

An Aligned Agenda for Early Childhood Education

The McCormick Foundation approves \$6.3 million to improve early care in Illinois

by Shanita Bigelow

In an effort to improve early care and education for all children in Illinois, the McCormick Foundation recently approved more than \$6 million in grant money for 21 organizations across three areas: public policy, infrastructure and public awareness. Grant recipients include the Kohl Education Foundation (\$83,000), the University of Illinois at Chicago (\$500,000), the City Colleges of Chicago (\$85,000), Illinois State University (\$360,000), the Women's Business Development Center (\$75,000), and the Erikson Institute (\$450,000).

Illinois has been a national leader in early education, according to Sara Slaughter, Director of the McCormick Foundation's Education Program. "We've enjoyed a lot

of successes," she said, adding that she's proud of the foundation's consistent funding in the area over the years to improve quality and access.

She cites the passage of Pre-School for All (2006), making Illinois the first state in the nation to offer pre-school to all families with three and four year olds who wish to participate. The program

offers mental health consultation, parent outreach, as well as efforts to expand teacher certification and professional development.

The McCormick Foundation has already invested over \$90 million to better address the necessities and complexities of early childhood education in Illinois.

"While we recognize that learning is a continuum, we know our current education system is

not – it is a series of silos each with its own delivery system, funding

stream, governing laws and regulations," Slaughter said in a press release. "The Foundation's expanded focus from birth to age eight will look across these delivery systems to work toward a unified system to ensure continuous, quality education for our youngest learners."

While programs such as Pre-School for All and Head Start, among others, address the needs of children across the state, they are governed by their own rules and regulations, Slaughter said. With this funding the McCormick Foundation is "trying to promote more of a vision of alignment," she continued.

The nation's economic crisis is a major challenge for existing programs, according to Slaughter. "Many programs are closing," she said, and if they aren't, they may be forced to reduce available classrooms, leading to a watering down of quality.

Another challenge, according to Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs /Dean of Faculty at the Erikson Institute, Aisha Ray, Ph.D., has garnered little attention in early education research and institutions of higher education: effectively preparing early educators to better work with students from culturally, linguistically, racially, and socioeconomically diverse backgrounds.

Family environment is an early determinant in a child's skill development, but early education programs are also vital. Research shows that teachers' understanding of children's

backgrounds influence classroom interaction, children's adjustment to school, and academic success, according to Ray. Understanding students' "culture and language is critical," Ray said, "because early childhood settings are often the first places where kids are not with

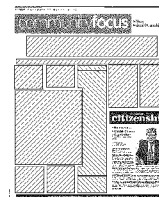
their family...There can be a real disconnect between school and home settings." This disconnect—the stark differences between most teachers and their students—can lead to the "disadvantaged discourse" labeling many students (often students of color, low-income or ESL students) "at-risk," according to Ray.

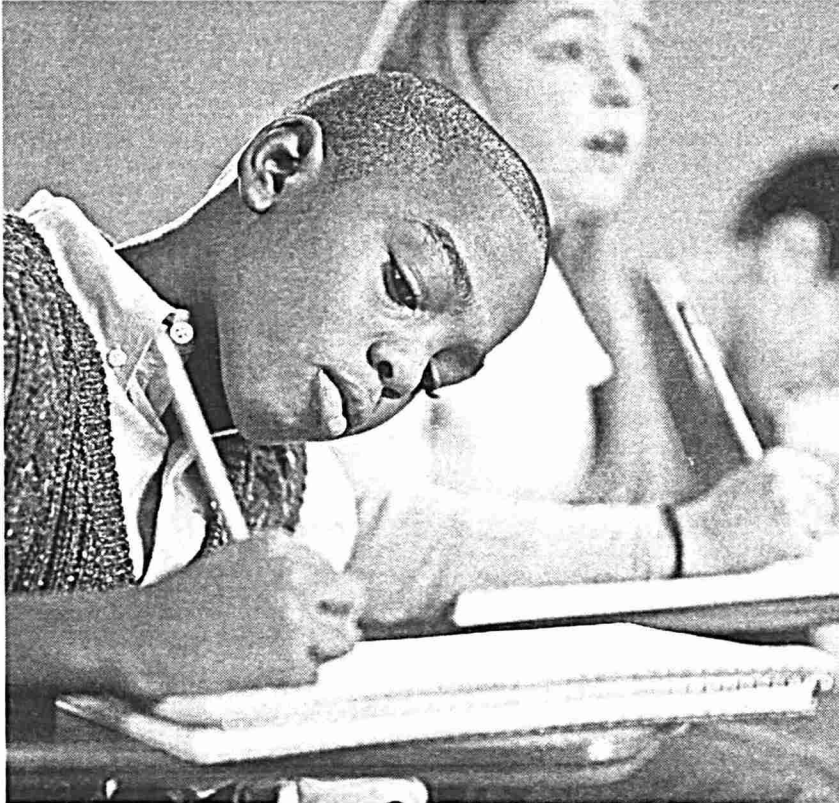
Ray, in conjunction with colleagues at the Erikson Institute, looked at one-third of early childhood teacher preparation programs in the U.S. in 2005/2006 to determine what extent of those programs courses addressed diversity. They found that of the required courses in 226 institutions of higher education only

12.5% addressed any aspect of diversity (e.g. culture, gender, and world view).

It's not that faculty in higher education don't realize that preparing teachers for diversity is a problem, she said, but improvements can be made around faculty preparation and curriculum assessment by infusing it with knowledge about the children that are actually in the classrooms.

An aligned effort is essential, according to Slaughter, an effort to better prepare early educators and school leaders, assess current program outcomes, share research findings and support early care facilities to ensure quality care for all children.





"Years of research show that early childhood development heavily influences a lifetime of health, education and economic outcomes for individuals," David Hiller, president and CEO of the McCormick Foundation said in a press release. "Our grantee partners are helping provide more children in Illinois with access to high-quality early learning programs that will make a real difference in their lives."