” p. 36–37;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• It is clear that the mental health consultant was an important element of PDG-E</td>
<td>Section 5 “Additional Supports” p. 40;</td>
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<td>programming.</td>
<td>Section 5 “Future Professional Development” p. 40;</td>
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<td>Section 7 “Benefits from Expansion Specifically” pp. 54.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enhanced support for families to obtain needed health, mental</td>
<td>• As a result of the articulated partnerships, community partners and PDG-E program staff identified an increase in families taking advantage of a wide range of services, from more families with young children obtaining library cards to more families being connected with appropriate physical and mental health services.</td>
<td>Section 8 “Services and Family Engagement”, pp. 55–68.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>health, dental, and social services through well-articulated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>partnerships with other service providers in the community</td>
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### Strengths and Wins

**Program transformation**

While the PDG-E program posed new challenges for many of the recipient sites, positive impacts described by program directors, teaching staff, family members, and stakeholders spoke to the transformative elements of the program. For some, it was transformative moving from the half-day PFA model to the high-quality PDG-E full-day model. For others, it was transformative for the community.

Some of the transformative elements of the PDG-E initiative involved moving past the PFA model into a more comprehensive program model. One program director describes this as it relates to the need to hire a mental health consultant and the need to think beyond the resources available exclusively from within the school. She states, “I think it provided some really good ideas that we did not think of with the Preschool For All program like the whole mental health consultant. It kind of made us analyze how we do things a little bit, to move outside of the school arena.”
Another program director spoke to the requirements the new model imposed related to program quality. The new requirements were significant, but in the end, coupled with the additional resources and the work of staff members, contributed to elevating the quality of services provided in the district. She says,

“I jokingly say ISBE had heard me say this often. The expansion grant was the worst and the best thing that ever happened to our program because the expectations, the accountability were spot on. It was a lot of hoops, a lot of hoops … It was a lot of work. The time put into it for that accountability piece, but what that made us do is really look at what we’re doing at each level, whether it be environment, instruction, interactions. Then each staff member has to have their own professional development goal, we just did it.”

The program director in a different community describes how the program provided them with resources necessary to move beyond the PFA model and her desire for even more high-quality resources, which go beyond what she had previously imagined in the context of provided early education services. She states,

Yeah I mean overall it’s just been a really positive experience having the expansion grant. I feel like you know — put it in like a little MTSS (Multi-Tiered Systems of Support) model — like when you got expansion funding, you got such a higher quality — like you just got more opportunity, and you got more support, and that was so helpful. So I feel bad almost for people that just have PFA because you don’t have all of those resources that we got to have. And it just opened my eyes of what else we can provide our PFA people. Like I never thought about having an instructional leader or coach like. But now that because I had to have one, now we have one, and I see the value, now I want more of that.”

Similarly, another program director speaks to the professional development resources provided that were specifically focused on early education programming within the school district. She describes the impact of these targeted professional development resources,

“For professional development, it really did allow … an instructional leader when we never had anyone focused on preschool before, previously, our preschool staff would attend professional development along with the rest of the district staff, and it often did not pertain. Now, with having an instructional leader, we’ve been breaking it apart more. In some ways, I wonder why it took that to lead us to this point. [Laughs] But it did. Now, we can have professional development geared towards preschool and what would improve their programs instead of just having them listen to the professional development for the rest of the district.”

For some, the PDG-E initiative has allowed them to move beyond generalizations made about services provided to young children. One program director describes how the program has transformed the mindset of how early education programming is perceived. She states,

“I think there’s a shift in thinking a little bit the whole social-emotional piece necessitates that with the statewide, that’s the Pyramid Model. All those things just are making people more aware and I think there’s more of a focus on early childhood now. People are finally realizing we’re not daycare. [laughs] I can go on and on about that.”

Others interviewed talked about how the PDG-E initiative was changing their community for the better. For many communities, it was the first funding they received for high-quality full-day preschool programming. Some districts simply did not have the resources to support any preschool programming. One program director describes the impact in her community by stating,

“I think it’s been amazing. We’re a small community. Like I said, we have a lot of students who are at risk. The money supports the teachers, supports the professional development, supports things that our other schools are not able to do. We’re able to do them with the resources provided.”
**Full-day programming**

The full-day programming and the comprehensive scope of services was mentioned by participants from 10 programs as the greatest positive aspect of the program. At the program level, access to community-based resources provided better supports for both children and families. For families, the opportunities provided flexibility for working adult caregivers as well as resources related to becoming a more informed family about school and education.

One parent describes the impact of the PDG-E compared to the half-day PFA program. She states,

“I like the full-day program. My daughter did the half-day program last year. For the half-day, I felt like there wasn’t enough time and as a parent that, having to drop them off and pick them up right away. The full-day for me was fantastic. They’re in school for this period of time. It’s helped her develop her social, communication, definitely verbiage, her mentality.”

Similarly, a teacher comments about the full-day programming by stating,

“I just really wanted to say that the program overall is just positive, you know. Of course, there’s always room for improvement, but I think it’s a great thing for the community as a whole. I think that it has allowed us to expand our enrollment and making sure that we reach as many high-need students that are out there. I’m happy that it is an opportunity for kids to be in school full-day as opposed to a half-a-day.”

**Full-day and kindergarten readiness**

All of the program directors reported that one of the “wins” was the fact that children who participate in a full-day program are much better prepared for kindergarten. The duration of the day allows more time to work with children within a safe and well-managed learning environment. One program director puts it in terms of “moving the needle.” She states,

“We always talk about moving the needle with the kids, getting them ready for kindergarten. I think the fact that we’re able to provide it for six hours, that we have more of a chance to move that needle with this program as opposed to maybe a 2.5 hour program.”

The impact of being in a more intensive full-day program provides enrolled children the opportunities to interact verbally with peers and teaching staff. Drawing upon her experiences working with children in a full-day program, one teacher describes one of the wins as,

“Oh by — just full day. I mean you can’t underestimate just having more time with the kids — the impact that has on their readiness. I mean just their vocabulary. I mean, I truly — like so many of our kids go home and look at screens, or people are so busy and so stressed, they don’t have time to talk to their kids. And they sit in a place where there’s no screens, and they are made to talk like all day long, and they’re listened to. And like they just — their language explodes. So I think just the literacy gains are massive.”

Other evaluation participants embraced the value of the full-day, high-quality program along with the full-day model as being beneficial to both children and families. The increased time with children facilitates increased development in children and the work with families provides new opportunities to engage with families who may be isolated and unfamiliar with the school system. A program director states,

“I just think it is very beneficial. I think that, like I said, the duration of services has allowed our teachers and our staff to really spend more time getting to know the kids, developing those relationships with them and with our families, and allowing them to really focus in on helping those kids get ready for kindergarten. It’s extremely beneficial, and then allowing and encouraging that same family services as part of that program, helping to ensure that we were able to provide an array of services to all of our families, case managing those families who are setting goals, helping them understand the importance of attendance. It’s a quality program. I’m glad that they wrote the program to be more of an intensive program, because we did feel that the things that were in that were very important for children and families.”
High-Quality Program Model

One program director describes the biggest win for her program as the high quality model required by the PDG-E initiative. Among the characteristics included in her description are the required program elements of inclusion, the involvement of an instructional leader, and family involvement. She states,

“The comprehensive services hands down. We haven’t talked about inclusion or my instructional leader really either, but no I mean it’s just — just the parents support that we’re able to give families. The mental health support we’re able to provide families. I think it’s truly looking at the whole child and the family, and not just the child in our classroom for two and a half hours. So I think it’s a shift in thinking.”

Another program director speaks to the individualized care that the high-quality program model affords to families. The individualization is facilitated by the program's required family coordinator staff role. She states,

“I love the comprehensive services so our parent coordinator does, you know, she meets with every single family and helps them do Parent Goals ... And she’s helped people get their GEDs. She’s helped people work on their immigration status. She’s helped people — young moms will sign up for community college.”

The impact of a high quality program model that offers comprehensive services was likely more important for less resourced communities where more families struggled with the challenges of poverty. Families enmeshed in poverty are many times isolated by living in communities with limited services, such as a lack of transportation. One program director states,

“Definitely. Comprehensive services, that’s a big win for us, for those families that needed mental health services and they were struggling with getting in such facilities with us having MOUs with services that allowed us to provide them with a contact person to make the partnership a little seamless and easier for them to navigate.”

Similarly, another program director comments about how the program simplifies the process for families to access community-based resources. She states,

“... and to provide those comprehensive services for them. To have a resource for them when they come and say, ‘Well, I can’t do this — The immunizations and things like that.’ You can send them to a resource that they don’t have to go through so much red tape to get to because having those MOUs and things.”

System and community level impact

One program director describes the big win for her program as the transformation of the district’s early education programming. The requirements imposed by the PDG-E program model forced her district to change their philosophy towards early education, one that focused much more intensely on the families served by the program and how it has changed their existing PFA programming. She states,

“We’ve also changed our philosophy in the district. I say we — I came in with the preschool expansion, it didn’t change my perspective. But overall, like our Preschool for All program has an instructional leader, and they now have two family educators to provide more comprehensive services. That’s not required for their program, but it’s required for preschool expansion, and it’s best practice. We’re increasing those high-quality — not that they weren’t high-quality classrooms before, but really reaching the whole family. That’s increased just by having preschool expansion and looking at, “Well, if that program is offering this, why isn’t this program offering this?” And if we can write to offer that, then why aren’t we doing that? Being able to kind of match. Our Preschool for All program looks a lot like our preschool expansion program, which is not always the case. I think that’s changed the mindset of how we’re offering services for families and not just kiddos.”
The implementation of the comprehensive program model has reframed discussions related to what constitutes a high-quality preschool experience for young children across the state. One program director articulated her hopes that different preschool programs will continue to evolve whereby all provide programming like that defined by PDG-E. She states,

“I’m happy that we have both programs, PFA and PFAE (PDG-E) which expands our depth a little bit more and that we’re able to provide some comprehensive services. I’m hoping that, like I said earlier, that ... The Preschool for All Program, that it mirrors the Expansion program. This would be a lot more seamless if both programs were doing the same things, and so, my hope is that we’ll get there and that eventually, that’s what it would look like. They will mirror each other.”

The high-quality PDG-E model has resulted in some district-based programs moving towards the community in order to address the issues that confront families and their children after the close of the school day. It was described by one program director as the districts engaging with the community in order to provide the range of services needed by children and families served by the program. She states,

“That really drove us to doing it through the collaborative, but really it went hand-in-hand with going outside. Because we were for the longest time we were like “We are the school. We’ll take care of all the stuff at school. What you do at home, that’s not on us because we are here at school.” So that bridging to the community just in case was ideal. That was a great byproduct of the Expansion.”

The availability of resources and fiscal support through the PDG-E initiative also provided incentives for school districts and community-based agencies to participate in developing community-level systems to support early education services. In some communities, coalitions were built with the sole mission of supporting the education of young children. Upon identifying community impact as a big win, one program director details why she feels this way. She states,

“I think the big win, honestly is, from a person that sits at the table where all the school districts come together ever since the beginning, it’s the relationships that came out of working together. I still remember (names coalition stakeholder) sitting at the table, and he was listening to his co-principal, and he goes, “Oh, I already took care of that. Why don’t I just send that over and we can work together and look at it from a community — ” It’s the exchange that happened. We were actually at (names local agency) when that happened. I just watched this — almost, well-oiled machine of sharing, of saying, “I’ll look into this and I’ll provide this information for you.” I think that’s a big win that (names community) ... There’s this real commitment to working together, to looking at the big picture. That’s huge for this community. It went beyond the school district. It went to our agencies who weren’t typically at the table ... ”

**Elevation of early learning at the community level**

Another win in some communities has been the role that the PDG-E initiative has played in elevating early education as a focal point for collaborative activity and system building. Having access to fiscal resources to support early education has resulted in having additional community stakeholders at the table. As one program director describes,

“I think another big win is that because all of a sudden we had this influx of funding that we’re so focused on early childhood. This community is starting to acknowledge the importance of early learning. Similarly, at the district level this PD states, “And also, I think that expansion has helped us increase our footprint in this city as a district. And so, now when there are district conversations we don’t talk K-12, we talk pre-K-12, which hasn’t always been the case.” Another program director concurs stating, “Yes, real positive, we’re not disengaged anymore. The preschool is engaged. They’re part of the pre-K-12 system. I think they’ve done that.”
Accountability

Some identified the required accountability for program resources and maintaining a high-quality program as a big win. As one program director states, “The other win for this one was the increased accountability. It’s both for teachers, staff, paras, related service.”

The required accountability has resulted in programs really thinking and focusing upon what they are doing. One program director illustrates accountability in the context of providing mental health services for children. (See Section 7 for more related to mental health.) She states,

“It really has held us accountable, made us focus. We didn’t ever do mental health screening of all the children in the program, and so now we do, which I think is a huge win for the children because we’re seeing more and more families with trauma. So I think that’s a win.”

Direct supports from ISBE

In terms of the direct support that individual programs received directly from the state on a one-to-one basis, there was near universal agreement that ISBE Principal Consultants were accessible, responsive, and helpful to both the subgrantees and the processes.

Given the dynamic nature of individual sites, the responsiveness of state consultants was critical in order to keep programs moving forward. Many program sites had previous experience with the Preschool for All half-day program, but PDG-E program model presented new implementation challenges. When asked how supportive/effective state support was for her program, a program director describes the important work that ISBE personnel provide for individual program sites. As one program director explains,

“Typically, if there’s an area that I’m struggling, I pick up the phone and I call … (ISBE Principal Consultant) I mean, honestly, … from an expansion standpoint, she was my absolute go-to person. Her response is always within probably a half an hour, 45 minutes … she knows her stuff. If she doesn’t know it, she’ll say, “I don’t know, I’ll get back to you,” and she does. She is my go-to person, and I feel very blessed.”

She describes her experience with more than one ISBE consultant,

“I think that they are always available for support. Having a principal consultant for the program, that is always there to guide, give you support, and help you figure out the changes and the things that are being asked of you to do, is really important.”

Challenges

Early communication and implementation challenges

There was evidence of confusion on the part of program staff related to how they were to respond to information received at trainings, from various Program Support Specialists and ISBE consultants over the course of the PDG-E initiative. These issues were more likely to emerge at the beginning of the initiative. Evaluators heard that “we were building the plane as we flew it” from numerous evaluation participants. While it appears that responses from ISBE staff were always punctual and helpful, there was a sporadic confusion about what to do and when to do it because multiple supports of the PDG-E initiative may have articulated conflicting information about what was required. As one program director states,

“I also think it’s really hard to figure out what’s required and what’s suggested. And there’s a couple reasons for that. One is I don’t think there’s always a very visible plan for users as to what’s the long-term plan here in the state of Illinois? We always just feel like we’re maybe a month ahead of what’s actually required of us. Then it’s hard to tell, is this something that we need to jump on now? We definitely believe that it’s important, but we don’t want to jump on and then find, well, it’s going in a different direction now. It’s also sometimes hard to tell which agency we’re listening to. Are we listening to The Ounce? Are we listening to ISBE? I think that there’s sometimes competing messages and sometimes just different information coming out of those organizations. Then it’s hard to tell who’s my main go-to? Is it (redacted person name)? Is it ISBE? … Is it (redacted organization name)? I feel like there’s lots of resources out there but it’s often hard to tell what am I supposed to be listening to?”
Challenges related to classroom ratios and staffing

The evaluation data collected from approximately 25 percent of program sites (representing over 4,000 children served) indicate that maintaining aggregates of 20 children for each program was extremely challenging. Based on the data collected, some programs hoped to reduce the student-to-staff ratio in each classroom with increased levels of staffing. A program director from a program describes challenges related to the high enrollments of children in relation to the available staff within the priority populations that are the focus of the grant. She states,

“... one of the biggest challenges is in those classrooms we’re finding the most at-risk kids so they are very, very needy. So, to have those costs to 20 (children in a class). Is really challenging, in my opinion, is too many ... That has been the absolute biggest challenge.”

The normal staffing in a PDG-E initiative program classroom is one licensed teacher and one paraprofessional. Some programs have attempted to secure an extra paraprofessional to assist in supporting the children within the priority populations in being successful in the program. Two teachers are reflecting about their desire for increased staffing in the context of a focus group. They shared, as follows:

Teacher B: “With 20 students, yep”.
Teacher A: “Yes. I don’t have any dreams of that happening.”
Interviewer: “You got two. Presently, you’ve got two.”
Teacher A: “We have two.”
Teacher B: “I feel like an octopus. I wish I had eight arms.”
Interviewer: “Okay.”
Teacher A: “That would be ideal, we said, thankfully we have other supports but — ”
Teacher B: “Yes, that would definitely be helpful with — Being able to have more time for that important instruction elements that you really need, like social-emotional needs. If you had that extra staff member, you could maybe divide up your classroom into three groups, and really have a rotating small group time and things of that nature. So you’re able to focus all those needs more individually.”

Transportation challenges

Transportation was referenced by evaluation participants as one area of potential improvement. Program directors, staff, and community stakeholders were of mixed opinions related to transportation. Transportation was a larger issue for programs with centralized programming (in contrast to a neighborhood school) for young children within a district-wide early learning facility. As a group of family members describe transportation issues in their community, one parent said,

“Yes. We searched, I think other parents looked for this information, to see if there were transport(ation) maybe not in front of the house, but near the house. We know for certain reasons of being too close, buses won’t be around. But, now, I have a little bit of time. I’m not working right now and I help my wife bring my child to school every day and take him home. My wife, since the beginning could not drive because of her pregnancy. I’m not saying everyone’s situation is the same, some people don’t know how to drive, some don’t have a car to bring their child, some have to take a long walk. For the school, a mile might not be so long but for people walking it can be, especially for children.”

In some communities, transportation was a critical issue for many families. Lack of transportation to a PDG-E program renders the existence of the program a moot point. As one social service agency representative describes,

“I think that for our families — I think I only got into the preschool portions of (names agency) about six months before this happened, but I would say maybe if we have 50 pre-K aged kids, there may have been 10 of them in school before, and it was a struggle to get them there, to get them to a preschool or some place. And now it’s probably 40. There’s a huge additional ability. The only struggle that we have is transportation. If they don’t live close enough to walk, then they can’t go to school. That, for us, it’s been a really, really large thing.”
Sustainability

As quoted on the Illinois State Board of Education’s PDG-E website, the goal of the program is “to enhance its infrastructure to provide high-quality preschool programs, and to expand high-quality full day preschool programs for four-year-olds in high-need communities” and to do so in ways that are sustainable over the long run. Challenges to sustaining preschool programs include fiscal- and personnel-related challenges. Programs utilize grant funds in a variety of areas depending on the needs of the classroom or students. A few programs also face limited space challenges. However, most of the programs would not be able to financially sustain the program if federal and state funding ceases. As two program directors express their thoughts related to the politics of funding high-quality preschool programming as defined by the PDG-E model,

Program Director A: “I think it’s going to be the funding and right now early childhood is really a hot topic all over the place. But, I’ve been in education long enough to know that the pendulum’s going to swing again and preschool is not required. If state funding gets cut anymore, eventually this lovely preschool funding that we’ve been getting is probably going to be the first to go. I appreciate what we have and what we’ve had. I just hope we can continue in the focus in early childhood. The research is still there for why we need early childhood.”

Program Director B: “We’ve had a commitment to early childhood since the ‘80s, at least. We had parents as teachers and preschool programming early on, but funding is always an issue, it just is. Not mandated. It’s always one of the discretionary things when things get tight.”

Space-related sustainability issues

A small number of programs listed challenges with space as a potential obstacle to sustainability. One program mentioned choosing not to convert half-day classes to full-day classes because of space issues and not wanting to decrease the number of children served. Another program mentioned having to maintain a waitlist because of lack of space for students. In addition to securing additional space for classrooms, comes the added fiscal cost of maintaining those additional classrooms. Ideally, programs would like to have funding for additional classrooms to service more children. Also noted was the challenge about securing funds to improve and remodel current physical infrastructure.

Generally, programs could use increases in funding to further expand local programming, but few are able to finance such expansion locally. As one program director simply stated,

“If we had more funding and if we had more space, we could potentially service more kids.

In the context of limited space, some programs are placed in the dilemma of whether or not to reduce half-day programming in lieu of increasing full-day PDG-E funded services. One program director describes her difficult decision in choosing not to convert PFA half-day classes to PFAE full-day classes because of space issues and not wanting to decrease the number of students served. She states,

“We made a conscious decision in this last RFP not to convert some of our half-day programming to full-day, more because then we would be serving fewer kids. We just didn’t have the capacity to expand beyond what we had. Because of space.”

A different program director noted this challenge which resulted in having to maintain a waitlist because of lack of space for students and said,

“That would be a challenge for the district to pick up, having a new building. I would have to find funding for that. I am concerned because this is a five-year process that we’re going to have kids that we don’t serve on our waiting list. That we can’t serve because we don’t have room, so that’s my only concern.”
Personnel-related sustainability challenges

As exemplified by the Illinois State Board of Education’s Annual Unfilled Positions Survey released in October 2019, the State of Illinois faces a teacher shortage at many different levels of instruction and in many different types of teaching positions. As such, some programs reported having personnel-related issues affecting sustainability. Some noted that finding teachers with the adequate certification was difficult especially with emergent bilingual programs. A couple of program directors describe their situation as follows:

**Program Director A:** “I think we’re starting to experience the teacher shortage. Especially when it comes to bilingual teachers. I have one bilingual Spanish classroom…but as a whole program, if I looked at long-term challenges just for high quality programming, maintaining that, getting the correct certified teachers, I think funding is going to be a piece of it.”

**Program Director B:** “We have currently six teacher vacancies that we are filling with retired pre-K teachers or long-term substitute teachers. And in five of those six circumstances it’s working really well, and in one of those circumstances is working really terribly. And so, having a robust pool of qualified teachers who can come into position is probably our biggest obstacle.”

Given the rate of pay for paraprofessionals and family educators in some programs, programs compete for personnel to work in these positions. One program director described her difficulties in finding paraprofessionals and family educators with the appropriate qualifications given the wages offered in those positions. She states,

“Like the expansion grant said, your family educator has to have a bachelor’s degree, but our district said that family educators aren’t required to have a bachelor’s degree, and they get paid $12.50 an hour. We’ve gone a year and a half without a family educator because nobody that has a bachelor’s degree can work for $12.50 an hour.”

Fiscal sustainability

A repeated concern expressed by many programs were the fiscal challenges if state or federal funding ceased. At the time of the interviews, program directors consistently stated that a majority of the programs would discontinue if federal or state funding ceased. While many of these programs’ start-up costs have been covered, maintaining a high-quality preschool program for students with the priority factors at no cost to families is a rather costly endeavor. One program director took the opportunity to do the math and stated,

“Preschool is a costly endeavor. I’m not saying it shouldn’t be, but you have a much smaller staff to student ratio. At least through PDG-E, you have a lot of absolute expectations required. Sometimes it’s an initial cost, like last year the curriculum cost us like fifteen thousand dollars. Now, we don’t have to do that every single year but the Brigance, the TS school (Teaching Strategies Gold), like those subscriptions so it takes, to do it correctly and to do it with expectations and the fidelity that it deserves, to service our 80 kids. We have very little. By the time you do all the staff, all the benefits, all the required training, parental involvement opportunities and associated costs, it’s just a cost. It’s very beneficial, but it’s a very costly program.”
Many programs are already tapping into other resources and establishing connections with other organizations as a means to sustain their program. However, despite this, the vast majority largely rely on having current state and federal funding to maintain their current level of educational programming. One program director is already experiencing this and stated,

“But as far as sustaining the program once the state funds go away, it’s not going to happen. You know when you’re living in a community that is high needs and all the families are in poverty, and you don’t have a good tax base to find ways to sustain all these classrooms, and pay salaries, have mental health and have these high quality things, it’s just not going to happen. Preschool programs are also concerned about increased costs due to future increasing costs of wages, benefits, and transportation fees. Funding also starts to influence a program’s ability to sustain high quality employees to staff these preschool programs, which comes with additional challenges.”

One program director expressed her concerns about how the lack of local funding would mean that the community could not fill the gap if the funds would end at the end of the grant. She states,

“We’re looking at communities that the families that we’re serving are required to be low income. Our school districts are not rich. We cannot afford to run 10 classrooms, high-quality classrooms on local funding sources. It’s not possible. One classroom, maybe. 10 classrooms to serve the highest need families, it’s just not — it’s not possible. That was my fear taking this job. When I read that grant and saw at the end of this grant, it’s supposed to be sustained in your community, there’s no community that’s going to qualify for this grant that’s going to be able to sustain it themselves.”

Many of the communities served by the PDG-E initiative are strained financially and have little to support high quality preschool programming for their most needy children. In a few cases, programs felt confident that their public school district would help to fund preschool services to continue current programming. The scaling of the program would be determined based upon available local resources. As one program director commented at the time of the interview,

“There would have to be a board decision. I can tell you that the board is very proud of our Pre-K program and feels that it is very beneficial to the kids and to the community. So, if you took their money away, I think they would do everything they can to keep it, but I don’t know if they’d be able to. The district is doing well financially, but that’s taking away funding. I don’t know. I don’t know if they would be able to continue it or not.”

For those programs that exist outside of a public school district, most are non-profit agencies without a tax base. These programs would certainly not be able to sustain the PDG-E model on their own.

Regardless of how sustainability is going to be worked out on the local level, the PDG-E initiative has set a level of expectation for high quality preschool programs across communities that have received PDG-E support. However, the specter of reduced funding or the discontinuation of funding may be a conversation for which many were not prepared. As one program director summarized,

“I think they’ve given us the framework. I don’t know. This sounds terrible, but I don’t know that we ever really had that conversation about “here’s what we see as the expiration date for the expansion money.” So, I think there’s also a piece that’s kind of like plausible deniability, like we’re not talking about it at all.”
Expanding High-Quality Preschool Programs

The PDG-E initiative has supported the expansion of high-quality preschool programs across many communities in Illinois. The comprehensive program model has led to the transformation of services in many school districts and community-based agencies. The comprehensive program model has also facilitated the development of system capacity and integration with community-based resources. While the PDG-E initiative has experienced some challenges with its implementation, the accessibility and responsiveness of ISBE staff and a network of Program Support Specialists have provided the support necessary for programs to be successful. Some PDG-E program sites have differing experiences related to sustainability, long-term fiscal sustainability remains a primary challenge as federal funding must be subsumed by new state and local money in order that gains realized through the PDG-E be sustained.
Teacher Support and Program Development
General Observations

Teachers and programs were given high-quality supports and professional development to implement the program as intended and to help meet student needs. For example, state-level program support specialists assisted with on-site and remote support to programs for topics such as program design, staff development, enrollment and recruitment, curriculum and assessment, support for administration, community partnerships, family supports, and supports for exceptional students. Subgrantees were also required to have a designated on-site instructional leader who could provide embedded, extended professional development to teachers and paraprofessionals working in PDG-E classrooms.

Key Takeaways

- The on-site instructional leader was highly valued by teachers and program directors.
- Professional development in general was highly valued by the teachers and program directors.
- Teaching staff, program directors, and program support specialists all indicated that class size needs to be reduced. This issue was brought up in surveys, focus groups, and during the interviews.
- Programs need additional supports to meet the mental health needs of their children and families.

Impact of Class Size

One of the significant impacts that the PDG-E program had on teachers were the challenges presented by 20 children in each classroom, many of whom presented with complex behavioral and familial situations. As stated before, approximately 25% of the sites (representing 4,000 of the children enrolled) reported concerns regarding class size during their interviews and focus groups. Clustering 20 preschoolers with the priority factors into an early childhood learning environment with two adults consistently produced criticisms from teachers and program directors.

Research related to class sizes in early education settings indicates that smaller class sizes may result in better child outcomes. Smaller class aggregates in early education environments may provide teaching staff better opportunities for positive relationships with young children and increase the potential for increased individualized instruction (Finn, Pannozzo, & Achilles, 2003; Bowne, Magnuson, Schindler, Duncan, & Yoshikawa, 2017). Previous research indicates that smaller class sizes are associated with less observed hostility and conflict and increased levels of learning and cooperative behavior among young children (Ruopp, 1979). Recent research indicates that small effect sizes were observed in child outcomes (i.e., cognitive and achievement) where a maximum child/teacher ratio of 7.5/1 and a maximum class size of 15 were established. This same analysis indicated that very small class sizes might be associated with enhanced social and emotional learning outcomes (Bowne, et al., 2017).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) sets a standard ratio of 1 adult to 10 students with a maximum of 20 students per classroom and a minimum of 1 teacher per classroom. PDG-E classrooms included one teacher and one paraprofessional. As a result, these classrooms met the standard set by the leading professional organization for early childhood education. However, the practice-based evidence emerging from this evaluation suggests that these ratios and class size aggregates may be too high for effectively serving the PDG-E target population. Both program directors and teaching staff describe the struggles of providing services to classrooms of children who qualified as PDG-E students to the priority selection factors. For example, during a focus group interview, teachers describe the challenge of meeting the needs of each child and the goals of the program:

Teacher C: “Their needs are big, they’re big ... And I think that when you want to be engaged with the kids, and you needed to be fully engaged, 20 to 2 is a big number, and especially when their needs are big, big. And challenging.

Teacher D: Yes, and then there’s the problem that I know for us it’s hard to balance both goals that they are requiring us to do, to make our job in a nice way. The role of this is as social-emotional focused program to develop their skills in that area, because this is the happiest place that they have in their lives.
Again, we’re going to build up their relations, and we are teaching them how to socialize and how to love the school as I told you, but then we have to balance that. We follow the assessments and data and collection, and portfolios that we need to in a formal way. At the end, finding that balance ...

This sentiment was also echoed in the teacher survey data. The last question in the survey asked teachers if there was anything else they wanted to add about the program. One teacher used the opportunity to state the following,

“I really believe that this program could be great and successful, but I truly think that there is a strong need for either lower class sizes or an expectation of two paraprofessionals per class ... We serve the neediest of those children plus some. With the current state, teachers get burned out and leave, or like me, we stay because we truly believe in the program but we are not giving our best selves because we feel overburdened.”

Two teachers from a different school describe a similar set of challenges related to the complex needs that children present in their program. Part of the frustration has become the tension that responsible professionals feel about not meeting their personal expectations as early educators.

Teacher E: “I will just speak for my classroom. We’ve had some very significant behaviors every year. With two of us in the classroom — and I have a fantastic paraprofessional — There’s two of us and kids even if there’s not attention getting behaviors or I have all these feelings, I don’t know what to do ‘behaviors, most of our kids need, want, our attention all the time. Impossible. There’s all this social emotional and emotional need ... For two of us to be able to come anywhere close to meeting those needs, I don’t know — it would be almost impossible. Especially when, and in my class this happens, kids are throwing chairs. They don’t know how to express their anger. When the two of us are trying to keep the classroom going and we’ve got this happening over here, for us to be able to get the walkie talkie and say ‘We need support in pre-k ...’”

For some, there were concerns about meeting the specialized services required by the Individual Education Plans (IEP). As one program director states,

“I think that that’s something [the state] did not take into account, that our most at-risk kids are often needing services that then gets picked up by the local school district. I also get the point that your local school district is supposed to be providing those regardless after three years old. The problem is that when we work in a community like this, those children would never have access to those services if they did not have access to the schools and a preschool program, I get that that’s the catch-22, but you’re adding 200 additional kids. Obviously, they don’t all need services, but a good number of those students do. Then that creates — It just creates a bit of a conundrum for districts, right? Because if you don’t have that, then you’re not reaching those kids, but you want to reach those kids, but you can’t really fund them either. It’s just kind of that, how do we support that?”

More program directors discussed the impact of class size on the quality of the program. One stated,

“One of the biggest challenges is in those classrooms we’re finding the most at-risk kids so they are very, very needy. So, to have 20 is really challenging, in my opinion, [it] is too many [kids]. It’s just really challenging for a teacher and a teaching assistant to educate the 20 at-risk students. The ratio needs to be different for those type of classrooms when you’re plucking out the most at-risk kids in your community and putting them all in the same room. That has been the absolute biggest challenge.”

The overwhelming needs of children with the priority factors often requires additional staff intervention. One program director reasoned,

“One of the challenges that we’ve faced, and I mentioned it earlier, it’s not mental health but just the trauma and the ACES that our kids have experienced. We are seeing behavior challenges and/or mental health concerns, both the families and children that we have not seen in the past. Again, we’ve tried to put additional supports. I’ve got two paras in a classroom with 20 kids. The highest need children with three adults. Sometimes four adults, still, is not sufficient to meet the needs of some of the kids.”
Additional Staffing

The typical staffing in PDG-E programs seems to be one licensed teacher and one paraprofessional per classroom. Some programs have attempted to secure an extra paraprofessional to assist in handling the needs of children with complex challenges. One program director acknowledged the need for an additional staff member in classrooms and was able to implement this, which benefited the program. The program director stated,

“Every classroom we have and operate has three people. We have a teacher that's a bachelor's level, a teacher assisting that's an associate's level, and then a program aid, which a lot of times most of our program aides — those are parents that we employ that are looking for employment. And we again are fortunate — that's the other thing that preschool expansion doesn't allow for, is training dollars. Like in Head Start, we have a training budget where we're able to work with those program aides and get them a CDA or pay for some schooling, so that they can then move up to a teacher assistant. We have a lot of staff that come through that way. But being in a classroom, in a school district, with two people, in a full day, how do they get their breaks? How do they do the food service? So we needed that third person to help with just the overall management of the classroom. And I mean let's be honest, we are dealing with a population that has other risk factors. They're low income, and with that there's some trauma, there's other things happening. There's children with concerns. And 10 percent of our population is children with disabilities, so we needed that third person to help assist in the classroom. Without that, it really does affect the quality of the programming. So now we're going to be in a situation where we're going to have to make that decision.”

Teacher Professional Development

It was clear from interviews with both program directors and teachers as well as the survey data from teachers that the PDG-E initiative has provided many valuable professional development resources and opportunities for program directors, instructional leaders, and teaching staff. Given that many of the professional development resources are provided free or at low cost, programs may participate in high quality, professional development activities without taking away scarce resources from the program itself. As one program director states,

“The PD (professional development) opportunities that the state provides are wonderful. They're free and there's a lot. I mean the resources are there for professional development. [It] is a huge asset to the program.”

A few interviewees referenced the Lead Learn Excel (LLE) training as a critical training for both themselves and their staff, especially at the early stages of the PDG-E initiative. Lead Learn Excel is a professional development program for early childhood education leaders from The Ounce, a professional organization supporting early childhood education broadly. The focus of Lead Learn Excel is to further develop instructional leadership skills that result in effective cycles of continuous improvement within their programs. One program director describes how Lead Learn Excel training was critical to her program. She states,

“One of my instructional leaders went through Lead Learn Excel. That Lead Learn Excel program is the most amazing, which she came back with. The way she can run a PD (professional development workshop), the way she can run a program now based on what she learned through The Ounce’s Lead Learn Excel. If ISBE can ever figure out a way to fund that, that is worth more money spent than anything else.”

Hours of professional development

As part of the teacher survey, teachers were asked to approximate how many hours they utilized the services of the instructional leader over the course of the 2018-2019 school year. Responses ranged from zero hours to 200 hours, with an average of about 26 hours over the course of the year. Similarly, 80% of respondents indicated they had worked with the instructional leader either in a professional learning community or they received small group or individual coaching from the instructional leader.
Professional development training topics

Teachers reported attending numerous professional development opportunities over the 2018–2019 school year. The professional development was delivered by a variety of providers but out of the 19 topics included in the survey, the instructional leader provided the most training for 13 of them (68% of them). Primarily, trainers from outside of the organization provided the training on social and emotional learning, health/safety, nutrition, behavior management and multi-tiered systems of support. Instructional leaders provided most of the training for curriculum, content, assessment, child development, learning environments, communicating with families, students with special needs, data collection tools, standards and ELLs. The instructional leaders were well-utilized not only in their day-to-day work providing job-embedded professional development to teaching staff but also in leading formal, specific trainings. See the Table 5.1 below.

Table 5.1. Who delivered teacher professional development (PD)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Development (PD) Topic</th>
<th># of Responses</th>
<th>Instructional Leader</th>
<th>Someone in the school, not the Instructional Leader</th>
<th>Someone outside the organization came to the school</th>
<th>Off-Site Conference/Workshop</th>
<th>Did not engage in PD on this topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guiding and interacting with young children</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum-specific training for academic curricula</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum-specific training for social-emotional/behavior curriculum</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General content instruction for academic areas (such as strategies that are not curricula-specific)</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducting formative (ongoing) child assessments through observation, child screening, and/or assessments</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding child development</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting children's social and emotional/behavioral development</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom organization and learning environments</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health, safety, nutrition</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training in using particular assessment tools (i.e., ASQ, TS Gold)</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior management</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating with parents/families</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with diverse populations</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting children with special needs in the classroom</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training in using particular tools to understand the classroom environment (ECERS, CLASS, etc.)</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training on state standards</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training on multi-tiered systems of support</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting English Language Learners</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other areas</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Perceived effectiveness of professional development

As part of the survey they completed, teachers rated the effectiveness of the various professional development activities they participated in. Overall, the teachers responding to the survey found 16 of the 17 topics very or somewhat effective. The social and emotional learning training was rated as very effective even though 40–45% of it was provided by people outside of the organization. The only topic seen mostly as neither effective or not was the behavior management training, again more than a third of it was provided by outside the entity. The instructional leaders’ training on child development, learning environment, standards, data collection tools and connecting with families were seen as very effective. Once again, this supports the pivotal role that these leaders had in the success of the staff. See the Table 5.2 below.

Table 5.2. Effectiveness of teacher professional development (PD).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Development (PD) Topic</th>
<th># of Responses</th>
<th>Very Effective</th>
<th>Somewhat Effective</th>
<th>Neither Effective nor Ineffective</th>
<th>Somewhat Ineffective</th>
<th>Very Ineffective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guiding and interacting with young children</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum-specific training for academic curricula</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum-specific training for social and emotional/behavior curriculum</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General content instruction for academic areas (such as strategies that are not curricula-specific)</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducting formative (ongoing) child assessments through observation, child screening, and/or assessments</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding child development</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting children’s social and emotional/behavioral development</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom organization and learning environments</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health, safety, nutrition</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training in using particular assessment tools (i.e., ASQ, TS Gold)</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior management</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating with parents/families</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with diverse populations</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting children with special needs in the classroom</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training in using particular tools to understand the classroom environment (ECERS, CLASS, etc.)</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training on state standards</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training on multi-tiered systems of support</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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About one-third of teachers who responded to the teacher survey named the Pyramid Model initiative by name as one professional development opportunity they found particularly effective and helpful. It is possible the Pyramid Model was talked about because it was one of the most recent initiatives.

In addition to results from the quantitative survey, qualitative interview and focus group data provide additional information about formal and informal professional development topics that were particularly helpful to teachers. For example, some sites discussed how the teachers were being trained by the mental health consultants. This could be about simple observation and understanding as in some sites or it could be more complex professional development. Several sites conducted training for the teachers in recognizing trauma and how to use specific skills in response. One site is helping train the teachers to be more aware and able to work with the children and their mental health.

As programs mature, individuals filling the role of instructional leader or family educator look to refine their skills or in some cases move into other positions. One program director reflects on how best to bring along others in those important roles. She states,

“The instructional coach (instructional leader) can be so impactful. But, there’s not a lot of teachers out there who are trained to be an instructional coach and there’s not a lot of training out there on how to be an instructional coach. So, when there’s turnover in instructional coaching, continuing, I would love to see a project that support(s) … turnover in instructional coaches.”

Additional Support via Program Support Specialists

The state provided program support specialists to each subgrantee. These program support specialists were available for on-site or virtual program support throughout the duration of the grant. All 27 program director interviews addressed the role of the program support specialist and six of the nine program support specialists completed a survey about their activities and program supports they provided to subgrantees.

Program Support Specialists’ Activities & Time Allocation

The program support specialists reported a wide range of time spent supporting their programs. Some indicated they work with their programs as little as one hour per month and some report working with their programs as much as 12 hours per month. All program support specialists indicated that the amount of time spent was largely dependent upon the specific program needs.

Program Support Specialist Roles

Program directors reported that several program support specialists were particularly helpful in on-site consultation, providing resources like professional development opportunities or connection with family educators and others. 40% (10 out of 27) of program directors reported close relationships in which they worked with their program support specialists at least monthly, if not more. They reported that they could contact their specialists about professional development, family engagement, instructional leadership and their CQIP. 48% (13/27) of program directors reported that they met with their program support specialist at least quarterly and could contact them for any questions or issue they might have. A few of the program directors knew their program support specialist from previous positions and those relationships seemed to be the most effective in supporting the program directors.
Program Changes

Program support specialists responded to an open-ended survey question that asked them to identify one or two specific things they felt could be changed with the high-quality program model as it is delivered to children. Below are their responses.

Program Support Specialist A: “I do believe that teachers have way too much on their plates, and as a result do not have the time or energy to plan and implement meaningful experiences for each and every child every day. School districts overwhelm teachers with new initiatives each year that place high demands on them as they struggle to incorporate the new and shiny initiative into all the rest of what they are doing. That said, I would like to see programs focus later in the four-year-old pre-k year on ABCs and 123s and focus initially on social emotional learning as the foundation for academic success, with this being reflected in the portfolio requirements. The first 1/3 to 1/2 of the school year should be organized so that building relationships and creating a supportive environment is the primary task of teachers.

Program Support Specialist B: “The components of the program model are wonderful and should really make a difference to the children and families. One issue that needs some thought is the requirement that 20 children with the highest needs and risk factors are all in the same classroom and that is a huge challenge for teachers.”

Program Support Specialist C: “Offer the training we get as program support coaches (Program Support Specialists) to the boots-on-the-ground instructional leader. They are often a lone staff member just out of the classroom struggling in their own role. They feel isolated and unappreciated. Providing PLN-Professional Learning Networks (referred to state-wide as Professional Learning Communities or PLCs).”

Program Support Specialist D: “I worked in 5 PDG programs the first three years. I think a challenge is leadership teams embedding designated monthly time for them to meet. Another challenge is working with community childcare centers and building community partners. More parent input [is needed]. Learning to have reciprocity with families. Engage them more in decision-making and leadership teams. Understanding the value of inclusion and the problem-solving process to gather data and receive support from mental health consultants.”

Additional Supports

Program support specialists were asked about what additional state supports they felt would benefit the programs in terms of sustainability. Below are their responses.

Program Support Specialist A: “Pyramid Model coaches have been valuable with their training understanding Benchmarks of Quality, Practiced Based Coaching and classroom assessments such as the TPOT-Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool. Also module training on the Pyramid Model for Challenging Behavior. The Center is supporting this work as well as it being a state initiative with ISBE, OECD.”

Program Support Specialist B: “In my experience, smaller programs need support on systems development that meet the expectations of the ISBE compliance checklist. There may be, at times, a practice in place that does not have a written plan. Sometimes, things just happen because ‘we just do it this way’ and it is without a written plan. This is a fundamental problem when there is a change in leadership. For sustainability, this should be a priority. Small programs need help in systems development.”

Program Support Specialist C: “I think more contact from the Governor’s Office and ISBE would be beneficial as well as facilitating opportunities for programs to network and learn from each other.”

Program Support Specialist D: “Funding to reduce class sizes for addressing the needs of all students. Increased expectations of districts to overcome barriers to regular, ongoing, protected opportunities for embedded professional development and cycles of coaching intended to result in improved student learning and development outcomes.”
Future Professional Development

In an open-ended survey question, teachers were asked specifically about what professional development they would most like to receive in the future. Overwhelmingly, teachers requested additional professional development on behavioral support for families, mental health support for children, and support for social and emotional development and challenging behaviors exhibited in the classroom.
Alignment — Birth to Grade Three
One dimension of the PDG-E initiative was to support the creation of seamless learning continuum for children from birth through grade three. In 2015, ISBE partnered with Illinois State University (ISU) to establish the Birth-to-Third Grade Continuity Project. The purpose of the project was to support PDG-E funded communities in their efforts to establish alignment in their early education systems from Birth to Third Grade. The alignment of separate systems usually involves connecting the transitional dots for children involved in (1) state or federally funded early intervention programming, (2) state or federally funded preschool programming, and (3) kindergarten and early elementary programming within public schools.

Most preschool programs are communicating with the school district regarding alignment from preschool to kindergarten and beyond. The logistics of collaboration with elementary education may be more easily facilitated when preschool programs are housed in buildings that also house kindergarten programs. To facilitate a more effective transition to kindergarten from preschool, programs have procedures in place that may include visits by preschool children to kindergarten classrooms and/or information fairs for families focusing on the transition process. In some PDG-E funded program sites, preschool and kindergarten teaching staff have initiated meetings designed to inform kindergarten teachers of the progress of individual children who are making the transition to kindergarten. In other systems, administrators and teachers are involved in collaborating to develop and implement play-based curriculum that continues through kindergarten and first grade.

The funding silos, which tend to separate out preschool programs from other elementary and secondary school funding, remain a significant challenge. Given the administrative and policy processes associated with individual age-graded program administrators must be responsive to the requirements imposed by different agencies funding their programs. Similarly, funding may come from a combination of sources including health and human services departments, public health departments, and/or education departments. The primary challenge of establishing birth through grade three alignment lies in the development of communication and referral processes intended to facilitate successful transition from one system to another.

**Key Takeaways**

• Communities are having success in building collaborative communication and referral processes needed to establish Birth to Grade Three alignment. The requirements of the PDG-E initiative have stimulated growth in this area.

• Birth to Grade Three alignment is supported in many communities through the development of community-based collaborations among multiple organizations specifically focusing on supporting high-quality programming for young children starting at birth. Larger school systems may also establish alignment by holding grants from different funding streams and coordinating services for children and their families internally.

• Most preschool programs are attempting to facilitate successful transition for their children and families from preschool services into the K–12 system. For some, this activity begins with enrollment in the preschool program and continues by providing supports and education for families throughout the kindergarten enrollment process.

• The availability of PDG-E initiative support combined with state requirements for collecting KIDS outcome data have spawned conversations between preschool and kindergarten administrators and staff in some communities. Similarly, increased activities are observed in the individualized sharing of data between preschool and kindergarten teaching staff designed to support the successful transition of individual children.

• Some programs have established curricular alignment between their preschool and kindergarten/early elementary programming. This curricular alignment is facilitated by incorporating increased play-based curricular elements in kindergarten through second grade classroom environments.
Building the Continuum

Many programs indicated that they have developed agency-to-agency relationships intended to facilitate the process of transitioning young children into preschool from Early Intervention (EI) services. For some, the relationship is within a school district or within a municipality. For others, it may require establishing relationships with multiple agencies that provide Early Intervention services. As a program director from a community-based provider describes,

“So one of the things that we have done and continue to do is, we’ve developed a really good relationship with our early intervention providers in both counties … who got a grant to provide specialized services to our programs, and then to provide observations of children, consultation with teachers regarding their observations and training.”

The alignment of birth through age three programming is established in many communities through the development of Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with agencies serving children ages birth through three years of age. Additionally, some communities have established inter-agency collaboratives to establish the relationships needed to sustain alignment. Some larger school systems have successfully established alignment by procuring funding to support services for young children from birth through age three.

This same program director quoted above also describes how their program has attempted to collaborate with families regardless of where children reside along the age spectrum. Staff members in this program realize that it is more than providing alignment with the intent to provide early education services, but also the alignment of comprehensive services to meet the needs of both children and their families. She continues,

“We received a grant to provide mental health services for families on-site and in the home, and all of that to kind of make sure that the concerns that we have at this age group, birth to three, that there’s some follow up as soon as possible, because we know the earlier, the better. Some of those issues perhaps would be resolved by the time they get three and four; if not, we have a heads up and to continue to provide services to those children in whatever form that it needs to happen.

And then we provide developmental screening for birth to three, we use the ages and stages. We’ve used ages or stages SE, the social and emotional one, that we do with the parents and the teachers [inaudible] with the children for the same purpose of early identification and detection of children needing some specialized services, or just some additional support.”

In some communities, interagency collaboratives have emerged in order to facilitate interagency collaboration, shared funding, and to increase the efficiency in the use of program resources. By working collaboratively, these organizations have also worked to minimize the chance that children and families “fall through the cracks” of a complex topography of siloed human service and education programs designed to support the unique needs of young children as they progress through the life cycle.

One program director describes the progress that her community has made to align local Birth to Grade Three programming. These efforts are reflected in the activities of her local collaborative organization and the “warm handoff” her program tries to provide in the transition. She describes in great detail the processes her community has developed to support the needs of children throughout the Birth to Grade Three continuum,

“We were fortunate as a community. We had already received the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting grant. That was a community grant. One of the features of that grant was to develop a coordinated intake process. The Health Department serves as our coordinated intake partner. Our prevention initiative program, which is an ISBE home visiting program (names additional programs and community organizations). We all sit on a home visit collaborative so the supervisors from each one of those programs meet monthly. The Health Department has a specific person fielding referrals for birth to three services through their Women Infant and Children (WIC) program partners. They’ve done some MOUs (Memorandum of Understanding) with other community partners to funnel referrals. They’ve got a website through iGrow. That organization then funnels birth to three out. What we’ve done (this) as a preschool program in cooperation with them … We have a transition process to move kids in. Because I’m fortunate enough to have additional local seats, I do go ahead and transition kiddos out of our EI (Early Intervention) program right into our preschool program throughout the year. We also work with Easter Seals and (another community group) to transition their children as well.”
This program director goes on to describe how her agency has the capacity to provide services for all children transitioning from the Early Intervention system and the process her agency has developed to facilitate transition to preschool. She states,

“I have not gotten to a point where we’ve needed to put any little birth to three friend who is transitioning on a waiting list. Part of that is just the sheer number of seats we have and some mobility, but we do ask that these agencies do the same thing that we do with Early Intervention. That is that we get a list of kids turning three, three months before they turn three, so we can look at saving seats. Basically, we modeled it off of Early Intervention process of three months beforehand we need to get student information. Then, we transition them. Now, between our own program, we do a warm hand-off so a family support member from preschool program goes on the last home visit with the home visiting family educator, so that they meet the family in the home. Then, the family educator comes with the family to the first school visit to take a tour.”

While certain programs are a part of a collaborative for ease of transition to programs, others are in the process of improving their current procedures for referrals from Early Intervention. One program director stated how they have modified their Early Intervention transition by working closely with their Early Intervention provider to modify the intake process into the Early Intervention program. They now assess need as part of the Early Intervention intake process. She states,

“So I think one of the biggest changes that came about is that we did not used to take all of the children that were in their program. We would have them come through our screening again and kind of be in the big pool. And then we’d prioritize who was the neediest, who had the most points. But I think with this grant, we’ve worked together and they now take the neediest families. They don’t just take anybody that comes to register. So we know that they have the needy families, so then we automatically take them into our program without any additional screening or anything. So I do think that the grant helped us to facilitate that. Helped them to identify the kids in the 0 to 3 who really were the most at-risk, and then they just bridge right into our program.”

Some PDG-E program sites may have built a Birth to Grade Three continuum within their own organizations. Programming may include prenatal programming, an early intervention program for children from birth to three years-of-age, and/or the use of an existing Preschool for All program for three-year-olds, and then transitioning them into the PDG-E funded classroom as a four-year-old. One program director describes how the increased availability of birth to age three funding transformed how her organization was able to provide services for children from birth to age three and their families resulting in a consistent programming continuum. She states,

“I have an advantage. I got an expansion of my birth to three program. I went up (nearly five times). That in and of itself, by growing that, my family educators are in those homes weekly. When they see another one running around, we got them … we can articulate them right to our Preschool for All as a three-year-old. When they get to be four, they go on to Expansion (PDG-E). The other pieces, we also have the prenatal. We do prenatal as well … What we have found is one birth to three family really is three families, because they’re always together and there’s always more than — Here’s the thing, we can only serve so many families based on our grant and so many children. We do service more than we say we do because there’s just the need out there. I mean, I could have done that too as well. The good thing is, is once we have them, they’re with us forever.”
Transitions between Preschool and Kindergarten

Communication between preschool and kindergarten is frequently a challenge. The preschool programs that are located in elementary schools appear to have easier access to collaborating with kindergarten staff compared to programs that are located in early childhood centers outside of a school district building. Some programs have found that aligning with kindergarten can be difficult if they are not housed within an elementary building. As one center-based program director stated,

“We would have loved to be involved, but because we don’t have kindergarten, we couldn’t. Although we do have — there is an advisory committee that does deal with some kindergarten teachers within the district. We have a bridging-the-gap formal event that is derived from the advisory committee.”

Despite these challenges when collaborating with kindergarten, most programs have transitional events or meetings that include preschool and kindergarten staff, students, and families. Some examples of these collaborative efforts with kindergarten are as follows:

- Meeting with curriculum staff to align educational goals
- Meeting with kindergarten teachers, staff, or principals to discuss incoming students
- Transferring records to elementary school
- Following the Illinois Learning Standards
- Including other preschool staff in meetings, such as mental health consultants, speech pathologists, and social workers
- Visiting, observing, and interacting with each other’s classrooms
- Providing coaching, support, and professional development for preschool and district staff

Many program directors described transition programming that included exposure to kindergarten and input from staff members. As one program director describes,

“First of all, we do have a transition plan that we use to have the kids that are in preschool and their families get acquainted with the kindergarten teachers and all that. Other than that, we do look at the skills that the kindergarten curriculum would need to have in order to be successful. We include them in our centers, and in our language that we use with the kids in Pre-K, so that when they transition into the kindergarten program, they have the skills that they need in order to succeed.”

Some programs have begun more intentional efforts to support the transition from preschool to kindergarten. These efforts involve conversations that take place between preschool and kindergarten teachers. These conversations may take the form of intentional meeting times or visits to each other’s classrooms. As one program director describes,

“Well, we’ve had our — we call them master teachers — our licensed teachers, trade places with teachers in the kindergarten. Go visit. They kind of stayed and they visited for the day, and then they come here and spend some time in our center just to see what kind of school readiness activities we’re working on, and they can offer us suggestions. We have done things like that.”

At one program site, the transition between preschool and kindergarten is facilitated through a structured summer experience. In this community, a one-week camp experience was created involving teachers from both preschool and kindergarten. This collaboration is intended to support a smooth transition for both young children and their families as well as facilitate relationships between teaching staff. As the program director states,

“We created a summer program for children who are transitioning from Pre-K to kindergarten, and we did a week-long event that was co-taught by Pre-K staff and kindergarten teachers. And we offered that at six sites ... We are piloting this year what that relationship looks like if it’s continued over the course of the year.”
The planning for a positive transition from preschool to kindergarten should not be reduced to a one-shot, end-of-program-year event, and in many cases, these transitions are ongoing long before the end of the year. Preparations for both children and their families should occur continually over the course of the PDG-E program year. One program director describes how her preschool program touches on the kindergarten transition all year long. She states how this works in her school-based PDG-E sites,

“What happens here is, we try to transition from the beginning, as early as October. We’re always transitioning to kindergarten. That’s our big thing. What we do is, during the school year, we have planning meetings with Pre-K staff and kindergarten staff. Children participate in some of the same activities. Some of the Pre-K classrooms and kindergartners, they visit each other’s classrooms. They have special time together. In the springtime, we do the same thing. We try to do it after the first marking period, which is just ending now. Every quarter, there are some activity between kindergarten and Pre-K. Towards the end, there is a transition activity for Pre-K kids going to kindergarten, where they actually go into the classrooms. Because we’re in a school building already, which is great and I have three kindergarten classrooms, it makes it a lot easier.”

She then goes on to describe how the year-long process is modified for classrooms located in the centralized facility. While there is some visitation planned for both staff and children, there is also a larger event organized for families. She states,

“What we’ve done for the centers, we invite them also to come over and give them the same information where they can come and they can visit a kindergarten classroom. The kindergarten teacher will plan an activity for her classroom and the new Pre-K kids that are coming to visit. At the end of the year, we have a transition. A big ‘Transition to Kindergarten’ night. We invite all the parents to come ... They are given all the things that they need to do to get their child ready for kindergarten. Medical, dental, activities as far as instruction, things that we feel like kindergarten should know, just how to get ready ... We provide the dinner and then they all get to go down and meet all the kindergarten teachers here. They go into the classrooms for an activity. They leave pretty much happy and excited to be going to kindergarten. Those are just some of the things that we do throughout the school year. They are always given pamphlets, little flyers about how to get their child ready for kindergarten. Not just at the end of the school year, but even though they’re in Pre-K, they’re coming into Pre-K, we’re talking about getting ready for kindergarten all the time.”

**Family Perspectives on the Kindergarten Transition**

Family members and teachers who participated in focus groups indicated that they felt the children were given a foundation for learning and were well prepared for kindergarten when the time came. Parents spoke to their children’s experiences in the programs and stated the following positive points regarding their early childhood education. One parent said,

“I think it gives them structure. Like she said, just being in a room setting gets them prepped for kindergarten. Especially respecting each other’s space. Helps them become emotional in a point, to express their feelings, how they feel, how to cope with those feelings. Instead of being mad, lashing out they can talk to them, use their words, little things like that. I think it gives them a break from us parents just because they need that. I feel like they need that for their mental health … My daughter wants to do anything and everything, what they do at school so that’s a good thing. I think now with the whole technology part that we are now, it gives them a great advantage not to be at home watching TV especially with the cold weather now, on the tablets, on the phone. They get to be away from that.”
Another parent describes how the PDG-E program provided academic preparation for her child to succeed in kindergarten. The parent references the social and emotional preparation facilitated by the program as well as the role of the program in encouraging parents to work with their children at home to prepare for kindergarten. She states, “It did a good job as far as learning the basics like A, B, Cs and numbers … I think it did a good job of preparing them (referencing both her son and daughter who attended the program) and my daughter’s going to leave out of there prepared as well. Then that goes back to, where is the child at? Where’s that child? Is that child prepared because of their mentality and their ability? What is the parent doing at home to help that child be prepared as well? I know that while we were on vacation, they gave them homework assignments like, ‘Keep up with this at home so that it will help them when they come back and they don’t go through the slide — ’ I think that’s what it’s called. Where they forget — (over the course of the summer). As far as that goes, they did a good job to prepare them for kindergarten.”

KIDS Data and Conversations about the Kindergarten Transition

While PDG-E initiative sites were not responsible for collecting KIDS data for children in their program, the initiation of using KIDS data within individual school districts prompted increased discussion of kindergarten readiness among preschool teaching staff. In some districts, conversations occurred between preschool and kindergarten teachers focusing on individualizing instruction for children transitioning to kindergarten. As such, early education staff become connected to the K–12 community within their districts. In an effort to strengthen the alignment between preschool and kindergarten, one program site-initiated conversations focusing on the preschool and data gathered through the KIDS system in kindergarten. By starting in one classroom in one building, the program aspires to take what is learned there and apply it across their system. This program director describes this activity,

“This year we've had (KIDS data) where we just looked between one Pre-K and one K building and had some of our teachers on both Pre-K and kindergarten do some collaboration, observation of each other's classrooms and discussion afterwards. Beginning to understand each other's worlds and now we're going to scale that out more and include more buildings. That's where we're starting in Pre-K and kindergarten.”

Building Alignment by Extending Play-Based Curriculum

In some program sites, the alignment between the preschool and kindergarten is being facilitated by extending the use of a play-based curriculum into the kindergarten and beyond. While many programs still maintain a more traditional approach to programming their kindergarten classrooms, the PDG-E initiative has given inspiration to some to smooth the transition into the K–12 system by aligning the curriculum. A program director describes this strategy in her district stating,

“Well, the coach (instructional leader) was just the play-based implementation coach. Because I cannot be there every day, so she had coaching cycles with the teachers so they understood what play should look like in a kindergarten classroom. Because most elementary school districts are not doing play-based kindergarten. This was something that we knew we'd have to invest in if we wanted to align with the preschool kids coming into kindergarten, because they're going into a classroom and now you're saying, 'sit at desks and rows,' and we weren't seeing great success with that with our students.”
Paradigm shifts related to kindergarten programming require a commitment from administrative leadership. In most school systems, the preschool and kindergarten/elementary worlds exist separately. In some districts, preschool programming continues to be a dimension of special education programming. Changes in the way that administrators approach Birth to Grade Three alignment were stimulated by the introduction of the PDG-E program model. One program director elaborated on how this occurred in her district,

“I think probably it opened up our eyes most to try and make more connections with birth to three and, also, alignment, the other way too and beyond Pre-K expanding into kindergarten. One of the things that probably has been the biggest. Now, was it the sole factor of why our district went this way? No, but I think it was definitely, it pushed and forced us to have conversations with early elementary and our Director of Elementary and we made a total 180 shift with our kindergarten philosophy. I mean our district was absolutely, there was absolutely no play in our kindergartens. Everything, all the kitchens, everything had been pulled out of the classroom probably six/seven years ago. kindergartens were not allowed to have any play. I mean they were told by our former, former now Director of Elementary Ed that ‘Couldn’t have that.’ As the Expansion (PDG-E) program kept coming along, I was up in between a rock and a hard place because I had this charge of aligning curriculum beyond kindergarten. I felt like, as a district, the gap was widening. I don’t know how we’re going to tackle this. We got a new Director of Elementary Education, and we began having conversations. I, also, think they started looking at just some data about the behaviors we were seeing in kindergarten. That and, also, we just did a 180. Now we’re in our full second year of the adaptation of play-based kindergarten ... It was a huge relief for me because I wasn’t sure I was going to be able to stay in this district and be able to fulfill the job that I was really obligated to fulfill under this Expansion grant. I was like ‘Ugh, we have no alignment between Pre-K and kindergarten and beyond.’ I would have to say that has been one of the bigger changes. Now, like I said, was it solely because of the expansion program? No, but it was definitely a piece, I think.”

The previous narrative reflects the recognition by some administrators that a new paradigm is required to better support the educational success of young children. Change, as reflected above, does not occur in the blink of an eye but may require a process sustained over multiple years. PDG-E initiative funding has provided a window for needed systemic transformation to occur in order for the goal of Birth to Grade Three alignment to take place.

PDG-E — Fostering Instructional Alignment for Children from Birth to Grade Three

The availability of PDG-E initiative funding, support provided through the Birth-to-Third Grade Continuity Project at ISU, and articulated program requirements have fostered the development of increased levels of Birth to Grade Three alignment in communities across Illinois. Communities have increased their focused collaborative activities related to birth through third grade services though community-based initiatives supported by a cross-section of stakeholders as well as the implementation developmentally appropriate practices across the age range. Many communities are also realizing increased energy in support of alignment among both administrators and teaching staff. Nonetheless, continued development is required to realize the goals of a seamless array of early education services for all children ages Birth to Grade Three.
Mental Health
From the outset, the PDG-E grant recognized the need for and importance of supporting mental health as part of a comprehensive early childhood education program. There were two major components of the PDG-E grant’s focus on mental health: the inclusion of the mental health consultant to provide training and support to teaching staff and the comprehensive services being offered to children and families, in part through connections with other organizations in the community.

The PDG-E grant provided funding to subgrantees for mental health consultation services through a mental health consultant position, which was designed to provide professional development support to teaching staff so they were better able to meet students’ instructional needs. In addition to this focus of PDG-E from the initial grant application, mental health was also a frequently mentioned topic in interviews, focus groups, and survey responses throughout this research study. It is clear from the collection of responses from each of these sources that mental health is an area where all stakeholders would like more support and training. In fact, six program directors specifically requested additional mental health supports.

As part of the initiative, each PDG-E program was to contract or collaborate with a qualified mental health provider or consultant who had experience working with young children and families. Various entities were mentioned as providers. The intention was for the consultant to provide training and education opportunities to families and staff on topics related to child mental health, child development, guidance and discipline, support for children with special needs, and self-care, among others. The consultant also supported the program in developing and implementing protocols for social and emotional screening, general classroom observation, and other appropriate methods for identifying children in need of mental health supports along with identifying children in need of individual observation and referral. Support and education needed to be provided to parents or guardians to determine if a referral is appropriate for their child and to navigate this process and individual consultation should be provided to children or parents/guardians as a bridge to long-term mental health services. Finally, mental health providers could also use a reflective case consultation approach, a model to support program staff in addressing the significant needs of children and families experiencing challenging circumstances.

Key Takeaways

- While most programs met the basic requirements for working with a mental health consultant, the frequency and quality of contact from the consultant varied between programs and flexibility in delivery of these supports was important.
- It is abundantly clear the mental health consultant was an important piece of PDG-E programming and families, teachers, and program directors wanted additional contact time with the consultant.
- Teachers and program directors expressed the need for additional direct mental health supports and trainings.

Although most sites used the standard term “mental health consultant” there were a few variations in the title used. For example, one site has a mental health consultant, and that site also has a social-emotional facilitator. Another site uses the term therapist or counselor. Yet another site uses an in-house social worker as the mental health consultant. The intention of the grant was that the role of the mental health consultant was to provide strategies and supports with regards to best practices to meet children’s social and emotional needs. The terms mental health consultant and mental health provider are specifically used in this report to describe the nature of the work being done.
Support for Families

Many times the mental health provider was used to help families with their children’s and their own mental health. Program directors frequently mentioned instances of trauma in students’ families. One site director mentioned their need for mental health for the family below,

“So, the biggest one for us is we are working on establishing a two-way relationship with a mental health partner. One of the things that we discovered is that many of our kids, but also many of our families, our parents, have mental health needs that are beyond our capacity to address. And to really have the opportunity to have a solid relationship with an organization that could support us, and our children, and our families related to mental health is in the work[s] for us.”

The mental health provider was used to not only help the child with their mental health but also families with their mental health. One director spoke about how the mental health provider was beneficial to families in being able to help their child in school and at home.

“The mental health services are not just for our children, they’re there for our families too. Those have been services that you know — in some cases, a parent will come to our center to talk to somebody, because they trust us but they will not go to an outside facility. That’s really helpful when we can at least get them to come to the center and talk with somebody.”

Several sites shared that the mental health providers that they partnered with saw and worked with all family members. There was mention by multiple sites about trauma. The mental health provider was said to be instrumental in providing help and support for families who experienced trauma. The quote below is merely but one indicator of how much the role of the consultant was valued:

“I also think the parent meetings, that social-emotional piece, like we have the mental health provider who does parent meetings with our families, they love to talk about that so I think they get most interested in, ‘How do I support my students social-emotional?’”

Support for Teaching Staff

Teaching staff also benefited from access to the mental health consultant in dealing with the high needs of the students. For example, some sites discussed how teachers were being trained by the mental health consultants. Trainings could be as simple as an informal discussion with the mental health consultant as in some sites, or it could be something more structured. Several sites accessed training for the teachers in recognizing trauma. One site is helping train the teachers to be more aware of mental health in preschoolers and trained with specific tools to work with preschoolers on developing mental health as illustrated in the quote below from a program director.

“We’re starting a new cohort called Child-Teacher Relationship Training where we’re taking ... teachers and they’re going to learn specific skills in working with children. They’re actually going to go into their classroom and work with children in their rooms. Then [used the therapist’s name] the therapist, is going to come observe and then do reflective meetings with them. It was something new that [the therapist] brought back.”
In addition to the support for teaching staff mentioned above, some mental health consultants helped teachers monitor the social and emotional health of preschoolers. They observed preschoolers in class and made a determination about the child and what they may need. Observations may have been done in class as well as checking in from time to time with the family. Feedback was given and referrals would be provided as needed. Where practical, social and emotional support was also given as needed to the whole preschool class. One teacher used an open-ended question on the teacher survey to state the following,

“Our early childhood mental health consultant (who was in our classroom one day each week with additional hours as needed) was phenomenal … She was an asset in implementing the Second Step Curriculum and helped me with the additional small group activities suggested in the curriculum.”

Programs are supposed to screen incoming children using a mental health screening tool in order to identify areas of potential social and emotional need. One program director talked about how the mental health consultant worked with teaching staff in preparing them for potentially challenging behaviors prior to the start of the program year. This involved the mental health consultant reviewing the mental health screening for each child with the teachers and family educator. She states,

“When the screenings occur the mentor teacher and the parent specialist also schedule time with our mental health consultant to review the ASQ-SEs to see, before even going into the school year, if there were certain students or just the overall environment of a particular room with certain kids, for a large number of kids, at a certain particular class or had some of the same indicators on the ASQ that we could kind of front load those conversations or opportunities to have a little bit better preparedness and how to handle those things the most effectively.”

Another teacher talked about the importance of having a mental health consultant with specific early childhood training,

“My classroom had a mental health consultant that was a great help to help foster children’s social emotional development. This consultant has a background in early childhood education which was helpful with working with four- and five-year-olds.”

Furthermore, the mental health consultant is an important part in monitoring the children’s mental and emotional health. One program director stated,

“I also wrote in for social-emotional facilitators. I love how we talk about academics, but that’s not what I feel is important. My social-emotional facilitators, where we use DECA, the Devereaux for Early Childhood. For expansion, every child gets it three times a year. Those principals know exactly how they’re coming in and what they look like. She works with the teams with the DECA results and things like that. Then she’ll meet with the teacher, put in environmental changes and or change in instructional strategies.”

**Requests for Additional Resources**

In addition to all of the positive impact teachers reported regarding the mental health consultant, many also expressed the need for additional resources. For example, on the teacher survey, several teachers expressed their frustrations on an open-ended question about student mental health. One teacher stated,

“We only have one social worker in our building to service 11 classrooms. We do not have the resources (needed) to support all of our students and families’ needs.”

Still another teacher stated,

“We needed a psychologist and counselor on a full-time basis to help with the social-emotional support.”

Additionally, while teachers appreciated the work of the mental health consultant, they need more assistance in their buildings. On this topic, one teacher stated,

“I have had little support in my base building, but my social-emotional coach (mental health consultant) has been a great asset to my classroom and helping me become a better teacher for my students.”
Benefits from Expansion Specifically

Many programs indicated that the Expansion model allowed for a more robust approach to mental health and well-being. One program director stated,

“Our Pre-K expansion program has been so beneficial to all the kids that are in it because those are highest risk kids. I would say that in those classes we probably have the most inappropriate behaviors that we get in the Pre-K. By the end of the school year, these kids that came in who had never been in any structured environment at all, are following a structure, following a schedule, and that is a huge contribution to their future learning.”

Similarly, a parent noted the children’s heightened self-esteem as a result of being in a full-day Expansion classroom.

“As we keep hearing, it’s making them be more confident or have more confidence in themselves. It’s the result of being in full-day, and also I think that in half-day there just isn’t enough time to cover more areas. I think that’s the difference.”

One program director described the benefit of the skills children develop by working through their emotions and having been immersed in a school setting prior to kindergarten. Learning these new skills better help children adjust to the changes of their environment, such as advancing to and transitioning into kindergarten.

“I think the other piece that’s really huge is the social-emotional piece and working with families about when your child is upset, how do you help them manage their upset? ... Then just the importance of a routine at home and how that can just impact day to day. You know, the importance of trying to stay in a routine. In school we do that, and so the importance of that at home ... The children are in the building, they’re going through — they’re getting lunch in the cafeteria at a smaller table, so I think that makes that less intimidating for when they go to kindergarten. So even that, I think is very valuable for these children.”
Comprehensive Services and Family Engagement
General Observations

Data collected through interviews, focus groups and surveys reports that the PDG-E initiative had a significant impact upon the way that early education providers interacted with families and provided significant impact upon both children and adults served by the program. The PDG-E initiative represented a major paradigm shift in the way most school-based early education services were delivered. While eight sites had previous experience with community collaborations, 11 more reported increased partnerships with community organizations resulting in significant impact regarding the comprehensive services and resources provided to families.

Key Takeaways:

• The impact of a high-quality program model facilitated empowerment of families within their schools and communities.
• The family educators working in PDG-E funded sites were essential to the success of engagement with families and facilitating connections between the PDG-E program and comprehensive community-based services.
• The emphasis on working with families to build relationships, gain the trust of family members and assess family needs has facilitated greater access to and participation in community-based services by families.
• Overall family engagement successes resulted in family members who are empowered to be more actively involved in the children’s education and in how to make their families stronger.
• Several of the sites shared that families reported more connectedness to their child’s PDG-E program due to family engagement activities.
• Partnerships with community-based organizations helped with outreach in trying to address challenges in engaging families, especially in the area of medical and dental services.
• The involvement of families in transition planning was critical to the successful transition to kindergarten.
• The focus on family engagement yielded personal growth benefits for both children and family members.

Impact of Comprehensive Program Model on Family Engagement

Examples of how the PDG-E comprehensive model benefited families included a notable extension of program reach into the lives of families who participated in the program. Paraphrasing one program director, the program extended its reach not only to the child but to the families of the children. In some cases, the information and linkages provided to caregivers prompted family decisions to seek out community-based resources beneficial to their needs.

The PDG-E requirement for programs to specify a staffing plan that included a family educator (a.k.a. family support specialist, parent liaison) enabled programs to intensify their engagement with families. Over 60 percent of program directors described in positive terms the role and/or work that the family educator provided for their programs through various tasks such as helping families with goal setting, exploring appropriate methods of parenting, finding stable housing, establishing service referrals and employment.

The information parlayed to families included basic information related to child development, information related to child behavior and parenting strategies, and information about community events and resources (i.e., furniture, food pantry, public assistance, library card, bus system, opportunities for adult family members to further their education, etc.).

A poignant example of how the PDG-E initiative had an impact on both children and families was articulated by the director of a community-based organization. She states,

“I think for (names community) the amount of varied languages that are spoken and English not being the family’s primary language, is a definite challenge and barrier for our schools to support our immigrant families ... When we started (this) collaboration, one of the key questions we asked is, “When do you think, as a parent, education starts for your child?” A lot of the responses at that time was “kindergarten.” One of the first jobs we had, or continues to be, is this public awareness campaign of the importance of early learning, and how to access early learning, not just in programs and centers, but how do you provide supports for the whole child, whole family? I think that kind of understanding and delivery of services is still a challenge because you’re taking a program to think outside of just what you deliver, and how do you serve the whole needs of a family.”
The comprehensive program model disseminated as part of the PDG-E initiative is playing a critical role in ensuring success for students and their families.

Access to and Participation in Community-Based Services

When referenced in focus groups and program director interviews, evaluation participants embraced the value of the high-quality program model as being beneficial to both children and families. The increased time with children in school resulted in more impact upon the development of children and more opportunities to engage with family members who may be less familiar with the school system. Providing comprehensive services facilitated the linkage of services to families served by the program. The emphasis on working with families to build relationships, gain the trust of families and assess family needs has facilitated greater access to and participation in community-based services by families. A program director states,

"... the duration of services has allowed our teachers and our staff to really spend more time getting to know the kids, developing those relationships with them and with our families, and allowing them to really focus in on helping ... kids get ready for kindergarten. It's extremely beneficial, and then allowing and encouraging that same family services as part of that program, helping to ensure that we were able to provide an array of services to all of our families, case managing ... families who are setting goals ..."

The social service system at both the community and state levels can be a daunting challenge for families with young children, especially young families with children that have been identified as having the priority factors for selection, which are defined on page 16 of this report. The PDG-E initiative’s strong comprehensive service emphasis has simplified life for some families. The requirement for PDG-E program sites to establish Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) with an array of services providers plays a pivotal role to build partnerships. Some 70% of the program directors reported increased collaborations with local providers in health, dental, mental health and others. Eight of the program directors described how PDG-E enhanced relationships they had already established through community collaborations. Eleven program directors described increased partnerships due to PDG-E even if they were not in a community with a collaboration.

While the number and nature of the partnerships varied from program-to-program and community-to-community, all of the program directors reported building partnerships with other preschool programs or school districts, local libraries, medical and dental providers, local park districts, health departments, community colleges, other early childhood organizations, and many other community services. The development of these crucial partnerships has made preschool programs more well-rounded in addressing all family needs. As one program director listed their extensive partnerships, she describes how her program works with other agencies:

"With our social services, we have under our umbrella — in our family services, in our social services, personnel in our building. They work directly with our social services agencies. Whether it’s DCFS or LCFS ... all of those social services agencies. Either to help link the families with services or to place children. Whether it’s children in foster care. We work directly with the homeless shelter here in town to ensure that whenever there’s a child who arrives there that they were able to enroll them. We also work with our health department. We’ve been able to help get some expansion of hours of operation for immunizations. They were doing immunization one time a week."

In most programs, the family educator facilitated the development of relationships between the PDG-E programs and local medical and health providers. One program director describes the dramatic change in this type of activity by stating,

"Three years ago, I would say, our relationships were basically nonexistent, just very surface — nothing. The level of collaboration that we’ve developed with partners over the past few years has been incredible."
She continues to heap praise on the family educator for building the essential relationships with community providers and how this has evolved over time. She states,

“He (referencing her family educator) has built some really, really deep relationships everywhere. He’s involved with finding the dental homes, medical homes, and mental health programs, counseling programs ... We have so much going on, considering we had nothing going on three years ago. We have the dentist coming here twice a year. We have brought the vision and hearing here, within the first 45 days we have somebody coming in doing that. That was never in place before we had this preschool grant.”

The narratives above provide examples of what many PDG-E initiative sites are doing for both children and families in response to implementation of the high-quality program model. By extending their work beyond the schoolhouse doors, they are leveraging the impact of the program to create greater positive impact upon the child and families served by the program.

### Overall Family Engagement Successes

The program was designed to not only help children but also includes activities to promote family engagement. Families, teachers and directors all shared that family engagement was a success.

**Figure 8.1.** Family perceptions of support and acceptance of PDG-E programs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Disagree nor Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I was given information about how I can support my child’s learning at home.</td>
<td>95% (N=115)</td>
<td>4% (N=115)</td>
<td>1% (N=115)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt welcome at the preschool.</td>
<td>95% (N=115)</td>
<td>4% (N=115)</td>
<td>1% (N=115)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child is prepared for kindergarten because of this preschool program.</td>
<td>93% (N=115)</td>
<td>6% (N=115)</td>
<td>1% (N=115)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There were helpful family education events throughout the year.</td>
<td>88% (N=115)</td>
<td>9% (N=115)</td>
<td>3% (N=115)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There were celebrations throughout the year where I felt welcome to attend.</td>
<td>85% (N=115)</td>
<td>12% (N=115)</td>
<td>3% (N=115)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Family survey results (n=115) indicate that families found the learning activities provided to them through the program to be helpful. Specifics are below:

- 97% said learning activities on **child mental health** were helpful.
- 98% said learning activities on **child dental health** were helpful.
- 100% said learning activities about **healthy lifestyles** were helpful.
- 100% said learning activities about **positive child-parent relationships** were helpful.
- 100% said learning activities about **social and emotional development** were helpful.
- 96% said learning activities about **family connection to peers and community** were helpful.
Community members also shared that they had seen changes in the families in their communities as well. Some of the community members noticed that the families were accepting of resources and opportunities more so than they had been in the past. The program has, from what was shared in focus groups, done a great job providing help for families with engagement. One focus group participant who worked for the library shared that they had observed an increase in younger families getting library cards. She states,

“I’ve definitely seen a lot of much younger families coming in and getting their first library card. One of the programs we have set up, we’ve been doing it for a few years, where we have every classroom at (names facility). They come in and they have a parent and child tour and story time. That’s very often the parent’s first time visiting us. Everyone is registered for a library card. It’s great to see them coming in at that point rather than once the child is already in grade school. In the past, that’s when we were starting to see them for the first time, that they’re realizing the kids are being assigned projects. Also, just having such an increased involvement with (program named), with museums. It’s really helped the library being able to increase our message to the community.”

In this example, families are described as taking an interest in becoming more familiar with their resources and community, which helps them engage in more activities with their child. Family members who participated in focus group acknowledged the role that the PDG-E initiative programs have in their own engagement behaviors. One parent was very enthused about the program and how it helped identify and enhance children and family’s well-being by providing families with opportunities to engage in workshops and trainings around social and emotional and child development. She describes it this way,

“It’s a parenting focus program where they educate us on discipline, positive discipline, emotional connection with your children, dialogue. Overall, just how to better your skills as a parent. I love the group ... it sparks up very good conversations as to what we’re not doing as a parent, what we could be doing better as a parents, and what our parents didn’t do or did do for us, and how we can change that, breaking that cycle with your child.”

Not only do community members and families see the impact of the program on family engagement, but the program directors are watching it happen as well. They see mothers, fathers, and grandparents (all family members) taking more of an active interest in ways that are visible to the school in the children’s education and in how to make their families stronger. Several programs discussed how they had specific father and grandparent days or activities and how well received it was. The director below shared how this engagement of dads is growing and strengthening the father/child engagement.

“We’ve done a lot with dads. We do fathers’ reading program and that just keeps growing. So our family engagement, we really think it’s a strength for our program, it’s something we’re really proud of.”

Overall, across the programs, there was an increased level of family engagement that was apparent at school. Families are building on what they have learned with the resources, education, and activities the program has provided. There are many examples from almost all the sites sharing the way the program has pulled families in and made them want to be a part of their child’s education. The program director below does a great job of summing up what other program directors echoed related to the impact of family engagement activities/resources.

“When a parent sees that you have taken on that role as an extension of what they already are doing, it makes them even more aware, makes them more involved, more committed. Parents’ involvement picks up. Parents are more engaged on going to build experience. Parents come in and volunteer within the classroom ... They have a ‘wow’ factor now ... They ask questions, and so now they are more involved in the learning process. Parents are the first teachers, so now when they are seeing the change, the development process, and they are seeing all of these things that are taking place in their child. They’re seeing the growth. They’re seeing the steps. That makes them become more involved.”
Family Engagement Activities

Whether it was families, teachers, or program directors, most had something to say about how the PDG-E initiative was engaging the families in activities. A number of families had positive things to say about the program providing opportunities for families to participate in shared activities. Numerous activities were offered to families throughout the school year in a variety of formats.

Figure 8.2. Support resources most commonly available to families.

![Bar chart showing support resources most commonly available to families.]

Responses add up to more than 109 as respondents were asked to list all formats through which they knew support resources were made available.

Many family engagement activities were offered throughout the year. Some of these activities included family nights, family/parent education classes, community resource fairs, field trips, and on-site resource libraries. In spite of the number of family engagement activities afforded, many teachers (37.5%) indicated that family involvement is the greatest challenge they face.

During a focus group with adult family members as part of this study, one individual parent spoke about family projects that were sent home and another parent spoke about monthly projects. In both cases, they shared that there is opportunity to do activities with their child and learn how to engage at home.

Parent A: “One thing that I also like is that they give us family projects. In other words, it’s the children and also involves the parents. They leave them to us every month and let us talk about a certain topic like winter and then they learn about what is winter.”

Parent B: “Like the lady said about the monthly projects, it’s a time together that we have. With my son, we make it between a game and something that you have to do to help guide you in your learning.”

Families expressed that they are aware of activities to do with their children but if there is nothing organized, it makes it difficult to execute. Generally, most sites have provided ways to have families be engaged in activities with their children. This includes not just at the sites, but at museums, libraries, and other places such as at home where families can learn and play together. Programs are trying to help the families learn how to be engaged with their child and also want to be a part of their family experience as described in one program,

“We have several parent engagement activities that we’re participating in over the course of the year. We do a parent and student literacy activity. We also do Grandparents as 2nd Time Parents. Most of our parents are grandparents that are raising grandchildren, so how to do it is different now for them being in that driver’s seat. We also do Healthy Meals in Five Minutes with our parents. All of those parent engagement activities, working with parents on how to support their child both through healthy eating, as well as educational support.”
Some sites even shared how just helping families learn how to do something like ride a train and go to a museum was life-altering. The example below shares how showing children and their families how to travel on a train, buy a ticket, and go to a museum can open up a world that they had never experienced previously. The program director shared,

“So we didn’t have the time to take them all the way to the city, but we went to ... the Children’s Museum, and then came back on the train and it was amazing. I mean life changing for some ... Even our staff, like our teacher’s assistants, really never done (this) before. But just teaching them, this how you buy a ticket. This is the schedule. This is where you could park. You know, like, was really empowering to them.”

Through intentional family engagement, families were empowered to set goals and figure out what they needed as a family. Several of the sites shared that families set goals for their families. Through the setting of goals, the families engaged in healthier activities as a unit and even reached out to other families in the process. The quote below shares how one site saw how families built on what they learned to make their families better.

“I think one of the things that it did was really helped us connect to families one-on-one, more on a personal level with the goal setting. You know between the family liaison (family educator) and the parents, which I think is good. We’ve seen a lot of family engagement where they set personal goals for themselves. We have families that started a walking club so that the families could get healthy, and they put down their electronics. We’ve had parents who went door to door. We’ve had parents who had a presentation with us on sugar in your sugary drinks, and then, they now are presenting to other parents.”

Many families involved in PDG-E programming are not familiar with local community-based resources or how the school works in their communities. Family members participating in focus groups spoke positively about how the program has embraced them with a positive programmatic climate that values the input and participation of families. A parent participant in a focus group describes the personnel in her child’s program,

“I love all of them. They’re all very good. First of all, as a school district, you have to have the tools and amenities that your teachers need. That’s first and foremost because without that your teacher can’t excel and can’t be the teacher to their full potential to help those children. Like I said, I’m experiencing that with my child over there. But I think here, it trickles down from the director to the principal to the assistant principal; them coming in with an attitude of, ‘This is what we’re going to do as a school,’ helps the teachers perform better at their jobs, which then, in turn, people like me come in and I’m happy because I know everyone. Everyone communicates, everyone is friendly and nice and they try to help you with your child the best that they can.”

Two other parents articulate similar feelings. One states,

“I’ve really enjoyed it there, that they’ve received me with open arms and have motivated me to continue to come back and be a part of the district in whichever way I can.”

Another family member states that by having integrated services accessible at the site, it has made her life easier, and she feels at ease. She states,

“I would say it’s made my life easier just because now all the resources that I would have had to struggle ... to get him there, (it’s) all there ...”
In addition to information obtained from the family focus groups, there were opportunities throughout the year to participate in school-based activities.

**Figure 8.3.** Family perceptions of the opportunities to learn about specific aspects of their child’s well-being.

As indicated in the chart below, many families reported having a strong relationship with a family educator.

**Figure 8.4.** Family perceptions of relationship and interactions with the family educator.
Challenges in Engaging Families

Family members, teaching staff and directors all shared that the family engagement was a success. However, some programs have experienced challenges reaching families and getting them to trust having their children enrolled in a preschool program. What was made clear was that if family members did not want to be a part of the education, activities or other things offered by the program, it was not a requirement of participation in the program. Programs were innovative in terms of the methods they used to bring new families into the program. One community was particularly creative in how they approached this challenge. As one community stakeholder describes,

“We were hoping to get into laundromats, bus stops, where do they walk home? Where do families — we’re just identifying the deserts where families are there, but there’s nothing to bring that awareness. That’s our thing to share.”

As in the previous example, community partnerships helped address the challenges of reaching families throughout the community. It was a process of making the PDG-E funded programs more prominent in the community through multiple touchpoints. As one program director describes,

“For us, with the community partnership, it has allowed us to become more visible in the community. When I arrived, a lot of parents didn’t even realize that the district had an early childhood program. It has gotten us more visible within both (community A) and (community B) communities. Just getting the word out that the program is here. It is available, and it does provide the support that they’re looking for.”

PDG-E had a powerful effect of enhancing the profile of preschool services within communities which created a “snowball” effect for some programs. Heightened visibility in the community increased the number of inquiries and led to a spike in enrollment numbers in one community as described by a community stakeholder,

“But I think the grant has really brought a lot of light to our center as far as enrollment and being more involved with the families and the community, which I don’t think we had nearly to the degree that we do now.”

In order to increase and maintain enrollments, one program involved family members in door-to-door canvassing of the community served by the program. Word of mouth strategies also had a powerful impact on the ability of programs to engage with families. Word of mouth is powerful because many times it involves an informal endorsement of program services where reservations may exist. As one program director describes,

“The more we talk about it, the more we involve the people in the community that have children and try to encourage — because most of our families we get is through word of mouth. They listen to their friends, their neighbors, their relatives about, “Oh, you should put your child in the program because they do this this and this, and they learn this, this, and this.”
Family Supports

Program directors, teachers, and families shared their thoughts about how the PDG-E program assisted families to enhance their engagement with their children and positively impact their parenting skills. Family educators lead family education and support efforts to address the challenges that families identified in parenting. The family educators supported engaging families in their children’s learning experiences. One program director states,

“When she’s working (family coordinator) with them, she’s giving them something to take home that they can apply at home. If they are talking about even things like routines and building responsibility at home, instead of just talking about it, they’re going home with something like a box or a chart or something that they can use with their kids at home. That’s been very effective.”

Families confirm this observation. As one parents describes,

“... I am very grateful for the program because, above all, I can see the support they give us as parents. There are times that we have no idea how to deal with situations that come up. And you come to them and they will give you advice or say, “How would you like to attend a workshop about such and such that you are experiencing at this time?” And it helps.”

Other methods used in the context of engaging families in children’s educational experiences were having fathers in promoting science-technology-engineering-mathematics (STEM) education with their children and having families engaging in use of a book-of-the-month club to promote family literacy. The project director describes these as follows,

“We also have them working with the fatherhood engagement. It does not exclude mothers, but it’s just more to get fathers involved. We just had our barbecue ... We had over a hundred people at that. That focuses on a lot of hands-on STEM things, where dad might be more willing to come to that than they are to a literacy activity.

We also started running a book-of-the-month club attached to our parent activities in the evenings. We felt like our families did not necessarily know how to read a book to their kids. Maybe, they have not experienced that as children growing up, and so they had not had a model. We have our teachers rotate — They sign up monthly to be the reader. They choose their book. They come, and they model reading. They model using inflection, and how do you predict before you turn the page, and how do you ask questions. How do you ask kids to re-tell the story? They read the story, and they model those questions, and then those families are provided with that book to take home and read again to their kids using the model that the teacher has provided to them.”

Increased Engagement between Home and School

The high-quality PDG-E program model has initiated a paradigm shift in how school and community-based programs work with families and their children enrolled in early education programming. PDG-E programs throughout the State partnered with families to identify their needs and provide access to services led by the family educators as well as engaged families in enriching activities that both directly and indirectly supported student learning and growth.
Monitoring and Continuous Quality Improvement Program
General Observations

The monitoring process required programs to incorporate an approach to program delivery that was linked to both staff professional development and program improvement. The monitoring process involved both the use of the compliance checklist from the Illinois State Board of Education, which consisted of 40 items related to program compliance and the use of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS), initially ECERS-R and then the updated ECERS-3 after its release, which is a comprehensive evaluation tool that uses classroom observations (and input from teachers in the case of the earlier ECERS-R) to assess the quality of early childhood education classrooms based on a range of important factors.

Classroom Observations

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) assessment was used to monitor classroom quality for all subgrantees. Most PDG-E funded classrooms had previous experience with ECERS monitoring through their half-day Preschool for All program. In Section 3 of this report, it was explained that the ECERS-R was used in 2016 and 2017 whereas the updated ECERS-3 was used in 2018 and 2019. All programs that participated in PDG-E in 2016 engaged with the assessment as a baseline that year. Then, in subsequent years, approximately one-third of programs were re-assessed again in 2017, another one-third were re-assessed in 2018, and then the last one-third of programs were re-assessed for the second time in 2019. Due to specific programs exiting the PDG-E grant and others entering, not all programs were monitored twice during this window of time, and as new programs joined the PDG-E initiative, they were monitored though they had not been included in 2016. Table 9.1 below shows baseline ECERS-R data from all PDG-E programs collected in 2016.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ECERS-R Scale</th>
<th>Number of Programs Monitored</th>
<th>Mean (Standard Deviation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall Average Score</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4.52 (.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space and Furnishings</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3.86 (.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language-Reasoning</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4.74 (.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4.56 (.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction(s)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5.07 (.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Structure</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4.92 (.91)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9.2 below shows the score comparison on the ECERS-R for programs assessed in 2016. These programs were assessed again in 2017.

As indicated by the data in Table 9.2, the average score in all subscale areas on the ECERS-R increased from the baseline in 2016. Of the programs evaluated in 2016 and again in 2017, those five programs were able to raise their Overall Average ECERS-R score from 4.20 in 2016 to 4.72. Even though it is not statistically significant due to the small number of programs evaluated, this is extraordinary growth and the program support specialists, ISBE program personnel, professional development providers and PDG-E staff should be commended for the rapid improvement implemented in these programs in just one year. Noteworthy improvements were shown in all of the areas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ECERS-R Scale</th>
<th>2016 Mean (S.D.)</th>
<th>2017 Mean (S.D.)</th>
<th>Score Improved?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall Average Score</td>
<td>4.20 (.59)</td>
<td>4.72 (.35)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space and Furnishings</td>
<td>3.57 (.48)</td>
<td>3.92 (.39)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language and Reasoning</td>
<td>4.56 (.53)</td>
<td>5.12 (.27)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>4.28 (.68)</td>
<td>4.88 (.57)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction(s)</td>
<td>4.74 (1.06)</td>
<td>4.96 (.53)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Structure</td>
<td>4.20 (.67)</td>
<td>5.26 (.76)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 9.3 below shows average scores for programs evaluated in 2016 and then again in 2018. As indicated by the data in Table 9.3, the overall average score changed from 4.67 in 2016 to 4.70 during their second visit (in 2018). Even though the improvement was not impressive overall, improvements occurred in all but two areas. One noteworthy difference was that the 2016 evaluation was with ECERS-R, and the 2018 evaluation was with the ECERS-3. Limited information about the effect of the change in scoring from the ECERS-R to the ECERS-3 prevents any confident conclusions, but regardless, the overall score of this group of programs increased.

### Table 9.3. 2016 to 2018 ECERS Score Comparison (sample size = 7).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>2016 Mean (s.d)</th>
<th>2018 Mean (s.d)</th>
<th>Score Improved?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall Average Score</td>
<td>4.67 (.40)</td>
<td>4.70 (.56)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space and Furnishings</td>
<td>3.99 (.41)</td>
<td>4.51 (.37)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language and Reasoning*</td>
<td>4.73 (.50)</td>
<td>5.05 (.90)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities**</td>
<td>4.50 (.47)</td>
<td>4.31 (.85)</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions</td>
<td>5.30 (.55)</td>
<td>5.32 (.97)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Structure</td>
<td>5.58 (.78)</td>
<td>5.14 (.71)</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Language and Reasoning was renamed Language and Literacy on the ECERS-3
**Activities was renamed Learning Activities on the ECERS-3

Table 9.4 shows average scores for programs evaluated in 2016 the first time and evaluated in 2019 for the second time. As indicated by the data in Table 9.4, the average score in all but two subscale areas increased from 2016 visit to the 2019 visit. The overall score decreased, mostly due to the drop in the Activities score. Additional research needs to be done on the ECERS-R (used in 2016) and the ECERS-3 (used in 2019) to better understand the decrease.

### Table 9.4. 2016 to 2019 ECERS Score Comparison (sample size = 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>2016 Mean (s.d)</th>
<th>2019 Mean (s.d)</th>
<th>Score Improved?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall Average Score</td>
<td>4.77 (.40)</td>
<td>4.63 (.72)</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space and Furnishings</td>
<td>4.05 (.42)</td>
<td>4.15 (.82)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language and Reasoning*</td>
<td>4.96 (.48)</td>
<td>5.06 (.92)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities**</td>
<td>4.88 (.59)</td>
<td>4.27 (.77)</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions</td>
<td>5.23 (.86)</td>
<td>5.32 (.57)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Structure</td>
<td>5.20 (.99)</td>
<td>5.04 (.70)</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Language and Reasoning was renamed Language and Literacy on the ECERS-3
**Activities was renamed Learning Activities on the ECERS-3

An examination of data from all three groups of programs (those evaluated in 2016 the first time and in 2017 the second time, those evaluated in 2016 the first time and in 2018 the second time, and those evaluated in 2016 the first time and in 2019 the second time), indicates programs scored more closely to each other for their second review — 4.72, 4.70, 4.63 and all ended above the baseline overall average of 4.52. On the whole, these improvements show that the improvement process had the intended effect of bringing all the program scores up by the second evaluation.

Another noteworthy area is Language and Reasoning. The baseline average was 4.74 when programs were first evaluated in 2016. The baseline score of the first group of programs (2016 to 2017) was only 4.56, which was below the baseline, and within one year, the score had moved to 5.12, showing impressive gains over the one year of interventions and supports. For the second group of programs (2016 to 2018), their original score was 4.73, which was above the baseline average and within two years, they were able to improve their score to 5.05. The third group of programs (2016 to 2019) continued to make improvements and even though the original baseline average was an impressive 4.96, they were able to move it to 5.06 by their second observation. Again, all of the scores moved closer (5.12, 5.05, 5.06) together showing that children across the state had access to similar high-quality programs in language and reasoning regardless to location.
Interactions is another category that showed improvements across all three groups of programs between their first and second visit. The original baseline average of the whole group was 5.07 but the first group (2016 to 2017) was much lower at 4.74. Their year of efforts raised them to 4.69 even though they were not able to get to the baseline average of all groups combined in 2016. The second (2016 to 2018) and third (2016 to 2019) group of programs were both at 5.32 by their second visit so this seems to remain an area of potential growth for the first group of programs. By working with their peers, can they identify specific differences in their programs as measured by the ECERS-3 Interactions category vs. the programs in the other groups?

The only area that could use some more investigation across all programs is Learning Activities. The first group (2016 to 2017) was able to improve their score from 4.28 to 4.88 but why did the second (2016 to 2018) and third group (2016 to 2019) end up (4.31 and 4.27, respectively) below their original score (4.50 and 4.88, respectively) AND below the original baseline (4.56)? It could be related to the change to the ECERS-3 tool in the second and third groups of programs that were assessed or it could be based on other factors. Additional information would be needed to determine the cause.

As indicated by the tables above, the trend in all programs from their first program evaluation to their second program evaluation is positive. While it is apparent that many of the averages on the ECERS scores indicate that improvement was realized from the first evaluation to the second, the gains observed must be considered in a methodological context. First, the gains realized are calculated on a small number of programs, and at times, a small number of classrooms within those programs, so the gains do not reflect a “statistically significant” magnitude of change. Comparisons between measures assessed with the ECERS-R and the ECERS-3 pose challenges in interpretation due to inherent differences between each version of the ECERS.

**Compliance Checklist**

Program sites with previous Preschool for All experience were familiar with a previous version (shorter) of the compliance checklist. The PDG-E initiative extended the compliance checklist previously used by half-day programs from 20 items to 40 items. Some community-based programs receiving PDG-E initiative support may have experienced monitoring in the past through their affiliation with Head Start.

The monitoring of classrooms using the ECERS quality assessment tool was not considered a component of compliance, but rather became the basis upon which to establish a Continuous Quality Improvement Program (CQIP) for all PDG-E funded sites. The PDG-E initiative extended the use of ECERS by using an updated version of the ECERS tool as well as coupling it with the CQIP. In addition to the 20-item Early Childhood Block Grant 3-5 Compliance Checklist that all PFA programs complete, PDG-E programs were monitored on an additional 20 items, bringing the total items on the PDG-E monitoring checklist to 40. Additional compliance checklist items unique to PDG-E programs included:

**A. Program Design**

- Item 21: PDG-E program meetings for a full-day equivalent to a first grade classroom in the local school district.
- Item 22: In addition to snack, a nutritious breakfast and lunch are offered to children.
- Item 23: The program actively engages in continuous quality improvement and takes concrete, measurable steps to resolve non-compliances.
- Item 24: Programs with subcontractors engage in a rigorous and ongoing process of compliance monitoring. (Only applies to programs delegating Preschool Expansion slots to subcontractors).

**B. Enrollment and Eligibility**

- Item 25: The preschool expansion program adheres to the weighted eligibility criteria established by the state to prioritize children who are most at risk of academic failure to determine eligibility.
- Item 26: The Preschool Expansion program intentionally implements a comprehensive recruitment strategy designed to identify and enroll the most at risk children and families.
C. **Curriculum and Assessment**
   - Item 27: The program provides universal and targeted supports for children’s positive behavior and social and emotional development.
   - Item 28: The program integrates physical activity appropriately into the curriculum.

D. **Community Partnerships and Comprehensive Services**
   - Item 29: The program actively collaborates and engages with the local Head Start grantee and early childhood collaboration groups to advance outcomes for at-risk children and families.
   - Item 30: The program actively partners with regional DCFS liaisons, McKinney-Vento homeless liaisons, food pantries, homeless shelters, libraries, museums, or other community institutions to provide a comprehensive spectrum of supports and opportunities to children and families.
   - Item 31: The program provides comprehensive services to support the development of the whole child, including in the areas of medical, dental, and mental health.

E. **Personnel and Professional Development**
   - Item 32: Teaching staff receive relevant and appropriate professional development to drive instructional quality.
   - Item 33: A qualified instructional leader supports teacher development and instructional quality.
   - Item 34: Qualified family educators support parent engagement in program and lead parent education and family support efforts.

F. **Parent Engagement and Empowerment**
   - Item 35: The program provides comprehensive services to address the needs of families and help families set and achieve ambitious goals.
   - Item 36: The program engages parents as leaders and maintains an active Parent Advisory Council inclusive of a diverse range of parent perspectives.
   - Item 37: Parent education opportunities are designed to support parents in meeting the needs of their children and achieving family goals.
   - Item 38: The program actively supports parents in transitioning their child to kindergarten.

G. **Services to Children with Special Needs**
   - Item 39: Program actively seeks out and enrolls children with special needs.
   - Item 40: Services to children with IEPs are coordinated with local partners and integrated across the school day.

Records from 2016 through 2019 indicate that the most non-compliance occurred with the following five areas (in order):

1. Physical activity services align with the Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards (IELDs) Physical Development and Health Domain.
2. Regular, age-appropriate, nutrition education for children and their families is provided.
3. Program ensures that each child receives a dental screening.
4. Parent Advisory Council additionally includes classroom teachers, school and center-level leadership and community members.
5. The Council meets at a minimum every two months at times and days that have been determined with input from parents.
Programs address any non-compliance issues as part of their Continuous Quality Improvement Plan (CQIP). With rare exception, all programs successfully remediated any areas of noted deficit in a timely manner.

In addition to the information presented above that was taken directly from program monitoring documents, interview data gave a richer picture of the impact of monitoring processes on program. For example, program directors noted many challenges with the monitoring process. Interviews revealed that most had developed effective methods of meeting these requirements and were embracing the intent of continuous quality improvement. There was a resignation to the fact that while the monitoring process was stressful, it was an important part of program implementation. One respondent described it as the “accountability” aspect of the program. She states,

“It holds everyone accountable. There’s an accountability piece there and expectations that set…a baseline. This is what we’re going off of. We’re going to adjust from there. This is the baseline, and this is where we should be, and this is the expectation. I think if you didn’t have that piece at all, that would be a really big problem. I feel kind of like for teachers, it’s necessary.”

Key Takeaways

Responses to program monitoring and the Continuous Quality Improvement Plan (CQIP) process are summarized in the list below and then followed with details sections for each of these points.

• Study participants found the monitoring and Continuous Quality Improvement Plan (CQIP) process a valuable component of the program model, especially in terms of planning continued professional development of teaching staff.
• Program directors were able to use monitoring for more focused professional development planning and some programs indicated that the monitoring/CQIP process increased the level of internal collaboration within their organizations. This experience included vertical collaboration between teaching staff and administrators and horizontal collaboration between teachers especially for program directors who approach the CQIP process as one that required collaboration on all levels by their entire staff.
• For some programs, the timing of the monitoring and subsequent CQIP reporting process was challenging. Some noted being monitored late in the program year as problematic because they were not able to complete the required CQIP prior to when staff members leave for the summer. It was apparent that there was some flexibility as ISBE staff allowed them to respond the next fall if they were made aware.

Using the Monitoring and CQIP for Professional Development Planning

Program directors spoke extensively about how the monitoring process and the related CQIP process contributed to the professional development of teaching staff and the overall development of their program. While there was some who indicated that monitors could be picky, generally program directors found the monitoring reports to be helpful. One program director gave this example,

“They definitely were used. What we did is we had the instructional coach (instructional leader) and the classroom teachers definitely use that feedback to go back through and set goals around next steps. I would have to say, actually, this last particular monitoring, we were kind of struggling with one of our classroom teachers because we had been using the CLASS tool with that teacher and we’re finding she wasn’t being real receptive to just the work around. We weren’t seeing a lot of progress with that classroom teacher. The classroom, itself, was having a lot of behavior problems so we were trying to use those pieces to move that teacher along. We got to a point where we were, between the instructional coach and myself, really banging our head against the wall. The last monitoring with the ECERS, it actually was a reflection of what we had been seeing using the CLASS tool, as well as that classroom teacher’s evaluation using the Danielsen tool. We can go back and have some conversations with that teacher like ‘Look, across the board, these three different tools are saying the same thing.’ We, finally, this year, really, started to see some turnaround with this teacher ... We definitely use that information to set some goals, have some conversations or improvement for instruction.”
Increased Collaboration Resulted from Monitoring and CQIP Processes

At the beginning of the PDG-E initiative, some program directors were not sure how to respond to the requirements. They wrote the initial CQIP responses by themselves with little input from teaching staff. As the program matured, some directors recognized that they needed to be more inclusive in responding to CQIP requirements in order gain teacher ‘buy-in’ and to leverage that buy-in for professional growth and program improvement. As such, the monitoring/CQIP process has benefited teachers through higher levels of collaboration between teachers and their supervisors. As one program director states,

“Okay so I reviewed the reports and ... let me say if you go back, historically, at the beginning, when they first — the first time that they came in, I think I was the one that wrote the CQIPS. I didn’t feel that there was enough teacher buy-ins. We just didn’t share it with the teachers. The last time that they (the reports) came in, I went through it with one of my coordinators. Then we got subs for the teachers and all of the Pre-K teachers (worked together to respond). I even included the (general) Early Childhood (teachers) because I feel that everyone has to take a look at this because I want all the programs to be consistent. They all got together, and they are the ones (who) created the CQIPs. So the teachers had a lot to do with it.”

In some programs, there was a progression of how directors responded to the CQIP reporting requirements both internally and externally in how they communicated with ISBE. For many, the internal process involved staff at various levels of the organization including teaching staff, and in some cases, the paraprofessionals, instructional leaders, and other school administrators (i.e. school principals, superintendents) were included in this process, too. As one program director stated,

“We (wrote the CQIP) like a PLC. We really tore apart the results and it was our whole preschool staff. It was teachers, paras, (and) some other staff that may not be specifically assigned to preschool but are involved in the preschool program. We really looked to see what the scores meant and why we had them, and what we could do to change them if we could.”

For those without experience with continuous improvement processes, the initial response by some programs was for program directors to complete the CQIP report without staff involvement, but in later iterations of CQIP reporting they found the value of involving teaching staff in the process for purposes of both improved moral and improved professional development. A program director describes it this way,

“In that first year, I don’t think that concept of building a CQIP through the whole team effort. I don’t think I got that when I was with (agency name omitted). It was really just me as the instructional leader and working with the administrator looking at the monitoring reports and then deciding what had to be changed to meet compliance and to improve practice. Then, we wrote that and then as instructional leader, I went and I worked with the teachers to implement that. Now, fast-forward to the next monitoring visit, I think I had a much clearer understanding of the process, and how important it is to work with the teaching team to develop a CQIP in which they are very proactive in how those changes in practice will be implemented.”
Recognizing the volume of information presented by ECERS feedback and the accompanying anxiety that teaching staff may have about the ECERS assessments, one program director proactively created an internal protocol for use by teachers in processing the data and also to assume a problem-solving approach required for an effective CQIP response. This process involved the program director taking a very detail-oriented approach to the ECERS data prior to discussing it with teaching staff. She states,

“So I created a data protocol the first year — so when I got the reports back, I first just read them all. I did not let the teachers see them for a little while because they just have so much anxiety about them. So I worked with them like a little bit about how we’re going to approach this information, and what we’re going to use it for, and what it’s not going to be used for. And that seemed to help ... We went through the data protocol and we just stayed focused on what the protocol was asking. I had created it. It was very basic like “What questions do you have about this tool? What are you surprised about?” Just very simple questions — there was probably about five of them. They all looked at their own reports, filled it out, and then we shared just our responses to it, not the actual information with the team. And then from there, kind of came up with what our CQIP items were going to be or what we had in common.”

Working closely with their program support specialists and ISBE consultants, program directors also became better at the continuous improvement process. It was challenging for some who felt that it was a heavy lift. Program directors spoke to the challenges of early CQIP reporting requirements where they were required to respond to all of the issues that had emerged from the ECERS assessment. The change in ISBE’s requirement now to only respond to the top five areas of concern felt more manageable and practicable.

Evaluation data suggest that the PDG-E initiative has pushed both community-based and school-based preschool programming towards a culture of monitoring and assessment. Many of the PDG-E sites are now doing assessment and continuous quality improvement for the first time and most see the value of the process to their programs and ultimately the teaching and learning processes meant to serve young children. One program director describes this piece in terms of increased accountability. She states,

“I would say the accountability has changed, greatly, in regards to the monitoring. We’ve gone through the existing current monitoring process, this will be our third time. We’re going to be monitored in October again. This is our third time using this model. In the past, when I was a principal at (omitted), it was very informal. It didn’t have the same kind of accountability ... rules, regulations and guidelines put in place as it does now. I would say that’s one of the largest changes — the accountability piece.”

Some programs have made significant progress in the institutionalization of the monitoring process such that it is now part of the annual calendar and involves stakeholders from across the program. One director describes how she has developed her strategy for internal monitoring as follows,

“Well, through the expansion grant, and now we have it for PFA too, we have a quarterly monitoring plan ... We have a standing agenda of all the things we need to cover. We, then, do just an internal monitor of how are we doing. I have a leadership team. There are four of us. When the superintendent first came on and we’re walking the building, this is like five years ago — he made a suggestion and he said, “Well, take it to your team and tell me what you think ... then expansion came and I had to bring in some other people. I now have three others that can go in the classrooms with me. We do weekly meetings and we bring back information (about) what we’re seeing in the classrooms. Then we address of whether there are social/emotional concerns, or if there are academic concerns. We meet weekly and then that goes to our quarterly meeting that includes our community stakeholders (and) some other principals. I also have a teacher on there, two teachers and a para, and a (staff member delivering a) related service. I have all the stakeholders in there that put their eyes on the kids, and even those that don’t, but are still vested from the community standpoint.”
Some programs have developed their internal monitoring process to mimic ECERS-3 assessments on a peer-to-peer basis. Others have contracted with outside consultants to conduct ECERS-3 assessments as part of their ongoing preparation for formal ISBE monitoring and to support their continued program development. A program director describes how her program uses an outside resource,

“Actually, we would do it — We’ve all had so much training on it. It would be something where the assistant site manager or myself would go into a classroom and do some self-assessments. We still do that today. We have a health nurse that teaches ECERS-3. She came through and did a walkthrough this year and was able to point out areas of potential improvement.”

What emerges from this data is that PDG-E has supported the development of an even stronger continuous quality improvement process. While this was imposed upon the programs receiving funding, it has contributed to the development of an infrastructure that aligns with existing systems at the school level, but also contributes to the sustainability of high-quality programming for children in preschool.

**Required Monitoring and CQIP Processes Elevate Programs**

Required monitoring and CQIP processes as part of the PDG-E initiative challenged some preschool programs to rethink how they provided quality early education services. The CQIP process coupled with the additional resources such as the instructional leader and family coordinator provided the necessary support structure for programs to adapt and improve over time. While some expressed frustration and anxiety related to the process of monitoring, these emotional responses seemed to diminish as programs focused on the challenge of improving their programs. For many, the CQIP required a collaborative process and then elevated the level of collaboration within their organizations resulting in more sophisticated internal approaches to monitoring program quality and targeted professional development.
Conclusion
The Preschool Development Grant — Expansion (PDG-E) provided federal funds to increase early childhood education services to specific priority populations of students across communities in Illinois. This program was jointly championed and led by the Illinois State Board of Education’s Early Childhood Education Office and the Illinois Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development. For identifying students, the highest priority selection factors included:

- Children who are experiencing homelessness as defined by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act
- Children who are current or recent child welfare involvement
- Children who have Individual Education Plans (IEPs) (for more than itinerant speech services) or who are referred for special education evaluation
- Family income at or below 50% Federal Poverty Level and/or receiving support from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

Additionally, there are other priority selection factors that can be used to identify children for the PDG-E program. Once in the program, children benefit from a full day of instruction that takes care to require the delivery of a high-quality program that focuses on play-based learning that supports social and emotional development and the active development of thinking and language skills.

The PDG-E program has focused centrally on program quality with key supports including instructional leader support, mental health support, family education, and an ongoing, systematic continuous quality improvement process based on a valid and reliable assessment that is specifically designed to measure critical elements of learning for children of this age and of the early childhood learning environment. Alongside these components of the PDG-E program, families are considered to be partners not only in the education of their own children but also in the ongoing development of the program itself. Likewise, community partnerships are critical to the success of children and families, and the PDG-E programs in communities across Illinois have sought to facilitate services ranging from providing mental health supports to ensuring a smooth transition from birth through grade three.

This study also identified the need for specific additional resources to meet the intended goals of the PDG-E program. Staff members and program directors identified the need for additional teaching staff in the classroom in a way that would lower the child-to-staff ratio and increase the likelihood of meeting each individual child’s needs. Likewise, additional funds for the mental health consultants and family educators were also identified to make these PDG-E strengths even stronger.

Throughout Illinois, the PDG-E model has consistently been described as transformational for these preschool programs. The transformation has come as a result of outstanding and effective structures and processes, the hard work and dedication of countless individuals at both the local and state level, and through processes focused on continuous improvement focused on engaging, appropriate, and quality learning environments. As a result of the success of the PDG-E grant, Illinois has continued these efforts through the state-funded Preschool for All Expansion (PFAE) program, which supports children in preschool programs throughout Illinois today.
References

