



# Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment **ADDENDUM**

## **Region 12**

(Clay, Crawford, Jasper, Lawrence,  
& Richland Counties)



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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.

## Slot Gap

Many community members, families, and preschool providers expressed surprise at the lack of a preschool slot gap. While it may be true if income was the only eligibility criteria, they shared that there are multiple criteria included in the Preschool for All (PFA) and Head Start guidelines that are not easily ascertained from publicly available data, such as the U.S. Census. For example, families experiencing domestic violence, substance misuse disorders, child abuse or neglect, or military deployment are recognized in program guidelines as eligible for these publicly funded programs, but data on these families is scarce. Families also shared that the barriers for one area of the state may be different than for Region 12. For example, the lack of a public transportation

system in the Region may prevent families from accessing programs that do not provide transportation. Other Regions may have a robust and accessible transportation system, eliminating this barrier for those families.

The only full day program in Flora is now operating as a half day program. According to the program Director, this change was necessitated due to budgeting. This PFA program provided longer hours of care for children, often allowing the families to not have a need for additional paid care for their children, and a nutritious lunch. Families expressed concern that their grocery dollars would be stretched even thinner with this change.

In addition to the change in service hours for the Flora classroom, other programs have been forced to decrease enrollment. In August 2023, the difficult decision was made by the Red Hill School District to cut enrollment in their preschool program to 40 children, half of the 80 they had been serving. This change was necessitated by the resignation of one of their preschool teachers and the inability to hire a replacement. An exhaustive search was completed, but no qualified candidates applied. This decision could not be made until days before school was to begin, leaving families to scramble at the last minute to find alternative programming for their children. Most families were not able to find another program and have been placed on waiting lists.

A change in transportation services in Robinson created a situation where families were no longer able to access one of the PFA programs. In years past, a local child care center had provided transportation for their enrolled children to the preschool. The PFA program paid for this service. This year the child care is not providing transportation. Parents report that this was announced, “at the very last minute.” This caused many children to lose the opportunity to participate in the PFA program.

One parent said, “My only option for my daughter since she couldn’t get into a preschool is a child care center that prides itself on saying that they don’t accept any state money, so they don’t have to follow their rules. That just tells me that they are doing whatever they want and don’t think they have to adhere to best practices. She is three and they are just doing worksheets all day. They don’t even get to play.”

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

Illinois Eastern Community Colleges (IECC) is a system of community colleges serving Region 12 and the surrounding counties. At the writing of the Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment, IECC had announced plans to offer Early Childhood Education (ECE) classes at two of its campuses in Region 12. Lincoln Trail College in Robinson and Olney Central College in Olney were slated to begin offering classes in the fall of 2023. However, per an IECC administrator, this decision was reversed at the resignation of the newly hired instructor. There was no time to hire a new instructor before the start of the semester, so classes were cancelled. It is not clear if a new instructor is being sought or if classes will be offered in the future.

Below is a quote from a community member who reiterated the need for ECE programs:

- “If students aren’t learning how to be good teachers how can we expect them to then become good teachers?” - Community College Administrator (Retired)

## 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.