



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment **ADDENDUM**

Region 16
(DeKalb County)



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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.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

Community members noted there were additional challenges that ECEC providers and professionals face. First, school district preschool teachers are now required to have both a Special Education endorsement and an English Language Learner endorsement, or an education plan to obtain them to provide services to students. Second, school districts must use a universal screening tool for all children starting January 2024, which some cited as an issue because they do not have capacity and cannot agree on a universal screener. Some are concerned that the mandate will make it more difficult to identify kids with delays. Third, home based family care provider recruitment and retention is difficult because many landlords, particularly corporate

management landlords, will not sign off on tenants running a child care business in their homes. It is speculated that this might be due to a misconception about liability issues related to caring for children in the home. Fourth, space is an issue for community organizations that used to provide spaces for playgroups or drop-in care. Those spaces are now being used as classrooms due to increased enrollment.

The lack of before and after school care remains an issue for families and compounds struggles faced in Early Childhood, leaving parents out of the workforce.

One caregiver noted that the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) is “cracking down” on child care centers, which would be fine if they followed through with investigation. They shared their child care center was closed for nine months due to an allegation by a disgruntled parent. It was not investigated in all that time and when it finally was, it was declared to be unfounded. Others echoed this story.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

Some providers said they would look to expand Preschool for All (PFA) or Preschool for All Expansion (PFA-E) program(s) if they thought they could hire enough staff. Unfortunately, the lack of available staff remains an issue in the Region, with one provider saying, “I can’t hire staff. We have incredible teachers leaving the field because they can’t pay their bills. They can make more money working at Walmart than doing something they’re truly passionate about.”

Another Early Childhood professional provided feedback on the Early Childhood Access for Consortium Equity (ECACE) scholarship, which helps fund educational opportunities for potential Early Childhood professionals. “The ECACE scholarship program is a ‘blessing and a curse’ because so many staff members must leave work to further their education, particularly if they are trying to obtain their Professional Educator’s License (PEL) and must student teach at both pre-K and primary grade level.”

Additional Regional Recommendations

One additional recommendation was made by community members.

- With increased economic development in DeKalb, corporations coming in should be shown the impact of Early Childhood Education and Care on their workforce (i.e., absenteeism and turnover) and asked to invest collaboratively in a center.

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.