



# Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment **ADDENDUM**

**Region 1-B-B**

Cook County (West)



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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 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.

## Local Community Collaborations

Community members expressed appreciation for the work of local Early Childhood Community Collaborations, but many acknowledged they were unaware they existed until the report.

- “I used to work for a Head Start program in Englewood, and I learned that a lot of families do not know about the different programs/services that are available. Community Collaborations and non-profit organizations that do outreach messaging to inform families about the services are vital.” - Norma Hernandez (Illinois House of Representatives, District 77)

The Professional Learning Specialist at West40 Intermediate Service Center in Maywood, Illinois, shared that there have been conversations with Bellwood School District #88 about how Local Community Collaborations can impact Kindergarten readiness scores. They believe that the lack of a Local Community Collaboration correlates to lower Kindergarten assessment scores and are in discussions about starting a Local Community Collaboration to better support the needs of children and their families. They also shared that they are currently working on a feasibility study on how attainable this might be in their community. Additional data charts were shared by West40 that show school districts without Community Collaborations and the Kindergarten readiness measurements in the top three key developmental areas, including students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)<sup>1</sup> were significantly lower than communities that have the presence of an Early Childhood Collaboration.

## Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

ECEC program owners, directors, and staff provided feedback on the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), the need to expand support to more families, and the need for better supports and services for children and their families.

ECEC providers discussed there had been delays in processing case paperwork and CCAP payments. The Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS), which executes the CCAP payments, acknowledged the problem and has worked to implement a new, ten-day time frame for sending payments to providers. Additionally, IDHS announced a new, streamlined application process for families who apply for CCAP, and are considering layered eligibility (i.e., if someone qualifies for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), they will automatically also qualify for CCAP).

The need to expand ECEC services and supports was discussed during dissemination meetings, as well. Community members said that families who do not qualify for income-based programs and services due to earning at or above the income threshold still need access to services and supports.

- “Yes, it is an issue for a lot of families, especially working families. Families talk about how they have to make sacrifices. We get a lot of phone calls, even though we are not a social service entity, but we see that people need help, especially coming out of COVID, people are still recovering.” - Director of Community Engagement (Village of Maywood)

Two ECEC providers shared about the need for expanded supports and services for children with disabilities.

- “As a Director of a preschool, we would love to be inclusive and supportive of children that have special needs and that need access to support via one-on-one aides. We do not have the resources to be able to do so.” - Child Care Director (Oak Park)

A home child care provider shared she has children in her care with special needs, who needs support, and wanted to note the amount of time it takes to get an evaluation or an IEP

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<sup>1</sup> Data is available upon request to Regional Council Manager.

(Individualized Education Plan). She has seen the impact of her city, Cicero, opening child care slots for Early Childhood, but it has resulted in waiting lists and longer wait times for evaluations.

## **Slot Gap**

The Superintendent at Oak Park School District #97 has acknowledged the need for full day child care for families in the district and is working on expanding its Early Childhood Education program from part- to full-day. They currently have 80 part-day slots. They have also acknowledged the call from families for additional services and are working to implement more supports and resources for families.

Other community partners discussed seeing the need for spaces in their programs and how it is difficult to meet that need due to the challenges of expanding their program. The Student Services Coordinator at the River Grove School District shared, “We see the demand for Early Childhood programming and want to serve the community, but right now we don’t have the capacity, we don’t have the space.”

## **Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce**

Community feedback on the ECEC workforce focused on training and education for Early Childhood professionals, better pay for ECEC professionals, the need for a more diverse Early Childhood workforce, and how Early Childhood professionals can better connect with priority populations.

Community members noted that Early Intervention professionals in the Region help to support the ECEC workforce through training and presentations to organizations, such as Erikson Institute. Additionally, some are working with the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) to establish internships for students who are interested in working as a Speech Pathologist, so they have an opportunity to build experience with children and families while in school.

Faculty at the Triton College Early Childhood Education Department shared that the college proposed to hold Early Childhood Education classes in Spanish to meet the need of the prospective and current students who were English Language Learners (ELL) and as an effort to better meet the needs of the community, as they found during community outreach and recruitment efforts there is a high demand for bilingual education offerings at the college level. However, this proposal has been a challenge to implement in part because many of the courses that students must complete are only available on the Gateways website (which only offers courses in English at this time). Faculty also shared that there have been discussions about how to retain members of the ECEC workforce, including implementing an apprenticeship program for Early Childhood Education students that would be facilitated in the students’ workplace so they can continue to earn wages. An added incentive would be a guaranteed raise at the end of the internship, as working students move to a full-time, credentialed position.

Many community members reiterated the need for higher wages for all Early Childhood professionals.

- “It is unfortunate that there is such a significant disparity of wages between early childhood educators and primary school educators. It is something that definitely needs to be changed.” - Community Member

This discussion was especially true for Early Intervention (EI) professionals. It was shared by the EI Ombudsman that in the Region there is a high rate of turnover because many therapists are considered self-employed vendors who do not see cost of living pay increases for the services they provide. If a family misses an appointment or the provider is unable to see the family, EI professionals do not receive compensation for their time. There are many Early Interventionists who work part-time, with no access to additional benefits such as health care or retirement. Demographically, by and large, most EI professionals in the Region are white and female, which is out of alignment with the racial/ethnic and gender demographics of the Region.

Additionally, the number of Early Childhood professionals who speak a language other than English is low, leaving some community members to wonder how those whose home language is not English can be better served. There were discussions about how to best connect with those who are undocumented or experiencing homelessness when there are not necessarily people who have those same lived experiences working in the field.

## **Additional Community Feedback**

Three elected officials provided feedback on the report during our dissemination meetings.

Broadview Mayor Katrina Thompson discussed the need to consider not only demographics when talking about the Region, but also culture to help identify needs and create recommendations that align with the community. Additionally, the Mayor spoke about the need for a more diverse Early Childhood workforce; specifically, the need for Black/African American teachers in ECEC programs.

It was also shared by the Director of Community Engagement that Maywood Mayor Nathaniel George Booker, who is also a member of the School District #89 board and foundation, is working to bring a federally funded, qualified health care center to Maywood. There is not one in the Proviso area, and they are learning that people are going out of the Region to get access to healthcare and mental health supports.

When asked who could help or support the planning and implementation phase of the Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment, Illinois House Representative Norma Hernandez suggested connecting with the local housing authorities and relying on non-profit organizations who are engaging with people living in the community.

Feedback from school districts and local libraries focused their conversations on how they could best support English Language Learners through their programs as they see an increase in the demographic of people whose primary language is not English.

The Superintendent of Oak Park School District #97 shared that they have an English as a Second Language (ESL) program to support children whose home language is not English. They are proud

to have those learners in their district and a diverse staff who can meet the needs of those students.

Administrators from Bellwood School District #88 expressed interest in how they could better support English Language Learners in their district, including how to start a program and how they could connect with students to support their individual needs, as they are seeing an increase in this demographic.

In a discussion about demographics of our Region, members of Library Administrators West (LAW), headed by the Director at Bellwood Public Library who represents libraries in Bellwood, Berkeley, Broadview, Forest Park, Hillside, La Grange Park, Maywood, Melrose Park, Northlake, and Westchester, shared that they noticed the population in Forest Park is dropping. Members of this group also noted the drop in enrollment within the school district and have been brainstorming how they can support an increase in enrollment. This group also expressed interest in meeting the needs of the unhoused population and the population of newcomers to our Region. They face similar challenges with the workforce in their sector and are brainstorming strategies for recruitment and retention of Library staff.

## **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 Early Childhood system that is more equitable for all families and support the incredible work ECEC professionals do every day.