

Advancing ECE AAS Transfer Pathways Through the Illinois ECACE Initiative

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Key Features of IL Early Childhood Education (ECE) Associate of Applied Science (AAS) Transfer Legislation

State-level transfer
policy

Unique cross-sector
initiative
(public/private 2-/4-yr
HE and EC)

Equity-focused work
to improve EC training
& wage prospects for
primarily women of
color

Benefits to young
children of better
trained educators

Case study of one of
the hardest transfer
challenges (AAS and
ECE)

Illinois ECE: More children served, fewer qualified teachers

- In FY23, Illinois increased its Early Childhood Block Grant by 10%, adding \$54.4 million to increase slots for Preschool for All and the Prevention Initiative (NIEER, 2023).
- State registry data showed a declining share of early childhood staff with bachelor's degrees, alongside growth in staff with only a high school diploma or some college/no degree.

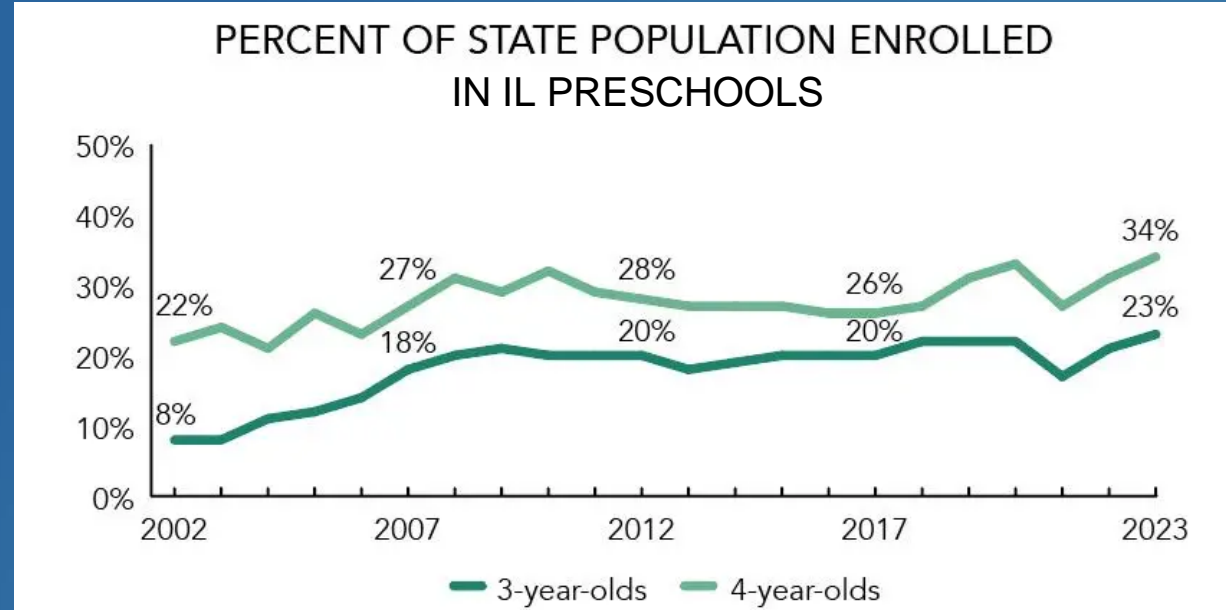


Image from: <https://nieer.org/yearbook/2023/state-profiles/illinois>

This widening gap created a clear policy window for new legislation aimed at strengthening pathways to early childhood credentials and bachelor's degrees.

Key Aims of IL Public Act 102-0174 (July 2021)

Creates the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE)

to align community colleges and universities in building clear, flexible degree pathways for incumbent early childhood educators.

Guarantees junior-level standing and prohibits duplicative coursework

for students transferring with an AAS in Early Childhood Education (aligned to the state's ECE Credential Level 4).

Requires coordinated statewide systems

including credit for prior learning, flexible course delivery, and data/reporting structures to expand access and improve ECE preparation.

ECACE Timeline



Legislation (2021)

Illinois passes ECACE legislation
Mandates clear AAS-to-BA transfer pathways



Consortium Created

Statewide collaboration across 2- and 4-year institutions + agencies
Shared problem-solving and curriculum alignment



Supports for Students & Colleges

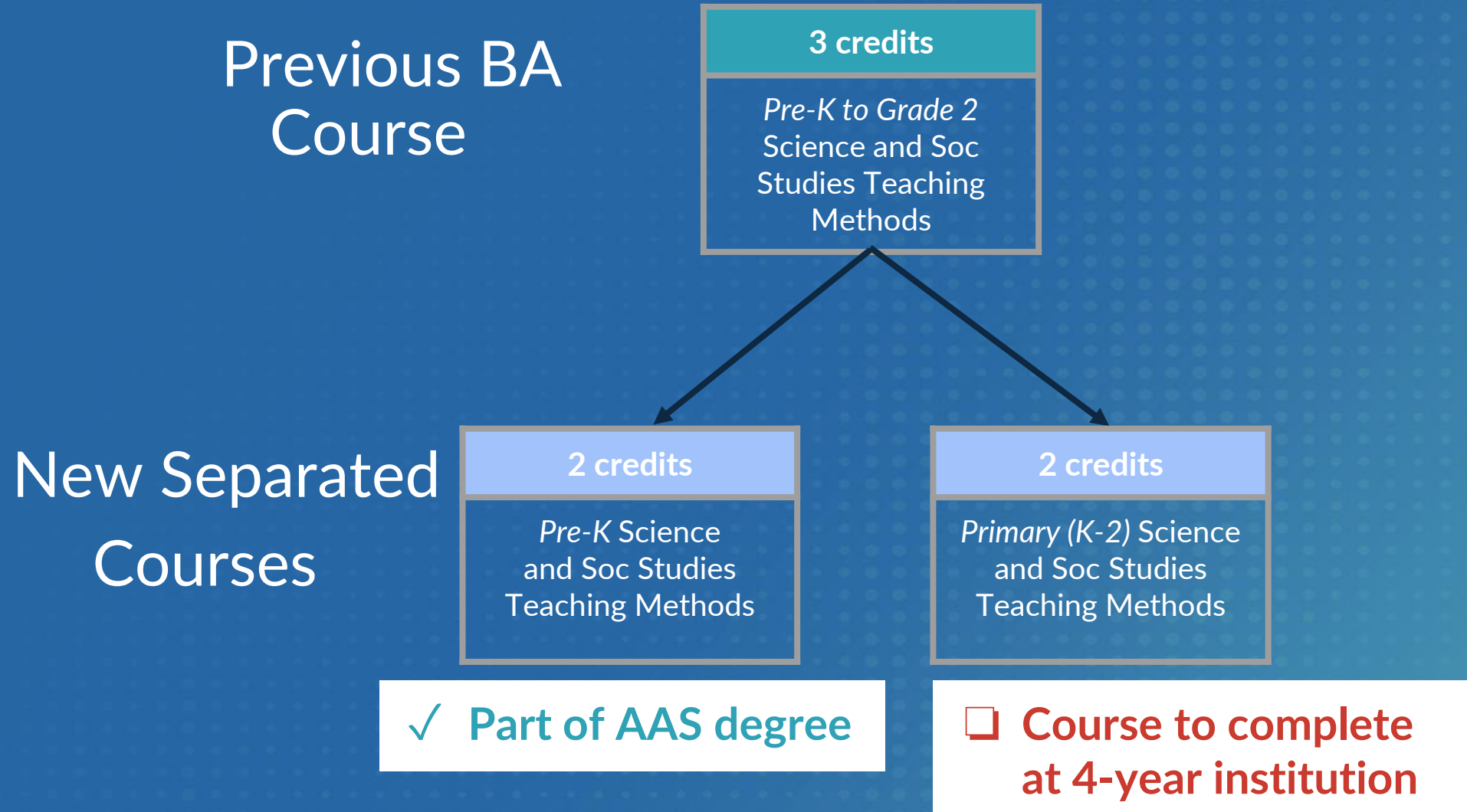
Scholarships + faculty/staff supports
Reduce financial barriers, enable redesign work



Implementation (2022-23)

Institutions required to comply by 2023
AAS = junior standing at BA programs

Example of Changes to Courses / Curricula



ECACE AAS Transfer Implementation Study

Areas of Focus	Data Collection
<p>This study sought to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Document the features of the Consortium institutions' AAS transfer pathways and ECE program redesign• Understand partnerships between institutions and across the Consortium• Identify innovative practices that institutions have developed• Identify strengths and weaknesses of the pathways• Understand implementation facilitators and barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Institutional survey (93% response rate: 57 of 61 ECACE Consortium institutions) in April 2025• Focus groups with two- and four-year faculty, staff, and administrators in April/May 2025• Review of 13 AAS–BA transfer degree plans and related institutional documents



Findings

Changes to Bachelor's Degree Programs

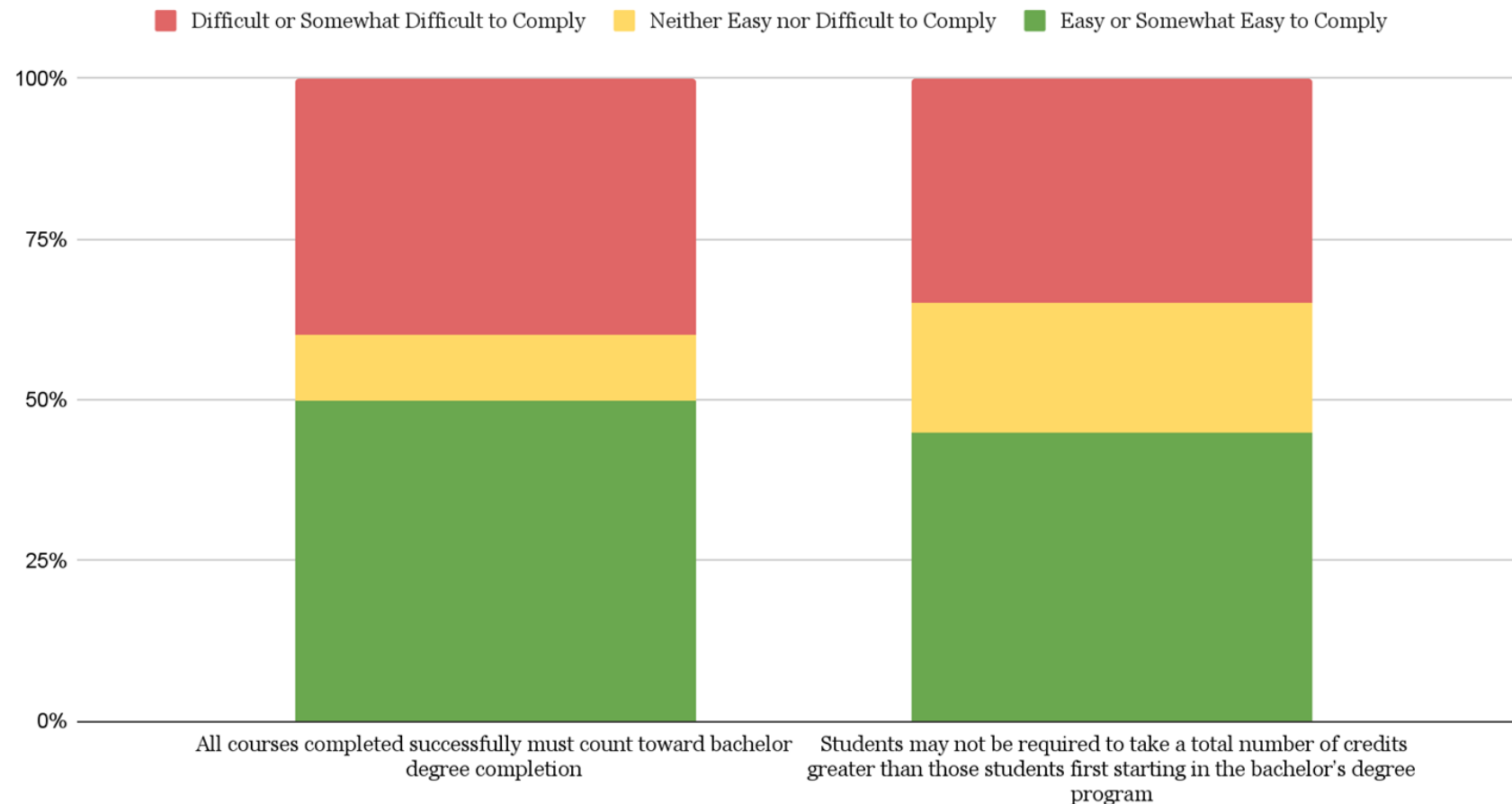
- **Widespread program redesign:** All four-year institutions expressed that they made changes to their programs. Redesigned features included: admissions criteria, credit/GPA requirements, general education expectations, and degree structures to comply with ECACE, expand access, and better serve AAS transfer students.
- **Improved transfer pathways:** Many institutions expanded acceptance of ECE coursework, credit for prior learning, and course waivers; reduced redundant requirements; and created clearer, more structured degree plans (including 2+2 models).

But transfer implementation remains uneven: students with complex credit histories face case-by-case reviews.

Institutions continue to struggle with ensuring consistency, reducing duplication, and supporting advising capacity.

Four-years found it difficult to comply with requirements related to accepting AAS credits and credit limits.

Figure 6: Survey Results in Percentages, "The legislation outlines 4 requirements for the AAS transfer pathways. In your experience, how difficult has it been for your institution to comply with these requirements?"



Source: CCRC Four-Year Institution Survey, April 2025

Changes to AAS Degree Programs

There were fewer changes overall because it was not mandated in the legislation; however, community colleges made some revisions:

- Changing curricula to better align with BA requirements
- Creating new pathways for bilingual / dual-language and special education endorsements
- Enacting competency-based and workplace-based student teaching models
- Strengthening cross-campus faculty collaboration



AAS Transfer Challenges

Student Transfer Barriers

- Misaligned courses
- Unclear degree options (AAS vs. AA)
- Limited awareness of transfer pathways

Faculty and Staff Capacity Strains

- Heavy workloads and admin duties
- Loss of dedicated advisors for AAS transfer students

Incumbent Workforce Needs

- Institutions struggle to accommodate students' need for flexible scheduling
 - For example, all depts (not just ECE) need to have evening/weekend course offerings

Communication Gaps

- Transfer alignment issues result from unclear communication of policy and licensure changes & lack of frequent and effective communication between two- and four-year partners

Examples of ECACE's Influence on Institutions and Students

“I have way more relationships with the two-year colleges than I ever thought I would. I think we've seen our institutions as being very separate, and the students are the connector, but now we're the connector for the students. So I think the Consortium really has helped us build some of those connections to these transfer institutions.” (four-year focus group)

“They [the ECE workforce] are denied opportunities to get higher degrees, but they create that for every family they serve. And so what happened during ECACE was super powerful and important.” (two-year focus group)

Key Takeaways and Remaining Questions

- There are clear signs of progress in building transfer pathways, though more work is needed to make the pathways seamless.
- Transfer barriers = equity barriers for incumbent workforce
- Important strategies to sustain this effort moving forward include identifying new funding sources and student support structures, strengthening communication, and increasing data collection and sharing to improve student engagement and success.
 - What policy levers could help close the gap between what is required in legislation and what is happening in practice?
 - What additional policy or funding strategies could ensure that these pathways remain accessible and equitable as state supports taper off?

Thank you!

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For more information visit <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/>