



# Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment **ADDENDUM**

**Region 1-A**

Cook County (City of Chicago)



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## Introduction

In 2021, the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Funding issued a report with findings that highlighted the inequities in ECEC funding in Illinois and the need to create a better statewide infrastructure to support ECEC professionals, expand services and programs for families and caregivers, and increase enrollment in ECEC programs. The report focused on the importance of addressing racial inequities and the need to include local voices in the conversation funders and decisionmakers were having about ECEC.

The experiences and knowledge families, caregivers, and Early Childhood professionals gain while navigating the complexities of the State's ECEC system is valuable, and understanding their lived experience in the local context is vital for decisionmakers to ensure communities have access to the programs, services, and supports they need. To this end, Birth to Five Illinois was created to harness family and caregiver voices in ECEC and serve as a bridge between the communities and policymakers so family, caregiver, and professional experiences can guide the decisions made to expand or enhance services across the State.

## Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments

Between August 2022 and May 2023, Regional Teams throughout the State met with their local Action Council and Family Council to talk about Early Childhood (EC) data and hear about their experiences with ECEC programs and services. They also conducted focus groups, interviews, held community listening sessions, and conducted surveys to gather additional feedback from caregivers, ECEC professionals, and priority populations in their Region. A community report, the Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment, was completed in June 2023. However, recognizing that not all community members had a chance to provide their feedback on data or share their experiences in the original Regional Needs Assessment, additional feedback was collected through community events and meetings, and this Addendum was created to complement the existing report. The new information provided by community members, agencies, organizations, and other community stakeholders is listed below.

## Regional Community Landscape

New data and feedback were provided on the demographics portion of the report. It was noted that the number of children ages birth to five reported in the Region on the Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM) decreased from 193,623 in 2020 to 190,957 in 2021. No additional community feedback was provided regarding why the population may have shifted.

Community members discussed the systemic barriers and challenges faced by those who speak in Mandarin, Arabic, and Polish such as materials not being in their native language, lack of bilingual staff to answer questions and experiencing a different educational system from their

place of origin. They also talked about the impact on ECE of higher populations of those who identify as Asian and the increased numbers of Central and South American migrants who are being brought to the city from states like Texas and Florida. Chicago reported over 18,000 new migrants have been bused to the city between January 1, 2023, and October 5, 2023. How will programs shift and adapt to accommodate new families, especially if there are not staff available to communicate with children and families whose primary language is not represented amongst staff? Additionally, how can programs or sites be expanded to accommodate migrant families who need or would like their child to attend care?

One community member said, “Need a deep dive to see the number in certain communities and see if programs are servicing the targeted populations as in recent years demographics have shifted.”

Other community partners discussed the need for better supports for pregnant persons who are transitioning from jail back into the community.

- “Pregnant women being released from jail don’t have a safe place to go. Since the closure of the women’s treatment center, there is nowhere for pregnant women to be released if they cannot go to a family member’s home, so they remain in the correctional facility until they can find suitable housing.”

Additionally, community members noted the need for more and better ECEC programs and supports for medically complex children, especially given the number of hospitals in the area that have Neo-natal Intensive Care Units (NICUs).

New data on some priority populations was provided from community partners.

Data from the 20<sup>th</sup> day of school Census was provided by Chicago Public Schools (CPS); it shows the total number of children ages birth to four, along with the number of English and diverse learners, as well those who have been labeled as “economically disadvantaged” by the district. Economically disadvantaged is defined as families whose income is within 185 percent of the federal poverty line. The Chicago Public School District previously referred to these students as “Free or Reduced Lunch Eligible Students” and adopted the new term after the federal government, under the Community Eligibility Provision, funded breakfasts and lunches for all students if more than 40 percent of students qualify.

Table 1: Chicago Public Schools 20<sup>th</sup> Day Early Childhood Enrollment

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>English Learners</b>	<b>Diverse Learners</b>	<b>Economically Disadvantaged</b>
Children Ages Birth to Three	4,532	1,557	1,521	358
Children Age Four	13,097	3,723	2,018	2,940

Source: Chicago Public Schools, 2023  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Table 2: Number of Children Experiencing Homelessness

	<b>Children Ages Birth to Two</b>	<b>Children Ages Three to Five</b>
Number of clients	332	434
Percentage of clients	2%	3%

Source: All Chicago - Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), September 2023  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Table 3: Number of Chicago Kindergarteners Demonstrating Readiness, by Developmental Area

	<b>% of Kindergarteners Rated on Required 14 Measures</b>	<b>Social and Emotional Development</b>	<b>Language and Literacy Development</b>	<b>Math</b>
State of Illinois	85%	55%	46%	34%
Chicago	78%	51%	41%	31%

Source: Illinois State Board of Education KIDS Data, 2021  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Below is a chart showing the percentage of kindergarteners in Chicago who were rated on 14 required measures and are considered ready for school across three developmental areas by self-reported race/ethnicity.

Table 4: Percentage of Chicago Kindergarteners Demonstrating Readiness, by Race/Ethnicity

	<b>Asian</b>	<b>Black/ African American</b>	<b>Hispanic/ Latine</b>	<b>Multi- Racial</b>	<b>Native American/ American Indian</b>	<b>Pacific Islander</b>	<b>White</b>
State of Illinois	35%	21%	17%	31%	18%	30%	36%
Chicago	32%	26%	19%	45%	10%	27%	43%

Source: Illinois State Board of Education KIDS Data, 2021  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

## Local Community Collaborations

Some community members provided feedback on the EC community collaborations in the Region, noting that there should be increased awareness of how families can participate in collaborations, along with the dates, times, locations of meetings, as well as the websites of area local community collaborations. They would also like to see local community collaborations to partner with programs (such as Early Head Start (EHS) and Head Start) offering Parent Cafes to provide trainings on how collaborations can work together and with other organizations. They also discussed the need for local community collaborations to work with Illinois Welcome Centers to help immigrants and refugee families find the services and support they need as they move into communities. Another community member thought the Regional local community collaborations

need to concentrate efforts on fostering the continuum from birth to school and/or enrollment in public school funded programs.

Other discussions focused on the need to track enrollment efforts across local community collaborations to ensure efforts are not being duplicated and that all children and families in the Region are being reached.

## Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

Some community members identified ECEC program needs that were not included in the original Report. They include:

- Shortening and making the enrollment process for publicly funded programs less complicated
- Improving or implementing mental health social supports for families
- Including all ECEC programs in the Chicago Early Learning system, as some Head Starts are missing
- Reducing the increased placements of pre-K students who are diverse learners in cluster programs, which are designed for students requiring a significantly modified curriculum with moderate to intensive supports in a separate classroom from general education peers for the majority of the day versus placing them in inclusive/blended programs which is for preschool students requiring educational services from an EC special education teacher in a general education classroom.
- Changes in benefit programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Family (TANF) such as time-limits and participation in school or work activities causes an increased need for more full-day programs versus half-day programs.
- Improving collaboration opportunities between staff from Early Intervention (EI), Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), CPS, and the Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) to support referrals and transitions for children and families involved in DCFS and Early Intervention is needed. As families are transitioning from one program to another, families may not recognize staff names or phone numbers of programs they are transitioning to, so they do not respond.
- Raising awareness of communities where collaboration exists between CBOs and CPS, where Early Childhood programming is provided on-site so others can replicate is needed to break down barriers and provide program offerings that meet community needs. One community member said, "I know there are CBOs providing before or after-care programs for preschoolers inside of CPS, but many think those partnerships do not exist. How can we show communities how this partnership can exist?"

Families and caregivers also identified barriers and challenges to accessing ECEC programs and services. Some noted that children in historically underrepresented areas are waiting too long to access EI therapies, and that some child care programs do not allow EI to provide services on-site leaving some with few options to receive the service. Additionally, some discussed that families have received acceptance letters from Chicago Early Learning indicating that their child would be placed at a CBO only to find that the acceptance was not honored. This was due to a difference in

actual funded slots versus those that were being funded by multiple sources. Families and caregivers found this process confusing and frustrating.

Additionally, family child care home providers discussed how they were interested in partnering with school districts but have not found it easy to do so.

One caregiver reiterated the need for high quality ECEC program, saying, "I settled with availability vs. quality."

Below are quotes from community members on how to improve access to and knowledge of ECEC programs in the Region:

- "The intake process for CBOS and CPS is widely different, we need to work on the city-wide 'universal' process application."
- "Identify desert areas with no daycares no EHS, no EI. Many African American communities in the City of Chicago are under-served with 0-3 programs (quality). Many communities are underserved due to inflation and immigration. It's hard to target specific communities when funding can be limited to a certain population."
- "Families can be eligible for one program yet not for other programs and don't have time to jump through the hoops to get services. Minimum wage going up makes families ineligible."
- "One thing that I would recommend, helping new parents by giving them resources sooner rather than later."

New data on child care programming in the Region was made available by Illinois Action for Children in summer 2023.<sup>1</sup> Below are some highlights from the report.

- Support from the federal government helped sustain Cook County child care providers during and just after the pandemic. Licensed slots were stable in most — *but not all* — Cook County regions.
- Changes to CCAP and to family incomes increased the affordability of child care for many families. However, the cost of child care remained unaffordable for other families without Child Care Assistance.
- Finding child care remains difficult for many families because of the continued decline of licensed home care, and the limited supply of infant and nontraditional hour care in homes or centers — particularly in South, Southwest, and West Chicago.

## Slot Gap

Community members noted that there needs to be a regular, city-wide assessment of funding allocations across all ECEC programs in order to better understand shifting demographics and to understand where the gaps truly are between families who want or need a seat for their child(ren) and the number of seats available. They wondered where the disconnect was between children who are eligible for programming and the number of open slots.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/ACTFORCHILDREN/f8e9848a-47b2-4792-9e90-a35961561f37/UploadedImages/ReportOnChildcareCookCounty2023.pdf>



Discussions and survey responses identified several new potential drivers of the slot gap in the Region:

- Differences and inconsistencies between CBOs and school-based pre-K programs.
- Communities are changing and possibly experiencing gentrification, forcing some families to move out. Yet, they want to continue to keep their children in their original neighborhood schools.
- Agencies and organizations seem to be working in silos, with little communication regarding governance, the Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) funding distributed through CPS, and publicly funded programs.
- Lack of funding for families to access full-day schooling for children age three.
- Lack of access to bilingual services, leaving some families reluctant to enroll their child(ren).
- Lack of transportation to and from schools and programs, especially for diverse learners and unhoused students in temporary living situations.

## Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

Additional feedback was provided by community members on the ECEC workforce section of the report during dissemination.

They discussed the need to increase high school Early Childhood Career Technical Education (CTE) programs to create a path for those interested in pursuing a career in the field. They also thought there should be a path for high school students to pursue training and credits through the Gateways Program so they can move more easily into the field. They would like to see a pipeline created for paraprofessionals to serve children with disabilities in CBOs, and wondered if there were opportunities for funding through DFSS or Early Head Start (EHS) funding to support this type of initiative.

They believe there needs to be more case managers to support the influx of migrants the city has seen since January and would like to see an increase in the EI workforce by replicating the Chicago Early Learning Workforce Scholarship model. The scholarship covers 100% of tuition, plus up to \$250 in books per course, that students' federal grants and other scholarships do not cover. After graduation, scholarship recipients commit to working in a Chicago Early Learning program for three years. They also discussed that the scholarship should be better aligned with the plans and work of the Every Child Ready Chicago (ECRC) workforce workgroup.

There was also discussion about how EI providers sometimes opt out of serving specific communities in the Region. Feedback collected from community members showed that, given the great need for children and families, this should not be allowed for EI providers.

Additional feedback on this section was provided by community members:

- "Scholarships are great for staff yet sometimes fall short as some staff want more training/certification in certain areas and scholarships do not cover those."
- "Language barrier is an issue, for example, if families need mental assistance, it is hard to support if specialists do not speak the family's language. Families say programs say they offer services, yet cannot due to staff's language barrier."

- "Not enough money for what is required and services. The pandemic isn't over which still causes hesitation to interact in person."

## Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

Parents and caregivers expressed the need for more advocacy training and increased engagement with fathers by providers, advocates, agencies, and organization, and increased awareness of accessing high quality ECEC programs. They also discussed the need to specify who is accountable to ensure ECEC programs implement meaningful relationships with families.

One caregiver noted, "I do not see family and community engagement; families' voice should be included all the time."

## New Data Provided by Community Members

Some new funding-related data was provided during the dissemination process.

The first table shows the program name, along with the abbreviation of the agency in charge of the program, the differences between what was proposed and eventually approved by the Illinois House and Senate, and the change in funding from Fiscal Year 2023 to Fiscal Year 2024.

Table 5: FY24 State Budget

	Proposed (February 2023)	Approved (Spring 2023)	Change from FY23 to FY24
Early Childhood Block Grant (ISBE)	\$75 million	\$75 million	12.5%
Evidence-Based Home Visiting (IDHS)	\$5 million	\$5 million	27.9%
Child Care (IDHS)	\$200 million	\$170 million	41.4%
Early Intervention (IDHS)	\$40 million	\$40 million	34.5%
Early Childhood Construction Grants	\$100 million	\$50 million	Not available
Early Childhood Inclusion Supports	Not Proposed	\$5 million	Not available

Source: Start Early Every Child Ready Chicago Presentation, 2023  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

The table below shows the amount the city of Chicago received from the new Smart Start initiative, funded through the ECBG launched by the Illinois Governor's Office in summer 2023. The table shows the increase in funding from the ECBG the Region will receive from the initiative, along with the breakout of funding between CPS and the Department of Family Support Services (DFSS). It should be noted that 25% of the new dollars must go to provide services to children ages birth to three.



Table 6: Smart Start Impact on Chicago

	<b>Amount Received/ECBG Increase</b>
ECBG Increase Overall	\$75 million (13%)
CPS Funding	\$16.7 million (60%)
DFSS Funding	\$11.1 million (40%)

Source: Start Early Every Child Ready Chicago Presentation, 2023  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

## Additional Regional Needs

The following are additional needs identified by community members.

- There is a great need for an ECEC Navigator or Coach for families and caregivers of children ages birth to five.
- Pregnant persons need more access to lactation services and supports.
- Families need transportation for diverse learning and Students in Temporary Living Situations (STLS) families. Currently, STLS students receive a bus card, but their parent/caregiver also needs a bus card.
- Currently, there is a bottleneck with CPS and the Chicago Department of Family Support Services (DFSS) enrollment system. The system needs to be improved so families can access services and support more quickly.
- Need for transparency for allocation of Smart Start investment coming to Chicago (37% to CPS).
- Community members would like to see a funding audit, more accountability, continued monitoring, and recalibration of publicly funded EC programs such as Preschool for All (PFA) and Prevention Initiative (PI).

## Additional Regional Recommendations

- Cross-train Family Support Specialists in CBOs, Family Engagement Coordinators in CPS, and STLS staff in CPS to refer children and their families to variety of ECEC services.
- Increase funding for marketing/messaging for Illinois Action for Children as "neutral" referral agency.
- Provide activity packets to children on waitlists (similar to packets distributed to children during pandemic).
- Replicate strategies used in communities that are doing well with enrollment.
- Connect to Family Connect Chicago, which provides newborn supports to parents and caregivers, who cite child care as their highest need.
- Commission a fund to support a system of collaboration and governance which allows stakeholders to feel valued with decision-making.
- Align or shift new Chicago ECEC Policy Table to the ECRC advisory workgroup or co-governance body.

## Next Steps

As Regional Teams continue their conversations with caregivers, ECEC professionals, and community stakeholders, their stories and experiences with ECEC programs and services will be

recorded and shared with state and local agencies, legislators, funders, and decisionmakers. We hope our work will contribute to reimagining an EC system that is more equitable for all families and support the incredible work ECEC professionals do every day.