From Policy to Impact

Illinois' Implementation of High-Impact Tutoring

By David Casalaspi, Marisa Mission, and Hailly T.N. Korman

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Bellwether

Introduction

High-impact tutoring is a research-based approach to providing individualized instruction for students and accelerating learning.[1] It was one of the most popular uses of federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) dollars,[2] with 10 states spending a portion of their funding on large-scale tutoring initiatives.[3] Illinois was one of these states, launching the Illinois Tutoring Initiative (ITI) in 2022. Over two years, the initiative served more than 7,200 students across 209 schools in 72 districts and achieved national attention for its success.[4]

Evaluation data suggests that ITI had a significant impact on student learning.[5] One analysis of the initiative's first year found that from fall to spring, nearly 90% of tutored students met or exceeded expected growth in math and nearly 80% of tutored students met or exceeded expected growth in reading.[6] It also found that tutored students scored significantly higher on end-of-year assessments.[7] ITI's success garnered the attention of the White House, which spotlighted ITI as an example of successful high-dosage tutoring.[8]

The implementation of ITI is instructive for a few key reasons: Illinois managed to coordinate and align several government agencies and institutions of higher education (IHEs) to design, roll out, scale, and monitor an initiative that achieved statewide reach while still remaining faithful to evidence-based design principles. Additionally, ITI's intentional use of data in program design, rollout, and evaluation helped ensure that the initiative was responsive to local contexts and produced evidence of impact that supported buy-in, scaling, and continuous learning.

This case study focuses on three elements of Illinois' implementation of ITI, highlighting high-quality practices in Leadership and Governance; Data-Driven Decision-Making; and Evaluation, Reporting, and Continuous Improvement.

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The elements in this analysis draw on From Policy to Impact: A State Education Agency's Guide to Implementation, which offers a new framework to help SEA leaders and staff think about policy implementation.

For other examples of high-quality implementation, see From Policy to Impact: North Carolina's Implementation of the Science of Reading and From Policy to Impact: Louisiana's Implementation of High-Quality Instructional Materials.

Program Overview

ITI's roots trace back to 2021, when state leadership convened a P-20 Council on Learning Renewal[9] to consider how to best leverage federal education relief dollars for Illinois students' learning recovery.[10] A resource guide published by the council listed high-impact tutoring as one recommended strategy.[11] Not long afterward, the Governor's Office selected it for statewide implementation, allocating $25 million in ESSER funds.[12]

ITI was a cross-agency initiative, requiring coordination among the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE, the state education agency), the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE), and the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), along with the Governor's Office, local school districts, and several IHEs. The program offered one-on-one or small-group tutoring (in-person or online) in literacy and mathematics to grade 3-8 students in districts disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.[13] Partner IHEs hired and supervised tutors, and an executive team at Illinois State University (ISU) provided overall project management, overseeing tutor training and development, data collection, and research. The university also worked with experts at the National Student Support Accelerator to establish scientifically grounded guardrails for the initiative while ensuring that program delivery remained flexible enough to fit each district's unique needs and context.

Implementation Highlights

Leadership and Governance

Cross-agency leadership was key to ITI's success, enabling the initiative to consolidate and leverage critical resources, networks, and expertise. Leaders from ISBE, IBHE, ICCB, and ISU **met weekly to establish program guidelines, monitor rollout, and collectively problem-solve**. Executive leaders across these agencies supported ITI and were willing to delegate and empower their deputies so that staff could make time-sensitive decisions quickly.[14] While sometimes challenging due to the "different languages"[15] of each agency, this collaboration helped develop and strengthen the relationships needed to foster statewide and systems-wide coordination. As Stephanie Bernoteit, former executive deputy director at IBHE, said, "Having folks who understood the importance of relationship-building and what true partnership looks like on the ground … was essential."[16]

Working together, leadership was able to immediately address implementation challenges. For example, hiring tutors proved more difficult than expected due to the initially low levels of pay, IHEs' limited hiring infrastructure, and a new state law enacted during the initiative that increased background check requirements for individuals working with children.[17] The leadership team accordingly increased tutor wages, provided technical assistance and guidance to assist IHEs in quickly hiring large numbers of tutors, and created new administrative protocols for the civil service system that governed hiring.

The collaboration across agencies also helped state leaders develop a shared vision and understanding of the program and offer a "united front" of communications.[18] This included clear communication protocols across the different agencies and monthly communications meetings to **ensure the program was consistently branded**. The consistent messaging kept stakeholders on the same page and provided a helpful problem-solving frame when there were different perspectives.

ISU's project team also used **a hub-and-spoke governance structure**, in which the university coordinated partner IHEs across the state's six ITI regions. This model allowed the ISU team to have a line of sight into all parts of the initiative, see how it was unfolding in different regions, offer support, and elevate challenges to the cross-agency leadership team. This design also created opportunities to leverage IHEs' relationships with local communities to support district recruitment and foster deeper connections between tutors and students.

ITI's governance model also allowed **centralized program design elements to coexist with regional flexibility** in tutoring delivery.[19] Leaders embedded scientifically grounded best practices in program design with protocols related to tutor training, matching, scheduling, and data collection. As long as districts fit within these basic standards, they could implement the program as they saw fit — adjusting curricula, session lengths, tutoring assignments, group sizes, and session timing to accommodate local needs. In a large and diverse state like Illinois, this was especially critical.[20]

Finally, ITI benefited from having **strong executive leadership**, with multiple officials highlighting Executive Director Christy Borders at ISU for her visionary, relational, and impact-oriented approach. Borders had credibility among all the different constituencies connected to the project (e.g., IHEs and school leaders) and excelled at building relationships, bringing partners into the fold, and conveying a vision that gave the initiative momentum.[21] Like others on the ITI leadership

team, she was known to roll up her sleeves when something needed to get done. Bernoteit recalled, "She was extremely savvy about times when she simply just needed to get in a car and go meet with a school principal or a school superintendent when an in-person meeting was needed to work through whatever they were seeing."[22] Given the time-sensitive nature of ITI as an ESSER-funded initiative, this approach was instrumental in quickly solving problems. Furthermore, as a university researcher, Borders brought a data lens to the initiative from the start, embedding evaluation and data-driven decision-making into ITI's design and helping leadership tell a story of impact that allowed the program to grow.

Data-Driven Decision-Making

ITI leadership consistently grounded their decision-making in data throughout implementation. As noted above, ITI guardrails applied evidence-based best practices about tutoring. Throughout implementation, ITI leadership provided technical assistance and guidance to ensure fidelity to these design elements, and whenever there was an internal disagreement about possible changes to the program, research helped guide those discussions. By **embedding evidence-based practices into the design of the program**, ITI leadership ensured the program would achieve impact, which in turn supported scaling as the impact became visible.

Data was also used to identify which districts would be defined as disproportionately affected by the pandemic and thus eligible for tutoring, helping to ensure that **grant dollars were directed where they were most needed**. The ITI leadership team also regularly used financial projections to determine when and how to redirect funding to address emergent program needs. ITI leadership and grant managers supported districts in assessing the financial implications of hiring more tutors, expanding tutoring group sizes, or implementing other program changes to get the most support to students in a way that was fiscally responsible.[23] They also used financial analysis to decide how to best shift expiring funds to places they could be used so they were not lost.[24]

As the program rolled out and scaled, ITI leaders collected data on a range of program outputs and outcomes (e.g., learning, motivation, self-efficacy, relationship-building) so they could better understand what was working and what could be improved. The data was collected and housed in a single online tutoring management software program that all tutors were required to use. Importantly, the surveys also included **implementation fidelity checks** for tutoring sessions based on self-reports and supervisor observations. This positioned ITI leaders to ensure implementation fidelity, pinpoint implementation challenges, respond to them, and iterate.

Evaluation, Reporting, and Continuous Improvement

A major strength of ITI's implementation was the fact that a research university (ISU) was the program's central hub. As a result, **research and evaluation plans were embedded into the design of ITI even before it launched**. Leaders specified the types of research questions that could be answered, the data that would be needed, and clear protocols for collecting it. Through data-sharing agreements with school districts and state agencies, researchers could connect tutoring data from the management software to other data sources, such as standardized test scores and attendance rates. As Jen Kirmes, former executive director of teaching and learning at ISBE, noted, "We had a plan for evaluation before we started the program, instead of what often happens … [which is] think[ing] about program evaluation after the fact. … But we had a research university from the beginning with capacity to design the system to ensure that we would have the data [needed] to evaluate outcomes."[25] ISBE and IBHE also devoted federal pandemic relief dollars to formally evaluating ITI. Reports[26] and presentations[27] from that research examined the relationship between tutoring and a host of student outcomes (e.g., academic growth, attendance, and motivation) and tutor outcomes (e.g., self-efficacy). The analyses also included qualitative insights from students and tutors about the impact of the work.

The intentionality around research and evaluation also fueled continuous improvement efforts. For example, when evidence revealed that many rural Illinois communities were struggling to attract tutors from their regional universities (which were sometimes very far away), the program evolved to allow districts to recruit tutors from among local community members. Evaluation data also facilitated consistent messages about program impact, which helped build public support and buy-in for the initiative. As Bernoteit noted, "We knew from the outset of this project that we needed to distinguish this work from the era of goal-worthy but not at all uniformly successful tutoring that happened under [No Child Left Behind]. … [We needed] solid, verifiable claims … about the efficacy … [and] to communicate successes and wins effectively when and where we could to help people see the promise of the project."[28]

Conclusion

ITI's implementation success was facilitated by high-quality practices with regard to leadership and governance; data-driven decision-making; and evaluation, reporting, and continuous improvement. State leaders successfully aligned and coordinated a large number of agencies and IHEs, established implementation guardrails, and oversaw a rollout that included both centralized support and regional flexibilities. Data was purposefully collected and leveraged throughout implementation to monitor rollout, ensure fidelity of implementation, strategically deploy resources, make policy adjustments, and tell a story of impact that fostered buy-in. In doing so, ITI emerged as an instructive model for other states hoping to implement large-scale tutoring initiatives and helped position Illinois at the forefront of post-COVID academic recovery. ✦

Endnotes

1   National Student Support Accelerator, "High-Impact Tutoring," https://studentsupportaccelerator.org/about/high-impact-tutoring.

2   Council of Chief State School Officers, "ESSER State Reserve Spending Priorities," updated March 2024, https://learning.ccsso.org/states-leading-how-state-education-agencies-are-leveraging-the-esser-set-aside.

3   Council of Chief State School Officers, "ESSER State Set-Aside Funds: Investment to Impact," updated March 2024, https://learning.ccsso.org/states-leading-how-state-education-agencies-are-leveraging-the-esser-set-aside.

4   Christy Borders, email exchange, October 10, 2024.

5   Illinois Tutoring Initiative, *Student and Tutor Outcomes Report on Academic Year 2022-23*, January 29, 2024, https://illinoistutoringinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/ITI-STUDENT-and-TUTOR-OUTCOMES-REPORT-AY2393.pdf.

6   Ibid.

7   Ibid.

8   The White House, "'Weathering the Storm': Federal Efforts Helped Bolster U.S. Education Standing Among Peer Nations," news release, December 5, 2023, https://www.whitehouse.gov/cea/written-materials/2023/12/05/weathering-the-storm-federal-efforts-helped-bolster-u-s-education-standing-among-peer-nations/.

9   Illinois Tutoring Initiative, "A COVID-Era Tutoring Initiative Worked With Thousands of Illinois Students. Will It Continue?," news release, April 4, 2024, https://illinoistutoringinitiative.org/a-covid-era-tutoring-initiative-worked-with-thousands-of-illinois-students-will-it-continue/.

10 Illinois P-20 Council, *P-20 Council Learning Renewal Resource Guide*, March 2021, https://www.isbe.net/Documents/p-20-learning-renewal-resource-guide.pdf.

11 Ibid.

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13 Districts were eligible to participate based on an evaluation of various factors including "adequacy of funding, concentration of low-income students, disproportionate COVID-19 impact, lost in-person instructional time during the 2020-21 school year, and current level of academic support resources and programs." For more information, see https://www.isbe.net/iltutoringinitiative.

14 Deana Schenk, interview, July 23, 2024.

15 Jen Kirmes, interview, August 9, 2024.

16 Stephanie Bernoteit, interview, July 26, 2024.

17 Deana Schenk, interview, July 23, 2024.

18 Ibid.

19 Christy Borders, interview, July 25, 2024.

20 Deana Schenk, interview, July 23, 2024.

21 Stephanie Bernoteit, interview, July 26, 2024.

22 Ibid.

23 Deana Schenk, interview, July 23, 2024.

24 Ibid.

25 Jen Kirmes, interview, August 9, 2024.

26 Illinois Tutoring Initiative, *Student and Tutor Outcomes*.

27 Illinois Tutoring Initiative, various presentations at the Annual Conference of the American Educational Research Association, Philadelphia, PA, April 11–14, 2024, https://illinoistutoringinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/AERA-Draft-2024-04-08-DRAFT.pdf.

28 Stephanie Bernoteit, interview, July 26, 2024.

About the Authors

DAVID CASALASPI

David Casalaspi is an associate partner at Bellwether in the Policy and Evaluation practice area. He can be reached at **david.casalaspi@bellwether.org**.

MARISA MISSION

Marisa Mission is a senior analyst at Bellwether in the Policy and Evaluation practice area. She can be reached at **marisa.mission@bellwether.org**.

HAILLY T.N. KORMAN

Hailly T.N. Korman is a senior associate partner at Bellwether in the Policy and Evaluation practice area. She can be reached at **hailly.korman@bellwether.org**.

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