



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment **ADDENDUM**

Region 1-B-C

Cook County (South)



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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.

Regional Community Landscape

Some feedback on the demographic portion of the report was provided. Community members noted that the U.S. Census data seemed inaccurate and do not reflect the growing number of Hispanic and Latine families in the Region. There was a suggestion made to view the data on a block-by-block basis to show the differences in socio-economic status, race, and ethnicity at the community level. Others wondered how the Region can deal with what they viewed as gentrification and the lasting community changes that often happen because of it.

A new report from The Latino Policy Forum titled *Latinos in the Suburbs* was released in August 2023 and “introduces data on income, demographic dispersion, and educational levels, among other themes, but also stories of life in the suburbs, and for example, how small acts make Latinos and their families feel welcome, part of the community, and committed to contributing to the social and economic life of the suburbs in which they live.”¹

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

Community members and providers discussed how to raise awareness about ECEC programs and connect families to services they need, especially Early Intervention (EI) and Home Visiting services. Some suggested that therapy services be conducted in the classroom. Students and teachers both benefit from occupational and physical therapy being performed in the same classroom as educational instruction. Teachers are able to observe how the therapy was conducted and incorporate it into daily classroom activities, even if the therapist is absent.

One community member noted that families are not often aware of EI services until a doctor or teacher refers them and also added that anyone who may interact with children should be educated about ECEC services, so they can help connect families to the support they need. For example, if a children’s church teacher was able to identify what could be a delay, parents may be more open to receiving information from that trusted community member. It was also shared that television commercials, especially, would help to raise awareness of ECEC programs.

- “High-quality EC [Early Childhood] can put children & families successfully on the path toward lifelong, good health & and well-being, especially among the most vulnerable.”

Others discussed the need to connect with families through Home Visiting, especially when they are waiting for EI services. They also see Prevention Initiative (PI) Home Visiting programs to engage families and build deeper relationships with them.

One community member discussed the need for better English Language Learner (ELL) assessments given to children for English learner services, voicing concern that there may be an over-identification of young children as needing ELL services. Misidentification of these children creates a longer waitlist for services and a delay in services for children who do need the services.

A new report from Illinois Action for Children² (IAFC) on child care in Cook County, which was released summer of 2023 and presents data from Fiscal Year 2022 (covering July 1, 2021, through June 30, 2022), prompted discussions about the need for programs with expanded hours that better align with families’ work schedules. Many families in the Region work non-traditional hours, and 40% work at least one hour between 6:00pm and 6:00am; many also work weekend hours. The Region has very few programs that can support families' work schedules. None of the child care centers offer weekend care, and only 37% of licensed child care homes

¹ <https://www.latinopolicyforum.org/publications/body/Latinos-in-the-Suburbs-Challenges-and-Opportunities.pdf>

² <https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/ACTFORCHILDREN/f8e9848a-47b2-4792-9e90-a35961561f37/UploadedImages/ReportOnChildcareCookCounty2023.pdf>

offer weekend care in the Region. The Region has programs that offer care before 6:30am, but only 9% of centers offer care after 7:00pm.

Community members also noted the disparities in funding between school districts. Often, school districts share communities, and there is a noticeable difference in the number and quality of services provided. One community member discussed that there is not much in-person support for families from Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latine communities. Additionally, caregivers discussed that children with disabilities do not always receive the individualized care they need in a blended classroom, and caregivers have begun advocating that children be pulled from those classrooms and placed in a space where they can get more one-on-one care.

Another topic that was discussed was authentic family engagement and how to improve the relationship between programs, providers, and families. But, to improve the relationship between families and ECEC programs, families need to be given a chance to engage with an authentic voice. Community organizations and agencies must meet families where they are, support them, and see what they need.

- “We need to remove the savior thought process of educating parents on how to raise their children, we should be joining parents in their parenting choices; we are not empowering families; they already have the power; our role is to connect families to resources they are interested in but being very careful as how we say things. If a person does not have privilege, then it's hard for them to have power.”

Slot Gap

Additional information was provided by community members on the slot gap in the Region.

There was a concern amongst community members that there are more than 10,000 children in the Region without access to a program if their family or caregiver wanted them to attend a program. They are concerned that those children are at a disadvantage because they do not have access to an ECEC program. Accessibility to programs is even more complicated when a child has a disability; some programs are unequipped to support their needs and families must either accept what they can find or sometimes face going without care altogether. One community member asked that even if there were enough slots available, how would families get the information so they could enroll their child(ren)? Many families are not aware of where to begin looking for ECEC programs and services.

It was noted that the South and Southwest Suburban Cook Regions lost 179 infant center slots because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The IAFC report on child care in Cook County highlights the need for more licensed home care, child care that expands beyond traditional working hours, expanded eligibility for the Child Care

Assistance Program (CCAP), and raising provider reimbursement rates to adequately fund high quality child care.³

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

EC professionals reiterated the need for better pay, more resources, and access to more supports. One said, “Teachers are burnout. They are not properly paid. They don't feel like they have the support to do what is being asked of them.”

They also discussed the need to build more training and support for parents and caregivers. The need to implement language development classes that are free and accessible, to help families with goal planning and parenting skills, and holding a High School Equivalent Fair, so adults can find options for studying and completing their GED, was also mentioned

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

- “Right now, I have a great concern with Harvey. We have been working with the Early Childhood program for years and the leadership is constantly changing. There are devoted teachers there, but they are constantly facing barriers within the system. It really makes it difficult to serve the families properly and give the kids the education they need.” ECEC Special Needs Advocate

Additional Regional Needs

Several additional Regional needs were identified throughout the dissemination process.

- Linguistic and cultural barriers around ECEC programs need to be broken down for immigrant families.
- Families struggle with transportation, especially during the wintertime. There needs to be a way to build partnerships between townships and villages, rideshare services, Pace Bus service, local mechanics, car supply shops, rental car businesses, and others to help support families with transportation.
- There needs to be support for parents and caregivers who want to obtain their GED or pursue higher education.
- There also needs to be training and help for families to support them with goal planning, building skills so they can be successful, and provide caregivers with the support they need to be successful parents.
- Additional Regional data is needed on priority populations, but also on sexual/domestic violence and mental health.
- There needs to be more awareness about ECEC programs and how to access those programs. Information should be shared in a variety of ways, including television and other places where families most often seek out information and resources.
- There should be resources and promotion materials made available to families of newborns in baby bags they receive when they are discharged from the hospital.
- Agencies, organizations, and ECEC programs need to establish and strengthen cross-program communication.

³ <https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/ACTFORCHILDREN/f8e9848a-47b2-4792-9e90-a35961561f37/UploadedImages/ReportOnChildcareCookCounty2023.pdf>

Additional Regional Recommendations

One additional recommendation was developed by community members.

- Establish more programs with extended hours to better align with the work schedules of caregivers. Additionally, school districts should partner with local child cares to help support mid-day transportation.

Next Steps

As Regional Teams continue their conversations with caregivers, ECEC professionals, and community stakeholders, the 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.