



# Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment **ADDENDUM**

## **Region 21**

(Franklin, Johnson, Massac, & Williamson  
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 broken into the following categories:

## Regional Community Landscape

Community partners reported that school districts have seen an increase in the number of foster parents and families taking in children who are not related to them, as well as an increase in the number of children and families who frequently move.

New data on the cost of child care and truancy was collected during dissemination meetings.

For one school district in our Region in Johnson County, the average salary of the lowest paid employees is \$18,400. The average cost of care for one infant age birth to two in Region 21 is \$13,195 per year. This does not allow families to survive, let alone thrive.

According to data from the Regional Office of Education #21, in 2022-2023, 7.9% of kindergarten students were truant. Reasons contributing to this truancy were that younger parents are busy, do not fully understand the impact of early education, and lack reliable or affordable transportation. Children who miss two days a week end up missing sixteen weeks a year in instruction.

## **Local Community Collaborations**

One community member would like local Early Childhood (EC) community collaborations to partner with school districts via communications and events to reach parents and caregivers regarding education and expansion of the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) usage.

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

Many programs have long standing owners, directors, teachers, and staff. They are deeply invested and care greatly for their students, families, and local communities.

But there were additional needs identified during dissemination meetings. They include training opportunities and resources for caregivers who want to parent more effectively, an increase in funding for mental health, and programs that help foster social-emotional development in children. There are also few before and after care programs, leaving parents without options for child care outside of school hours.

There is also a lack of consistent therapy services for children with IEPs transitioning from Early Intervention (EI). If the child does not have a “slot” in an EI program, the responsibility falls solely onto the parent to seek out appropriate therapy services. Transportation, scheduling, and lack of guidance for eligible children after the age of three were all noted as problematic.

Community members discussed the need to continue to educate providers, so they have a better understanding of CCAP, as well as the importance of providers marketing the program to parents and caregivers. It was also noted that the majority of before and after care programs in the Region do not accept CCAP payments, which eliminates many families from accessing this type of care. Providers also discussed the challenge of receiving timely CCAP payments, citing this as a possible additional driver of the slot gap in the Region.

Child care program staff discussed that they have tried to build more meaningful family engagement by establishing relationships, having open communication, and learning the schedules and routines of families and caregivers. However, programs report low turnouts to open houses and other center events, leaving them unsure of how else to engage caregivers and families so they feel supported. They also noted that it has been a challenge to build community relationships and engagement when DCFS does not allow anyone in the building without background check. As a result, some child care staff said they would like more training on parent and family engagement.

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

Some EC professionals talked about some additional needs that were not included in the original report. One topic was men working in ECEC programs. While the field needs to be more diverse, some parents and caregivers are not responding well to men working in their child’s care center.

One child care staffer in Franklin County said, “We are seeing a gender stereotype inequity perception in the workforce in child care. Parents are not comfortable with men providing nurturing care (diaper changing, holding, toileting, etc.).”

Another challenge noted was that the DCFS Sunshine website, which lists child care resources for families, is only in English, leaving those whose home language is not English trying to find resources elsewhere. It was also discussed that the Region has a small number of Spanish-speaking families. When they join a child care center, it is difficult for staff to communicate and translate because there are few bilingual staff in the Region.

There is also the challenge of finding staff who can meet the demands of a challenging field. One child care administrator in Massac County said, “Our staff members care deeply about students. With that they are exposed to the traumas students bring to school every day. Poverty, hunger, drug abuse, family problems, grief are just a few of them. Secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue are both contributing factors to the decline in the educational workforce.”

The COVID-19 pandemic changed how and where people work. Some community members discussed how work from home jobs have impacted the EC workforce, with some caregivers choosing or wanting to align their work schedule with their child’s school schedule. This is easier for positions whose schedule follows a school calendar but has been a challenge for programs that operate year round.

## Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

One caregiver in Johnson County said, “Decisions are being made about us without us. As a grandparent who is unexpectedly raising my grandchildren, thank you for valuing my voice.”

Some community members discussed their challenges with finding the ECEC supports and services their child(ren) needed. There is a need for more assistants/paraprofessionals in child care programs who can support children with disabilities, and more child care centers that offer therapeutic services or that will allow therapists to come and provide services on site. Related, parents reported needing more guidance and support when trying to find therapists. Many said they were provided a handout, but it would have been more beneficial if they were provided directions on how to navigate the system via phone or even on a website. Others noted that children who attend child care seem to get more information about resources via the child care Director or center that others do not know about.

- “My son has ADHD and struggles with his handwriting and social anxiety. It was a struggle to get an IEP or services because he wasn’t failing, didn’t behave badly and we were now low income. The reason he didn’t fail was because I would fight tooth and nail with him at night to reteach him what he missed during the day. I would ask everyone for help and opinions. I would have teachers tell me he was autistic or had dysgraphia. He did not get any intervention or services until the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Even then, the help was very limited. It was extended test taking time and he could type his assignments. It basically took the stress away from us so my son and I could have a better relationship.”
- “Relationships and access to adults in the education system for children are key to help identify needed support and services. I did not know that many services and resources

existed until my child started attending a child care program. The program staff shared special services and supports for me to access to assist my family.”

There were concerns about children being left in unsafe child care environments because parents and caregivers have been left with no other choices. The lack of child care options, coupled with the rising cost of child care and few transportation options has left some families going with whatever is available to them. Some parents report that they must leave work to pick up their child to transport them from school to child care, placing an additional burden on them.

- “I get up at 4:30am and drive 70 miles round trip a day to take my children to the places that can provide the best care for them. It makes for a long day, but I do whatever I need to do for my children to get the services they need.”

Finally, community members discussed that generational trauma is widespread across Region 21. Parents are raising their children the way in which they were raised, without resources or training to support caregivers or their children.

### **Additional Regional Needs**

- Providers, educators, and families have expressed the need for more mental health services and supports for both children and families.

### **Additional Regional Recommendations**

One additional recommendation was created because of feedback from the community:

- Collaborate with agencies that provide mental health supports to share resources and assist in distributing information to families to support healthy mental development.

### **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.