



Early Childhood Education Research Alliance

Research Update April 2017



Message from the partnership facilitators

Welcome to Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Midwest's first newsletter for the Midwest Early Childhood Education Research Alliance (MECERA). We are pleased to introduce you to MECERA and our plan for the next five years. We have generated great momentum and are excited about the work to come and the level of engagement of each of the alliance members.



The structure of MECERA includes two levels of collaboration: primary collaborators from Illinois and a community of practice from the rest of the REL Midwest region states. The primary collaborators drive the work and create the research agenda, with regular input from community of practice members. MECERA primary collaborators include early childhood stakeholders from multiple Illinois agencies, school districts, advocacy groups, and the Illinois Head Start Association. These members have worked with REL Midwest researchers to develop a research agenda focused on three main topics: cross-system collaboration, social emotional development, and the transition from preschool programming to the elementary school years. Over the next five years, alliance members and REL Midwest staff will conduct technical support and applied research projects to answer questions related to these topics.



In 2017, MECERA's focus is on kindergarten readiness as Illinois rolls out its new [KIDS assessment](#) statewide and other Midwest states grapple with kindergarten readiness assessments of their own. Stay tuned for more information on these projects and an upcoming MECERA-sponsored webinar later this year! On behalf of the REL Midwest staff, we want to thank all of the alliance members for their enthusiasm in this collaboration.—**Jill Bowdon, Heather Lavigne, and Megan Norris**

Equipping parents to support kindergarten readiness [Webinar]

Join REL Midwest and MECERA on Wednesday, May 17, 12:00–1:00 p.m. (CT), for a webinar that will address how practitioners can help parents develop their children's nonacademic skills and prepare for kindergarten. Spring Dawson-McClure, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Center of Early Childhood Health and Development at the NYU School of Medicine, will discuss research on factors affecting parental involvement and the resulting outcomes for children entering kindergarten. Kimberly Mann, Ph.D., project director of the Illinois Birth-Three Initiative at the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, will discuss trauma-informed care and social and emotional development for young children. Valerie Young, a parent ambassador from the Illinois Head Start Association, will discuss parent engagement strategies. [Register](#) for the webinar.

Meet the alliance member: Kimberly Nelson

Kimberly Nelson is a member of MECERA and serves as the executive director of early childhood for the Rockford (IL) Public School District. Nelson supervises the district's early childhood program of more than 2,500 students ages 3 to 5 as well as a birth to 3 home visit program that currently serves 171 families. Rockford Public School District serves a school population with high rates of poverty, student mobility, and homelessness.



Nelson has been closely involved in a “safety net” effort with other community partners in Rockford to make sure that families have access to high-quality early learning programs. Working with the housing authority, the community partners looked at pockets in the city by zip code where there were many families with children under the age of three not being served by the birth to age 3 home visit program. Nelson explains, “We are trying to identify all of the organizations that provide services to the families we serve and ask whether we are doing a good job coordinating services. Are agencies connecting with one another?” The ultimate goal of this effort is to better coordinate community services so that more referrals for early childhood education programs are made.

Nelson has been able to apply this expertise as a program executive and community collaborator to the research agenda-setting process with MECERA. As the group of stakeholders from higher education, state agencies, and district programs began to define its planned scope of work, Nelson was pleased to see that there were many common themes. “It was a really interesting process,” Nelson reflected. “I learned a lot listening to the conversations. Everyone at the table had different perspectives but similar concerns about early childhood education.” When asked what she hopes to gain from her involvement with REL Midwest, Nelson emphasized the importance of the collaborative approach to applied research.

“Our district has always looked at best practices. We want to learn and take information back from conferences, but those don’t always translate into changed practice unless you do a deeper dive.” For Nelson, having access to rigorous data and research is critically important in shaping decisions about programs and resources. “Data without research does not effectively move the needle for student outcomes,” explained Nelson. “We cannot continue to do things the same way and expect a different outcome for our most vulnerable children and families.”

The building blocks of our future: A look at quality early education [Public Television]

In 2017, REL Midwest partnered with WFYI, the public television station in Indianapolis, to produce a documentary-style program on quality early childhood education. Watch the program to learn about three Indiana early childhood education programs providing high-quality experiences for different student populations. The program also features experts from research, policy, and practice discussing the characteristics of high-quality early childhood education and the balance between academic rigor and developmentally appropriate practice. REL Midwest created this program under the 2012–2017 contract. Watch the program on the [IES YouTube channel](#).

15 hours of training or more: What it takes to improve the quality of early childhood [Podcast]

“If I had not started taking professional development, I’m not sure I’d still be in the field any longer. Professional development is what made everything click.” –Tracy Ehlert, early childhood education provider

Early childhood education—the things we teach children before they enter kindergarten—lays the foundation for success in school and life. What can we do to get teachers the support they need to provide high-quality early childhood education? In this podcast, REL Midwest team member Sarah Rand interviews researcher Ann-Marie Faria and early childhood educator Tracy Ehlert about what it takes to get early childhood teachers the training they need. REL Midwest created this podcast under the 2012–2017 contract. Listen to the podcast on the [IES YouTube channel](#).

REL resources on early childhood program quality and family/community engagement

[Early childhood topic page, IES](#)

IES has compiled a selected list of early childhood resources from the REL Program, including publications, videos, archived webinars, and infographics.

[Quality improvement efforts among early childhood education programs participating in Iowa’s Quality Rating System, REL Midwest](#)

This report summarizes survey responses from 388 program administrators, describing how staff of programs in Iowa’s quality rating system participate in quality improvement activities such as training, coaching, and continuing education.

Toolkit of resources for engaging parents and community, REL Pacific

The Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Parents and Community as Partners in Education is designed to guide school staff in strengthening partnerships with families and community members to support student learning.

Engaging families in the assessment process and use of data: An early childhood example, REL Northeast & Islands and REL Southwest

This webinar hosted by the Early Childhood Education Research Alliance at REL Northeast & Islands examines the strategies that the Research Program Partnership at the University of Kansas employs to promote the use of education data at multiple levels, particularly the family level.

How kindergarten entry assessments are used in public schools and how they correlate with spring assessments, REL Northeast & Islands

REL Northeast & Islands researchers examined data from the Head Start Impact Study for patterns of early childhood education classroom quality across multiple domains: structural quality, process quality, teacher-child interactions, and instructional activities.

State Support Network launches website

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of State Support is pleased to announce the new State Support Network website, an online platform designed to support school improvement efforts by providing States and districts with opportunities to engage with their peers and connect with experts and resources. Learn more on the [State Support Network website](#).

Contact Us

Please contact us for more information about any of the items in this newsletter or to speak to a member of our staff. We look forward to hearing from you.

REL Midwest at American Institutes for Research

10 S. Riverside Plaza, Suite 600
Chicago, IL 60606

