



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment **ADDENDUM**

Region 1-B-D

Cook County (North)



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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

Local community members provided feedback on local community supports and requested additional information on some of the priority populations in the Region.

Faith Feeds uses a mobile pantry in Palatine, an area that has seen an increase in food insecurity. They reported serving 120 families at each of their sites per month. Running the mobile pantry five days a week helps to reduce barriers to food such as transportation.

United Way Metro Chicago shared updated data for Cook County.¹ Service referral categories include housing and shelter, utilities, healthcare, mental health and addiction, child care and parenting, and others. Users can filter data by zip code, county, congressional district, state house district, state senate district, school district, and/or region.

Some wondered if there was data available on the number of immigrant families with young children in the Region, and on how many people have used the United Way 211 system to access social services. Others discussed the need to ensure all community-based organizations and agencies, such as local police departments, are aware of resources that are available to families so that they are able to refer them to services when they interact with families.

Community members reiterated the challenges they have with transportation, with one commenting, “Even if you have a bus card it’s hard to get around because the infrastructure is not there... certain parts of Palatine are hard to get to the services even if the services are there it’s hard to commute to.”

Another spoke about the misconceptions about communities in the Region, with one community member noting that while Evanston seems to be an affluent community due to reported median income, there are several parts of the city that have less access to economic and material resources.

One community member noted that families face barriers to resources due to language, noting that it is easier to navigate systems if one parent speaks English. Another discussed that families are doubling and tripling up for housing due to rising costs of living.

Local Community Collaborations

Niles Township Early Childhood Alliance (ECA) has hired family liaisons to make child care accessible to the families in their communities, specifically under-resourced families. They noted that almost 90% of the families that the ECA has engaged with and supported are immigrant or refugee families.

Community members did question if local Early Childhood (EC) community collaborations were utilizing the Integrated Referral and Intake System (IRIS); they noted this system could be an entry point for families of children ages birth to five seeking services.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

Some additional data was discussed during community events.

A report on child care in Cook County, released in fall 2023 by Illinois Action for Children, presents data from July 1, 2021, through June 30, 2022, on center and home based care, as well as on the families who utilize it in the county. Highlights from the report include:

¹ Available at 211metrochicago.211counts.org

- The north and northwest suburbs of Cook County lost 11% of the Region’s infant center slots.
- Programs report having many toddlers on the waitlist.
- Thirty-four percent of employed parents who have little to no access to economic resources need early morning child care from 4:00am to 8:00am. Sixteen percent of all parents who have little to no access to economic resources need evening child care from 6:00pm to midnight.

Table 1: Alternative Child Care Hours in North & Northwest Suburbs

Hours	Percent of Centers	Percent of Licensed Homes
Offer early morning care before 6:30am	14%	35%
Offer evening care at 7:00pm or later	1%	9%
Offer weekend care	0%	2%
Offer overnight care	0%	1%

Source: Illinois Action for Children
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Additionally, 14 school districts in the Cook North Region are preschool deserts based on the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) definition, where there is an insufficient number of publicly funded slots/seats to serve at least 80% of children ages three and four from low-income families.²

Below is a table showing the names, cities, and zip codes of preschool deserts in the Region.

Table 2: ISBE List of Preschool Deserts for Cook North Region

District Name	City	Zip Code
Community Consolidated District 59	Elk Grove Village	60007
Glenview Community Consolidated School District #34	Glenview	60026
Wheeling Community Consolidated School District #21	Wheeling	60090
Skokie-Fairview School District #72	Skokie	60077
Arlington Heights School District #25	Arlington Heights	60005
Skokie School District #68	Skokie	60076
East Prairie School District #73	Skokie	60076
Mount Prospect School District #57	Mt. Prospect	60056
Wilmette School District #39	Wilmette	60091

² <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/ECBG-Preschool-Deserts.aspx>

Note: The term “low-income” is included in the definition of preschool desert because the data from the Illinois State Board of Education uses this language. The language Birth to Five Illinois would use is “families with limited to no access to economic/material resources.”

Northbrook Elem School District #27	Northbrook	60062
West Northfield School District #31	Northbrook	60062
Northbrook School District #28	Northbrook	60062
Sunset Ridge School District #29	Northfield	60093
Park Ridge CCSD 64	Park Ridge	60068

Source: Illinois State Board of Education

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Additional challenges to accessing ECEC programming were identified by community members. Parents and caregivers are not always aware of the services available to them, highlighting the need to raise awareness of programs such as Early Intervention and the Birth to Three program.

- “I’m in the field and I didn’t know about all the programs and how do families find out about them.” - Early Childhood Educator

Additionally, more families need full-day programs but there are still some that continue to only offer half-day options. Even when they are aware of ECEC programs and supports, the high cost of tuition may keep some from enrolling their child even part-time. To address this, community members suggested that tuition be assessed on a sliding scale.

Caregivers and providers reiterated the challenges families face due to lack of reliable, affordable transportation. This challenge is compounded for families who must drop off and pick up multiple children off at different sites. One solution proposed by community members that could help ease the burden for some families, was to partner with schools that could provide transportation for children with disabilities to and from sites that fall within their boundaries.

- “Transportation is a barrier for our families. Whether it be a displaced/homeless family that doesn't have transportation, or a lot of our families have unreliable transportation so are often missing days because of transportation.” - Program Leader

There is also uncertainty about the steps parents and caregivers of young children should take to ensure their child is ready for kindergarten. Community members agreed that there should be clear directions about how to prepare a child for kindergarten, the programs that are available to them, and how to access each of them. They also noted that there has been some movement toward building stronger ties between school districts and community-based programming for special education services. The Early Choices Inclusion Initiative is a program that uses grant funds so school therapists can provide services in community-based programs. Considering the workforce shortage, it was commented that both staff and funds are limited. However, community members thought this type of collaboration could be especially beneficial to decrease barriers for children who are receiving special education services.

Community members also discussed that many families do not qualify for child care subsidies, but there is a need for families in unique circumstances to tap into the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). For example, some caregivers only work part-time, other families need to enroll in English-learning classes, and they cannot meet the five hours a day, five days a week

requirement to receive CCAP. Community members noted this is especially true for immigrant and refugee families.

Providers noted that lack of physical space is one reason they are unable to open new classrooms or expand enrollment in existing classrooms. Renting space can be a challenge due to Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) regulations. Additionally, if a site is approved it is difficult to move quickly to another site if there is a problem with the building.

Some community members talked about the need for social emotional learning and supports in the classroom. Oftentimes, children and families are not offered support until they are nearing or at a crisis point. They also discussed the need to provide assessments for families who are not enrolled in programs, and how family child care providers and educators may be able to help with assessments of children in their care. Overall, however, community members agreed that there must be earlier interventions and enough mental and behavioral support professionals to support children and their families.

Slot Gap

It was noted that not all slots in some of the part day, 2.5-hour programs, are not full due to families needing full time care. Some families want part-time enrollment for their child but have difficulty finding a program that provides it.

- “I can’t afford to have my baby in child care for 5 days a week, but there are no programs that I have found that allow for part-time enrollment of an infant.”

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

Community members discussed additional challenges to retaining Early Childhood professionals. It was noted that many caregivers, especially women, are leaving the workforce due to lack of child care options and low wages. In high cost of living areas, many are unable to afford to live in the community, leaving them to commute daily. Additionally, one professional said there was a need to hire someone full-time just to manage the large amount of paperwork associated with families receiving subsidies.

Training and higher education options were also discussed. To be a preschool teacher, professionals must attain certifications and endorsements, especially if they are teaching in a school district. Some professionals noted that they need more endorsements to be a preschool teacher than to be a Kindergarten teacher, including general education, English as a second language, special education. The requirements for training, certifications, and endorsements can be a barrier to some due to the amount of time it takes to study for and take the exams, along with the cost of paying for the certifications and exams. It was noted that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, some school districts were paying or waiving the certification fees; however, this does not seem to still be the case for most school districts.

- “Taking classes and maintaining a family is challenging, some are taking a ECEC class for the first time.” - Program Director

- “Staff are asked to fill in and work extra hours so very little flexibility for when they can take classes and do classwork.” - Program Director

Early Childhood professionals also talked about the need for mental health supports for children and staff. They noted that burnout and stress of the job has contributed to some staff leaving not only their position but the field entirely. One discussed that it is difficult to support the needs of children and their families, then also support the needs of their own family. Others talked about the need for Early Childhood professions to have a better understanding of trauma-informed learning and care, as well as Adverse Childhood Experiences Scores (ACES).

- “Very different times.... COVID uncovered the mask of the need for mental health supports ... especially for children.... These Mental Health supports need to be embedded into the workforce.” - Early Childhood Leader

Finally, the cost of starting a child care business was discussed by providers and owners. Again, providers and owners noted that working with DCFS can be a challenge, especially if they are attempting to build or renovate space. Waiting for DCFS approval can lead to delayed openings and increased labor costs for providers and owners. One child care Director said, “The first two years of child care you break even or you lose money.” Other providers and owners are choosing early retirement or leaving the field because the financial costs of ECEC programs are too high.

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

Parents and caregivers reiterated the need for pre-K and birth to three programs that better align with their full-time work schedule. Even when they can afford to enroll their child(ren) in ECEC programs, some families face barriers due to transportation issues- especially if their children are enrolled at different sites.

One parent shared that she was stressed thinking about the arrival of her second baby because she couldn't afford child care for her infant but could not afford to stay home with both her children due to financial constraints. Further, families have shared an interest in prenatal programs, such as Doula services or support groups.

Additional Regional Needs

Some additional needs were discussed by community members during dissemination meetings.

- Families need better access to nutritious foods.
- Caregivers and educators need ways to invest in self-care.
- Families would like to see more play spaces geared toward children ages three and younger, as well as affordable indoor spaces that are accessible during the winter months.

Additional Regional Recommendations

Some additional recommendations were discussed by community members during dissemination meetings.

- Increase connected, high quality professional development training for the first five years of an Early Childhood professional's career to build their knowledge, allow for networking, and establish mentorship relationships.
- Provide opportunities for families to meet and interact so they can share parenting knowledge and experiencing with one another
- Embed programming and services where families are already going, such as the laundromat or pediatrician's office
- Establish support groups for educators led by a mental health professional
- Consider the cost of living, ability to pay, the cost of rent, in addition to income for CCAP eligibility.
- Establish sliding scales for tuition costs in all ECEC programs.
- Expand Early Intervention services to include children ages three to five.
- Streamline the process and application to become a provider in Early Intervention and maintain credentialing.
- Raise reimbursement for Medicaid to attract more professionals to serve families and children.
- Consider establishing more low cost or free substance misuse programs in communities to support parents with young children.

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.