



Association of Illinois Montessori Schools

AIMS Policy Briefing January 2022

In recent years, AIMS has been devoting considerable staff time and energy into addressing policy challenges facing Illinois Montessori Schools. As the state works to improve and expand the child care and education options available to all Illinois families, state policy is constantly changing, and AIMS needs to be a strong and present voice at the state level to both guarantee continued freedom for Montessori schools to provide authentic Montessori programs and to advocate for change to improve those state policies that impede our schools.

There are several main areas for policy and advocacy work in Illinois, and they all influence each other and often concern the same policy making state organizations. Here is a breakdown.

DCFS Licensing

Child Care Licensing Exemption – While Illinois Montessori schools have for more than half a century enjoyed the opportunity to be exempt from child care licensing, in the last decade questions as to the meaning of the original legislation and the way it is interpreted into rule and practice have developed. The legislative language is clear that the exemption is offered for AMS accredited and AMI recognized schools, but that had long been interpreted and practiced as “all AMS member schools are exempt” which has prompted a great deal of advocacy work to change the legislative language to accommodate more schools. Those conversations are ongoing to include schools that have reached Step 6 on the AMS Pathway of Continuous School Improvement or potentially schools that AIMS would “validate” as Montessori programs.

Child Care Licensing Options - As we work through this process questions have come up about the value of a complete exemption from licensing. Covid relief funding and possible federal child care and universal preschool funding may hinge on schools being licensed. Because of this we are also now engaged in conversations around Montessori exemptions for schools that meet those same above Montessori quality standards to have the options of coming under licensing with some exceptions around mixed age groupings, ratios, and some classroom materials and activities such as food preparation.

Montessori Administrator Credentials – AIMS has successfully negotiated the (re-) addition of the Montessori credential as a substitute for the early childhood coursework required for the DCFS Administrator Credential. We are continuing to push for an improvement on that language to allow Montessori teachers with any credentials to supervise any age groups, and have been cultivating the support of the Illinois Professional Development Advisory Council on that change.

ExceleRate QRIS/Gateways

ExceleRate 2.0 - ExceleRate Illinois, our state’s Quality Rating and Improvement System will be expanding and improving with ExceleRate 2.0. The increased use of ExceleRate has already been seen with ExceleRate participants being eligible for COVID relief funding and again being stipulated for participation in proposed federal legislation for increased funding for early care

and education programs. A number of years ago AIMS negotiated a crosswalk for AMS Accredited Schools to the Gold Circle of Quality, but that is not enough. AIMS members and staff have been working with the ExceleRate Subcommittee of the Early Learning Council (ELC) to put together a proposal for the ELC which includes some very important and hard won provisions that will allow Montessori programs to achieve higher quality ratings. There is still work to do around group sizes and ratios, and conversations have begun on the placement of the Montessori credential on the Gateways registry, and also include the Professional Development Advisory Council as well.

Teacher Credential Recognition

AIMS has been engaged in advocacy work towards a pathway to Illinois state teacher licensure for many years without a clear path to success. In 2021, we partnered with the Montessori Public Policy Initiative and a cohort of 6 other states to revitalize this work. AIMS has been engaged in conversations with ISBE and PDAC, and submitted public comment to ISBE in 2016, as well as with other advocacy groups in the state. We have a small work group that is meeting regularly and combining forces to get this done for Illinois Montessori schools. Again, proposed federal legislative language has been identified that would exclude schools employing Montessori credentialed teachers from accessing enhanced federal preschool for all funding and our goal is to get ahead of that problem for Illinois, as well as to secure a pathway that will allow our Montessori public schools to hire qualified Montessori teachers in order to guard the quality of those programs and to allow them to grow and flourish. Our group met with Illinois Senator Cristina Pacione-Zayas last month and she indicated interest in this potential legislation. We are currently putting together a package of information and support for potential legislation and have been able to get model legislative language drawn up by the IL Legislative Reference Bureau that will enable us to move forward more quickly. ISBE has released proposed legislative updates to the teacher credential requirements and AIMS will be preparing public comment to submit next week.

AIMS Presence on State Councils and Committees

AIMS participates in multiple advisory, advocacy, and work groups within the state. These include the DCFS Child Care Licensing Advisory Council, the ExceleRate and Quality Subcommittees of the Early Learning Council, the Professional Development Advisory Council, We the Village Illinois advocacy, and the Early Childhood Funding Coalition. In June of 2021, AIMS Executive Director, Denise Monnier, was appointed to the Governor's Early Learning Council. The ELC has been charged with implementing the recommendations that the governor's Early Childhood Funding Commission has developed and the Early Childhood Funding Coalition has detailed. These proposed and begun advancements for Illinois children can be found here: <https://www2.illinois.gov/sites/OECD/Pages/Governor's-Early-Childhood-Funding-Commission.aspx>, <https://fundecil.org/home>

Prepared by Denise Monnier, AIMS Executive Director, 1-23-2022