

Illinois Teacher Quality Grants: Evaluating Professional Development Partnerships  
*An Ongoing Collaboration of the Center for the Study of Education Policy and  
the Illinois Board of Higher Education*

Since 2003, an evaluation team from the Center for the Study of Education Policy at Illinois State University has partnered with the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) to improve its grant evaluation system. The work began as an audit of 2002 Higher Education Cooperation Act grant evaluations. We found that grant evaluations were neglected by both the state agency and individual grant directors with only 40% of grants submitting final evaluations. We reasoned that each grant-funding stream was more than a loose collection of projects; it was a cluster of research endeavors that could be used to sharpen policy and add to our understanding of what works and what doesn't. We recommended that IBHE follow a cyclic evaluation process organized around the phases of the grant-funding process.

In 2004, we had our first opportunity to test our ideas about grant evaluation with Illinois Teacher Quality (ITQ) Grants awarded competitively under Title II. Since that time, we have consulted with IBHE on its evaluation processes and collaborated with ITQ projects around the state. Given a number of grant-funded projects with the same basic goals but a range of approaches on how to reach them, we decided to test these approaches for their effectiveness. We assumed that projects with comprehensive approaches would be most interested in using evaluation results for continuous improvement. This has been demonstrated to us since 2004. We continue to develop our thinking about grant evaluation and its implications through ongoing research at the project sites around the state, visiting school sites and university partners. We continue our twofold effort to make the projects stronger through collaboration and to ensure that evaluations support the strategic goals of the IBHE.

We have continued to study and support projects to improve the achievement of PK12 students through effective: (1) school-university partnerships; (2) professional learning opportunities for teachers and school leaders; and (3) evaluation used for improvement and accountability. Our broad findings to date indicate that exemplary projects will have these common, general characteristics:

*School-University Partnerships work best when:*

- Partners have a history of collaboration OR invest heavily in creating a partnership.
- Partners share a commitment to student achievement and really change their ways of doing business in order to see results.
- Traditional roles and relationships are changed to reflect the new ways of working.
- Work in both the school and the university is reorganized to allow for ongoing collaboration.

*Professional learning for teacher and school leaders works best when:*

- Extended time is provided and the work follows the teachers and leaders into the school.
- Teachers learn the content of a subject as they learn the best ways to teach that subject.
- Teachers learn actively with the materials they can use in their classrooms.
- Teachers are given different kinds of chances to learn over time and are supported to try new approaches, to take risks with supportive partners.

*Evaluation is most effective when:*

- Project designers plan evaluation from the beginning and assess local needs as a first step.
- Evidence and data are used by everyone for improving the project, with the goal of student achievement as the guiding principle.
- Evaluation tests the assumptions in project design with ongoing improvement as the first goal, accountability as the second.
- All the projects IBHE funds can learn about how to evaluate from each other.