

# Illinois Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Annual Performance Review Summary- Year 1

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Illinois is focused on implementing early childhood systems reform that will lead to an increase in the number of children—especially Children with High Needs—who enter kindergarten ready to engage in a challenging curriculum. The Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grant will help to build the infrastructure necessary to realize the vision. To this end, we have established these goals for the grant.

- By December 2016, increase to at least 65% the percentage of Children with High Needs who have at least one year of participation in a high-quality (ExceleRate Gold Circle of Quality) Early Learning and Development Program prior to kindergarten entry.
- By December 2016, increase to at least 40% the percentage of Children with High Needs who have two years or more years of participation in a high quality Early Learning and Development Program prior to kindergarten entry.
- By December 2016, increase to at least 10% the percentage of Children with High Needs who receive five years of high quality early learning services before kindergarten, including home visiting services or ExceleRate Gold Circle early care and education in the infant and toddler years.

The following report summarizes the state's progress toward these three goals and efforts taken toward the State's three strategic reform priorities. In each of these areas, the State made major progress during its first year of implementation. The most notable successes included the launch of ExceleRate Illinois, the state's Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (TQRIS) and the full establishment of the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development.

**Priority 1: Deepening the integration of state supports to create a unified framework for all early learning and development programs.** Although Illinois is building upon a long history of collaboration among state agencies and their contractors, 2013 marked a "big leap forward" toward creating a unified early childhood system. Accomplishments include:

- Hired the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development (OECD) staff, including a QRIS Policy Director, QRIS and Licensing Integration Policy Director, Workforce Development Policy Director, and Data and Outcomes Manager, in addition to the Executive Director and Grant Administration and Budget Development Manager who were already in place.
- Formed Interagency Project Teams that will integrate the implementation of early childhood efforts in areas such as data systems development and data analysis, professional development supports, and home visiting coordination.
- Completed the design of ExceleRate Illinois, the state's new cross-sector Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (TORIS), and implementing its "soft launch" and initial roll-out for center-based programs.
- Launched a year-long visioning and strategic planning process to determine the State's approach to developing community-level early childhood systems.
- Dramatically expanded the Gateways Professional Development Registry to include over 56,000 early childhood educators and increased the number of candidates receiving higher-level Gateways Credentials.
- Continued pilot implementation of the Kindergarten Individual Development Survey (KIDS) that will provide statewide information about children's development as they enter and progress through kindergarten.
- Developed high-level system architecture for an integrated early childhood data system that is linked with the State's Longitudinal Data System.

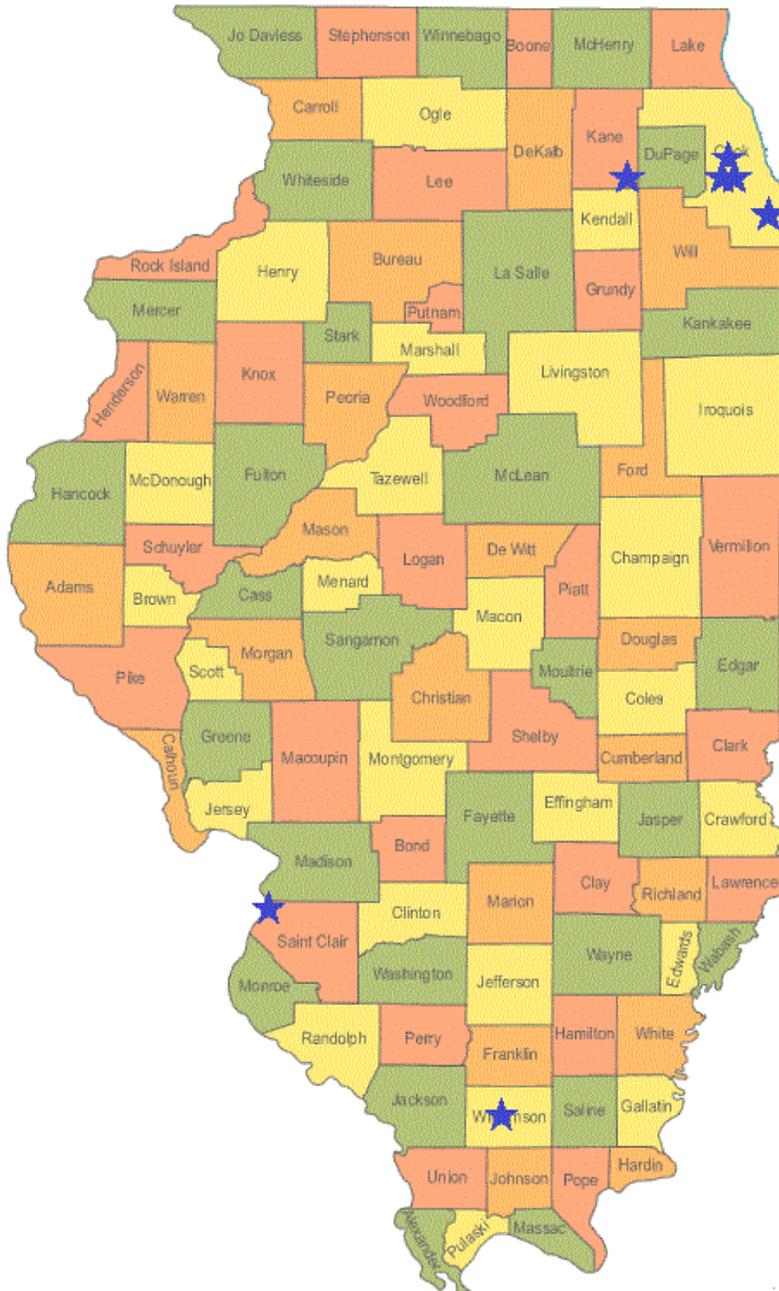
**Priority 2: Connecting the most-at-risk children with the supports and services they need.** Although Illinois has a relatively high level of services for children with high needs, too many of the most vulnerable young children in the State are not being served. Through its State Plan, Illinois is working to identify and remove barriers to participation for these children and their families. Accomplishments include:

- Established seven "Early Childhood Innovation Zones (Innovation Zones)" across the state, where local collaborations are identifying strategies for increasing the number of highest-need children who are enrolled in high-quality early learning services. Six of these Innovation Zones have completed the first phase of their planning, and all are on track to begin implementation by the summer of 2014.

## Illinois Innovation Zones

Every Innovation Zone is working to:

- 1) Increase the number of children from priority populations served in Early Learning programs
- 2) Increase program quality as measured by ExceleRate Illinois.



★ Early Childhood Innovation Zone

**Priority 3: Increasing program quality: From adequate to good and from good to great.** Illinois recognizes that all early childhood programs—even those already meeting high quality standards—need support and guidance in developing and implementing continuous program improvement strategies. Recent research shows what is required in terms of program intensity, rigorous curriculum, and high-quality teacher-child interaction to significantly impact the developmental trajectory of children with high needs. Illinois is working to translate that research into strengthened practices in classrooms across the state. Accomplishments include:

- Hired and/or re-trained over 50 new and existing Quality Specialists in Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies across the state to support programs moving to higher Circles of Quality in ExceleRate Illinois.
- Held a Preschool Instructional Excellence conference in June 2013 to consolidate lessons learned from a decade of Early Reading First, Investing in Innovation (i3), and other projects focused on strengthening preschool instruction.
- Developed criteria for Awards of Excellence through ExceleRate Illinois that reflect research-based best practices for serving children with high needs and their families. Award areas include Infant-Toddler Care and Education; Preschool Instruction; Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Practice; Family and Community Engagement; and Inclusion of Children with Special Needs.
- Launched a grant program for institutions of higher education that supports partnerships of four-year and two-year institutions in redesigning their early childhood teacher preparation programs to reflect best practices and to allow for smoother articulation and flexible pathways for students.

### ***Overall Grant Accomplishments, Lessons Learned, and Challenges***

One of the key lessons learned in the first year of implementation is that it is worth investing the time to bring multiple stakeholders to the table to work through the development of new initiatives and policies. ExceleRate Illinois was developed with the extensive participation of dozens of early childhood advocates, providers, private philanthropists, and state and local government agency staff. Likewise, the Gateways Credentials have been developed with extensive participation of higher education faculty, practitioners, and other stakeholders. At every step in developing and implementing reform efforts, Illinois has taken a public-private partnership approach, and that has led to higher quality in the implementation of the State Plan.

The greatest challenges in the first year are those that are inherent to the launching of any initiative of this scale and scope. Identifying and hiring high-quality staff, both within OECD and in the subgrantee partner organizations, took a great deal of time and effort, as did getting complex Inter-Governmental Agreements, contracts, and subgrants executed. Meanwhile, even before these staff, contracts, and subgrants were in place, there were many tasks that required immediate completion in order to keep the State Plan on track. The commitment of the existing staff in the Participating State Agencies and in the

*“It is worth investing the time to bring multiple stakeholders to the table to work through the development of new initiatives and new policies.”*

subgrantee partner organizations has been remarkable and is what has allowed for such significant progress in the first year. With the staff, contracts, and subgrants now in place, the State anticipates that 2014 will see many fewer of these “start-up” challenges.



A positive challenge that Illinois encountered in 2013 was the need to revise Illinois’ State Plan to incorporate the supplemental funding that was announced part way through the year. Developing the supplemental budget and scope of work required both the State and its subgrantees to juggle planning and implementation simultaneously and necessitated many amendments to contracts and subgrants. In some cases, this led to delays, most notably in developing and

implementing plans for communicating with providers about ExceleRate Illinois. Now that these contracts and subgrants are fully in place, Illinois is aggressively implementing the communication plan and engaging providers across the state in the new system.

### Deliverables

Throughout 2013, Illinois took many steps to increase the quality of education and care that young children in the State receive. Developed over the past two years, ExceleRate is a framework for centers to improve the quality of their programs, and for parents to identify high-quality early learning opportunities for their children. In an effort to increase the number of credentials held by Illinois teachers and early childhood administrators, improvements were also made to the existing Gateways to Opportunity program.

### *ExceleRate*

Perhaps the greatest evidence of progress, the design of Illinois’s newest Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (TQRIS) was completed during 2013. [ExceleRate](#) Illinois provides early learning and development programs with the framework to make continuous quality improvements and gain recognition for their quality achievements. With application to licensed child care centers, Head Start/ Early Head Start programs, Preschool for All and center-based prevention initiatives, and in 2015, licensed family/group child care homes, ExceleRate provides parents with an easy-to-understand comparison of their many options. Within all types of programs, ExceleRate uses a consistent set of standards, organized into four domains:



- Teaching & Learning
- Family & Community Engagement
- Leadership & Management
- Qualifications & Continuing Education

Based on standards under each of the four domains, programs achieve a Circle of Quality:

- **Licensing:** The first circle of quality equates to compliance with current Illinois licensing standards.
- **Bronze Circle of Quality:** The Bronze Circle includes additional requirements for training and education.
- **Silver Circle of Quality:** The Silver Circle includes a rigorous self-assessment and program improvement plan.
- **Gold Circle of Quality:** The Gold Circle of Quality includes a validation of high quality by an independent assessor.
- **Awards of Excellence**



### ***Gateways to Opportunity Registry and Credentialing System***

Although [Gateways to Opportunity](#) was developed over a decade ago, major improvements in the system were made during 2013. Some of the key indicators of progress are noted below:

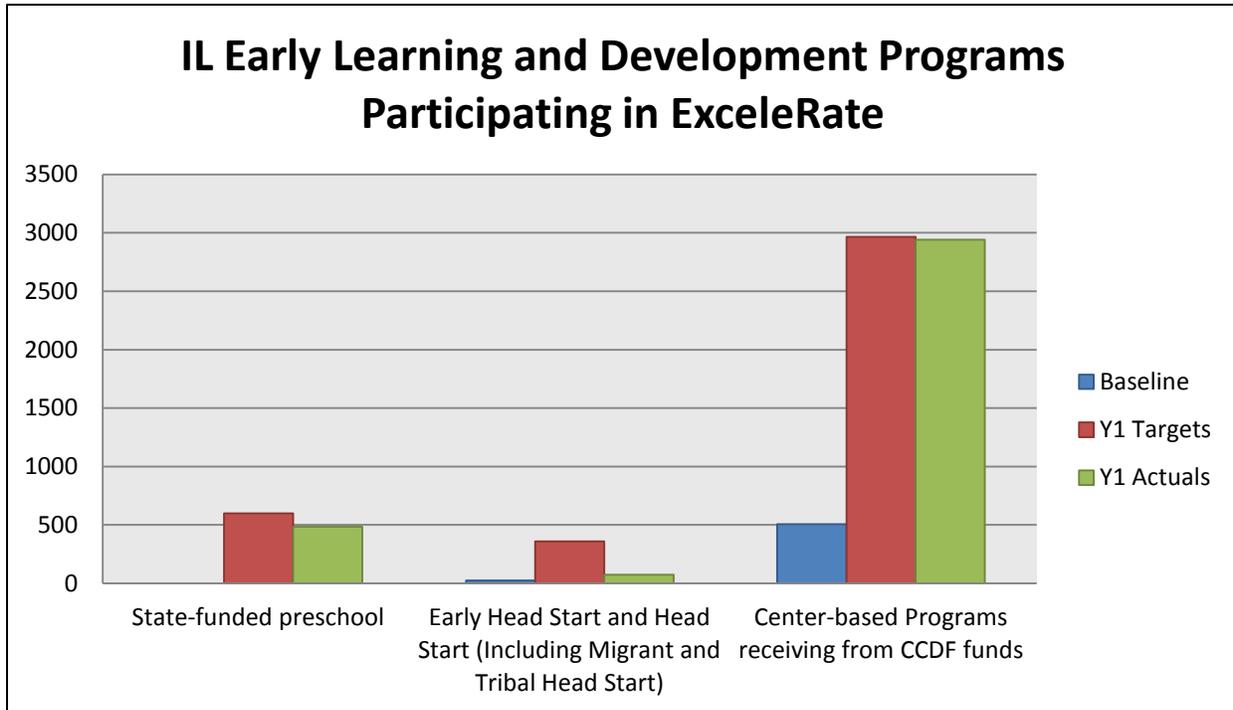
- From 2012 to 2013, the number of members in the Gateways Registry increased by 74.4%, from 32,402 members to 56,503 members.
- An advisory group was formed to align teacher preparation programs with Gateway credentials.
- During 2013, the number of Professional Development Providers authorized by Gateways to Opportunity increased from 5 providers to 30 providers.
- During 2013, the number of credential-approved trainings in the Gateways to Opportunity Registry increased from 40 trainings to 76 trainings. Early childhood educators can search for trainings [here](#).
- From 2012 to 2013, the number of postsecondary institutions with programs aligned to competencies required for Gateways Credentials increased from 45 institutions to 49 institutions.

### **Performance Measures:**

When Illinois applied for the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge grant, aggressive targets were set and a specific plan for progress was created. The following bar graphs describe the progress Illinois has made, relative to its targets, based on the five standards that the federal government is using to

measure program effectiveness. The baseline bar represents information from 2012, whereas Year 1 targets and actual represent information from 2013.

**1. Number of Early Learning and Development Programs in the Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System**



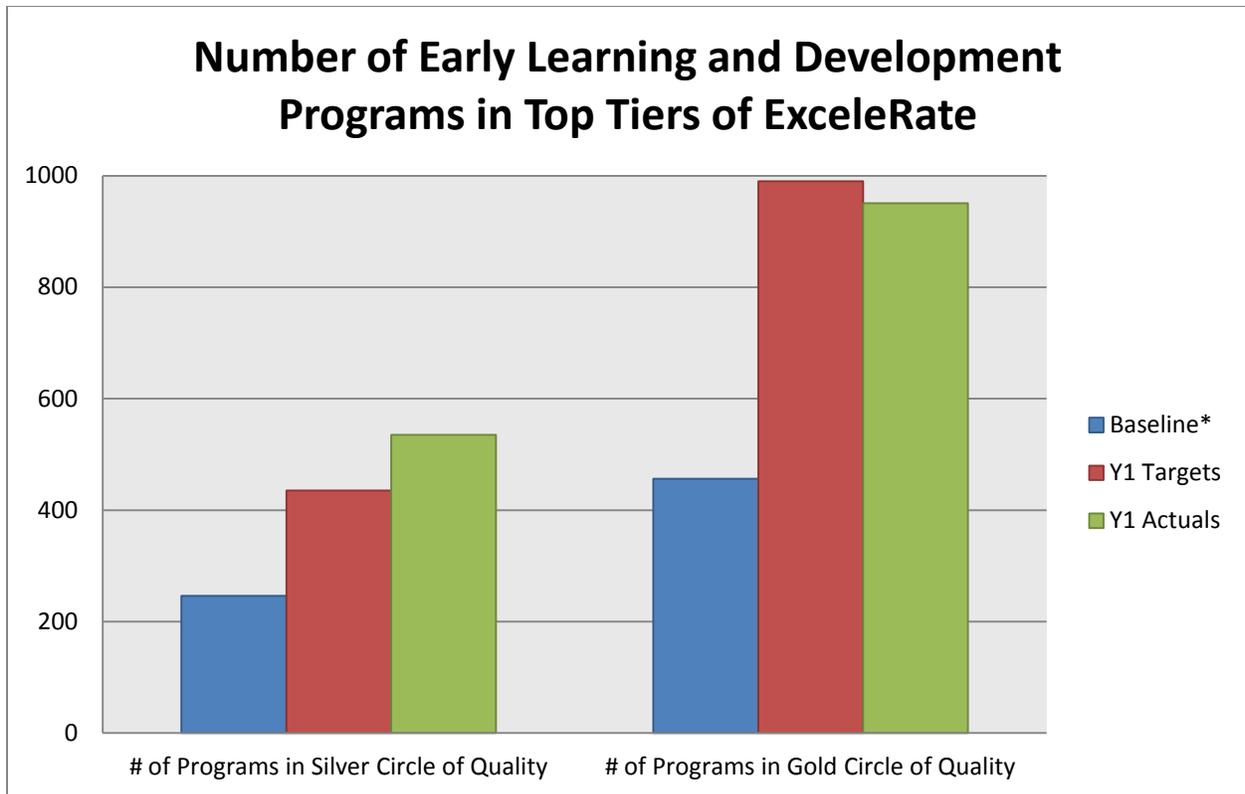
Illinois met its Performance Measure target for the percentage of licensed programs enrolled in the TQRIS.

For State Preschool, the State did not meet its target of 50% enrollment for a few reasons. First, we encountered delays in implementing a data transfer process from ISBE to the Data Tracking Program (DTP) for ExceleRate Illinois, such that the DTP does not yet include all Preschool for All sites. These delays were the result of unforeseen staffing shortages at ISBE that have now been resolved, and work is now progressing on the data transfer process. For this first year, a manual process of enrolling sites in ExceleRate was implemented for only those school-based programs that had received a full monitoring visit in the past two years. No community-based programs were included in this process, and therefore a lower percentage of sites overall were included. Second, we made a decision with programs funded through the Chicago Public Schools (which use a different monitoring process than in the balance of the state, and who recently revised their monitoring process to align with ExceleRate) that we would only use monitoring data collected in 2013 and beyond for ExceleRate. This decision resulted in far fewer Chicago sites being included in this year's Performance Measures than anticipated. It may also result in our not meeting the full 100% target we set for 2014, although we anticipate coming close to that target.

For Head Start and Early Head Start, we have similarly faced obstacles in including these sites in the DTP from which we generate our Performance Measures. We encountered delays in developing an application process for Head Start and Early Head Start programs, largely due to delays in hiring for key

policy positions for the grant. We have not yet worked out all of our policies for how Head Start and Early Head Start programs will submit evidence of meeting all of the ExceleRate Illinois standards. That policy work is slated to be completed by June, 2014, and it is anticipated that all of the Head Start and Early Head Start programs will be enrolled in ExceleRate by December, 2014. For the current year, only Head Start and Early Head Start programs that joined ExceleRate as accredited programs and Head Start programs in Chicago Public School buildings that had been monitored under the new CPS process were included in the Performance Measure.

**2. The number of Early Learning and Development Programs in the top tiers of the TQRIS**



\*Baseline refers to programs enrolled in the previous Quality Rating System.

Illinois came very close to its goal for programs at the top tiers of ExceleRate despite the previously mentioned delays and difficulties in enrolling Preschool for All and Head Start/Early Head Start sites.

Accredited programs and programs that participated in the old Quality Counts program were targeted aggressively to align to ExceleRate. Beginning in the summer of 2014 programs will receive one time financial bonuses based on their Circle of Quality for enrolling in ExceleRate.

The Performance Measure target for Tier 2 (Bronze) was originally set assuming programs at Star 1 of Quality Counts would be included in Tier 2 in ExceleRate Illinois. As the policy for transitioning programs from Quality Counts to ExceleRate Illinois was finalized, however, the State made the decision to transition all programs that were at Star 1 and Star 2 into the Silver Circle (Tier 3) of ExceleRate. This is because Star 1 and Star 2 were both levels that involved an on-site assessment of program quality,

which the Bronze Circle (Tier 2) does not. (Transitioning programs have a defined period of time to align with all of the standards at the Circle of Quality in which they have been provisionally enrolled.) The process for new programs to enroll in the Bronze Circle of Quality is being implemented in the first half of 2014; therefore there are currently no programs enrolled in Tier 2. We anticipate that our numbers of programs enrolled in Tier 2 will be lower in 2014 than our original target, but that our growth will be as projected in this tier.

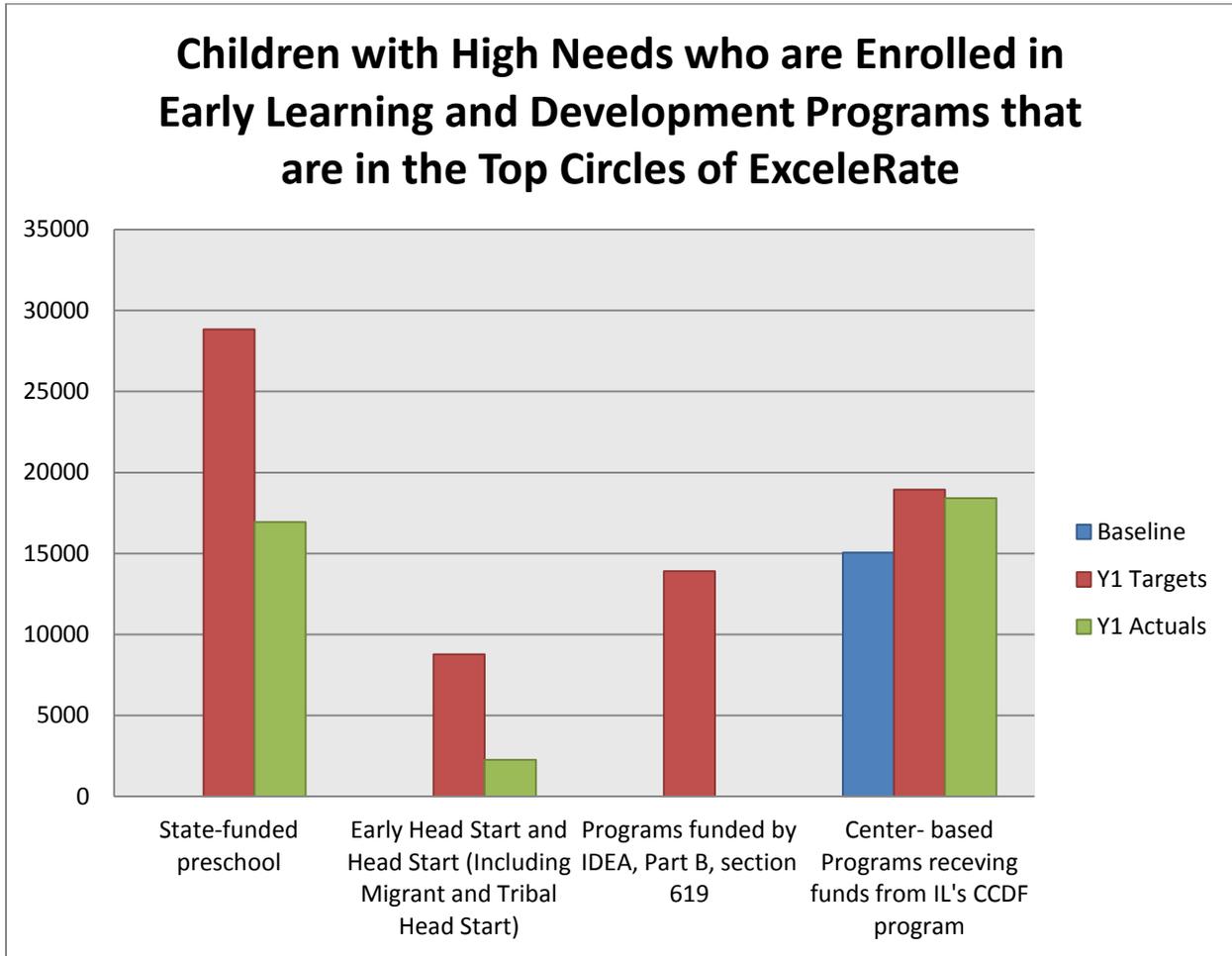
Likewise, our original Performance Measure target for Tier 5 assumed that we would transition programs that had a 4-star rating in Quality Counts into Tier 5. Instead, the decision was made to transition them into the Gold Circle of Quality (Tier 4). Tier 5 will represent only programs that have achieved one or more Awards of Excellence. These Awards are being implemented for the first time in late 2014 and programs will receive Awards of Excellence in the following years.

The number of programs enrolled in the Silver Circle (Tier 3) of ExceleRate is close to our original target of the number of programs that would be in Tiers 2 and combined. We anticipate that we will continue to be on target for Tier 3 in the future.

The Performance Measure target for Tier 4 had also assumed more Head Start and Chicago Public School (CPS) PFA programs would be in ExceleRate; however, as previously mentioned, fewer of those programs have been fully rated at this time than anticipated. Nevertheless, we came very close to our target for the number of programs in the Gold Circle of Quality. The proportion of Preschool for All and Head Start sites that are meeting the performance standards for the Gold Circle upon their initial rating are on track with our projections.

The Family Child Care Center standards for ExceleRate will be announced in 2014.

**3. Number and percent of Children with High Needs Participating in Programs that are in the top tiers of the TQRIS**

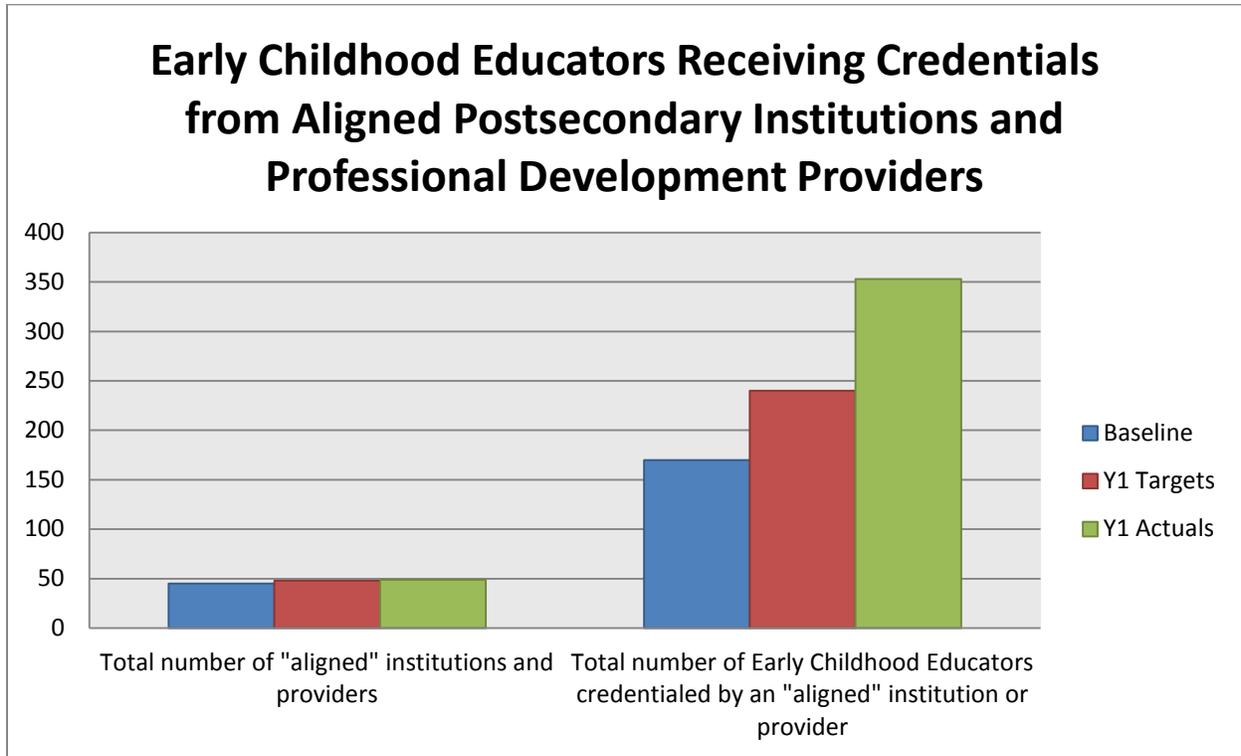


Illinois met its Performance Measure target for the percentage of CCDF participating children that are served in programs at the highest tiers (Gold Circle of Quality) in ExceleRate Illinois.

Many children who are served in Head Start or Early Head Start take part in collaboration programs with CCDF funding and many of these programs are actually already rated in ExceleRate. However, our data system does not yet allow us to identify the number of children who are served with Head Start or Early Head Start funding in these programs; therefore these children are not counted in the Performance Measure for 2013. This is also true for Preschool for All programs. These data system shortcomings should be overcome in 2014.

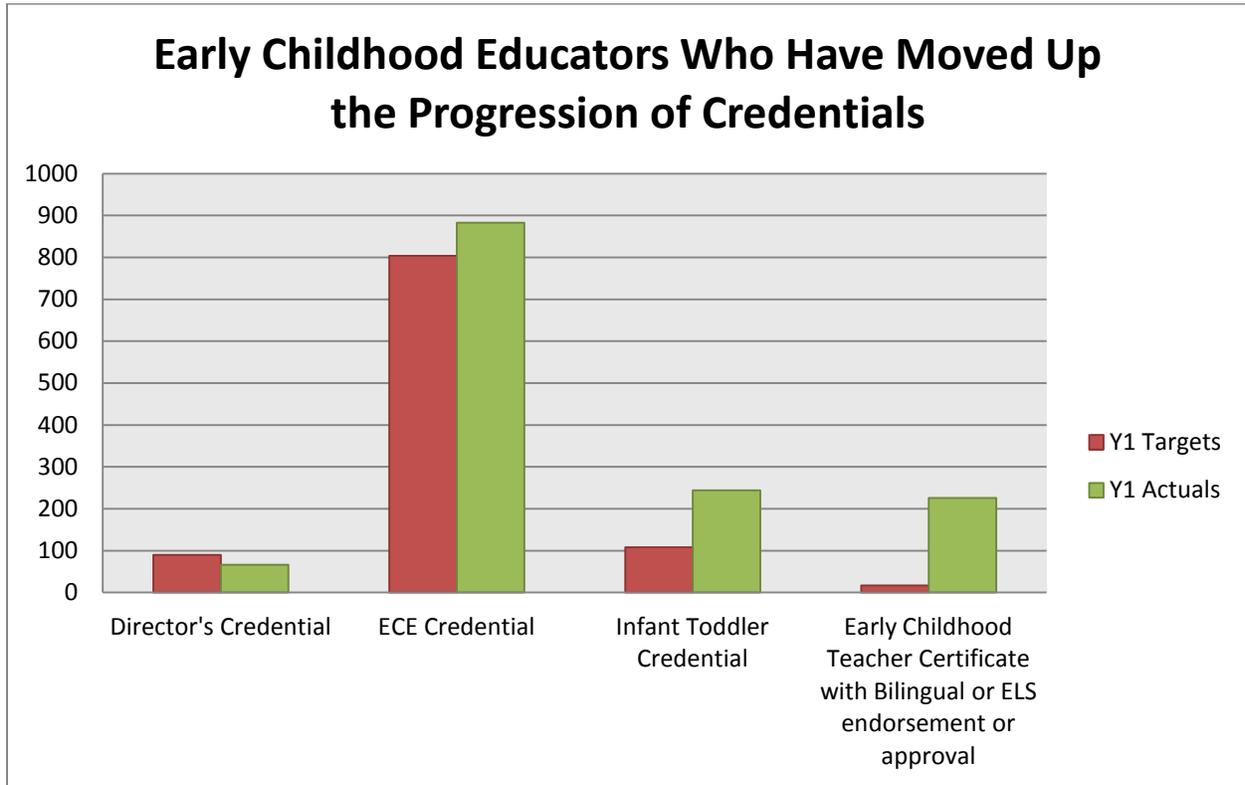
As previously noted, Illinois was not able to enroll many Head Start or Early Head Start and Preschool for All programs in ExceleRate in 2013, and therefore underperformed relative to our target on this Performance Measure for Head Start, Early Head Start, and Preschool for All participants.

**4. The number of Early Childhood Educators receiving credentials from postsecondary institutions and professional development providers with programs that are aligned to the Workforce Knowledge and Competency Framework.**



Illinois was successful in meeting its Performance Measure targets for this Measure. Our outreach efforts to entitled institutions have been successful in increasing the number of students who are obtaining their Gateways credentials.

5. Number and percentage of Early Childhood Educators who have moved up the progression of credentials, aligned to the Workforce Knowledge and Competency Framework, in the prior year.



Illinois was pleased to see that though our actual numbers were below our goals at the lower levels for Early Childhood and Infant and Toddler credentials, we far surpassed them at the higher levels of the credential. This indicates that more of our workforce was prepared for and able to seek even higher levels of credentials than we anticipated.

### Looking Ahead

While strategic collaboration led to major progress for Illinois children during 2013, there is certainly more work to be done. Over the next several years, Illinois will continue to focus on its three priorities:

- **Priority 1: Deepening the integration of state supports to create a unified framework for all early learning and development programs.**
- **Priority 2: Connecting the most-at-risk children with the supports and services they need.**
- **Priority 3: Increasing program quality: From adequate to good and from good to great.**