
THE IOWA INNOVATIVE EARLY ELEMENTARY PROGRAM
SERVING AT-RISK STUDENTS IN KINDERGARTEN THROUGH THIRD GRADE

EVALUATION REPORT

2005-2006

Conducted at the request of the Iowa Department of Education by the
Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy, Yale University

Matia Finn-Stevenson, Ph.D., Principal Investigator

Misty Ginicola, Ph.D., Research Associate

Alina Yekelchik, Research Associate

Iowa Department of Education
Penny Milburne, ECSE/EC Specialist
Bureau of Instructional Services

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Executive Summary

The Iowa Department of Education asked The Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy to evaluate The Iowa Innovative Early Elementary Program, referred to herein as the Grant Program. The Grant Program, under the direction of the Iowa Department of Education, provided grants to 24 schools to implement services to address the needs of students at risk for educational failure in kindergarten through grade three. Yale researchers have been evaluating the program since 1992, submitting annual evaluation reports on various aspects of the initiative. This year's report presents findings on four main evaluation questions:

- 1) What are the characteristics of the student population served by the Grant Program?
- 2) What are the activities and initiatives implemented to address the needs of the students and families?
- 3) What is the impact on students, families, and the schools?
- 4) What is the prevalence of mental health problems in the grantee schools?

We have investigated the first three questions every year, paying attention to longitudinal changes. We added the question on mental health as a result of last year's evaluation, which indicated that mental health is a growing problem in schools around the country, as well as in the grantee schools.

The findings of this year's evaluation indicate that the Iowa Innovative Early Elementary Program completed another successful year. The schools continue to serve more than 5,500 of the most vulnerable students in the state, including students who are from low-income households (65 percent of the school population), homeless (6 percent), migrant families (3 percent) and English as second language learners (19 percent). Student transience, which presents obstacles to student learning, is high in the grantee schools, with turnover rates averaging 29 percent across all schools.

To address the needs of at-risk students and their families, the grantee schools implemented a rich variety of programs and services, including pre-school, full-day kindergarten, child care, tutoring, recreational activities, home visits, summer school, family resource centers, and mentor programs. These various initiatives have yielded positive results. Within this school year, grantee schools continued to show a decrease in special education referral rates and grade retention rates, as well as a large increase in the percentage of students reading at grade level, indicating that the Grant Program is having a positive impact on student achievement. In addition, grantee school principals, teachers, parents, and students reported that the schools have a positive school climate. The vast majority of parents and students, in both their ratings and qualitative comments, expressed their fondness for and appreciation of their teachers and indicated that they liked their school and are happy to be there. In terms of parental involvement, although ratings showed parent-school relations as fair, parent attendance at school events was high. Parents reported being involved in their child's education, both in school and at home, where they indicated that they help their children with homework, read to their children, and ask their children about their school day. While continuing to encourage parent involvement is of utmost importance, the high level of parental engagement in this at-risk population is impressive and likely to yield continued improvements in student achievement. The large number of parent surveys returned and the vast number of comments given on the parent surveys further attest to the fact that many parents are interested and engaged in their children's education.

The positive findings noted above gain in significance when considering the prevalence of mental health problems in the student population. We noted the issue in last year's evaluation, prompting us to continue to monitor the problem. We found

that mental health problems in the grantee schools are again widespread and pervasive, with approximately 20 percent of the entire school population is presenting with mental health problems, consisting primarily of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and aggression. The majority of teachers in the grantee schools reported that they feel only somewhat prepared for this task and that they have had no formal training in mental health. Teachers who reported to have had some training received it from brief staff development workshops on ADHD given in some of the schools. Parents, principals, and teachers reported that they absolutely need more help in this area. Teachers, in particular, indicated that they have limited help, as most school psychologists and counselors are part-time and over-loaded with work, with a counselor-student ratio averaging 1 to more than 300 students.

Although concerns about mental health problems in the grantee schools are pervasive, they mirror what is happening in school across the country and require immediate attention. Given the mental health issues that the grantee schools are confronting, the impact findings and positive comments about the schools have shown how tremendously successful the Grant Program has been despite these obstacles. The program has accomplished extremely high levels of parental involvement, significantly decreased grade retention and special education rates, and increased the percentage of students reading at grade level. The program has also helped provide an overall good school climate for students' families, all in a population at an extremely high risk for academic failure. Teachers and principals in the grantee schools deserve recognition for their dedication and efforts on behalf of children and families.