



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment **ADDENDUM**

Region 24

(Grundy & Kendall 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.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

Conversations with community members revealed that additional state-funded preschools have opened in Morris, located in Grundy County. The Morris School District added another preschool session due to the influx of children in the area.

Additionally, there are five preschools within Grundy County that are not listed on any data websites. The following are held within churches and dance studios:

- Autism School in Morris (Name unknown)
- Dawn of a New Day Care

- Immaculate Conception School
- Kreative Kids, located in Mueller’s Dance Studio
- Rainbow Preschool, located in First Christian Church of Morris

ECEC providers discussed additional challenges they face, including:

- No incentives to motivate providers to prioritize quality.
- Free/low-cost speech services are very difficult to find.
- Not enough Early Intervention (EI) providers available to meet the demand, leaving local school districts with long waitlists.
- A local school district noted that they have experienced inequity with EI providers picking and choosing who they do and do not serve. This leaves some students without adequate EI support.

One school district, in particular, cited needs based on their growing student population. Morris School District noted that 18% of their students are Spanish speaking, and the district is in need of additional bilingual teachers. Furthermore, some students are using a local cab ride service, Telecab, to get to school. The district said they were experiencing a bus driver shortage, leaving some families with few options to transport their children to and from school.

Some parents and caregivers believe that there should be mandatory partnerships between school districts and child care programs. Others noted that there has been an increase in the number of children being homeschooled since the pandemic, as many parents have chosen this option. Children are learning better in smaller groups, as opposed to the 30+ children in a typical elementary school classroom.

Below are quotes from parents about ECEC programs and services:

- “What incentives are there for family child care providers to improve the quality of their program?” “The cost of a child care program should be determined based on their ExceleRate rating.”
- “Child Care Assistance should be accessible to everyone, including free breakfast and lunch at all schools.”
- “I am a teacher, and I cannot even afford to send my child to preschool.”
- “People shouldn’t be in positions to make decisions about things they don’t know anything about.”

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

Providers believe there needs to be greater awareness of the resources and trainings available to ECEC professionals, including the Pyramid Model, the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) Scholarship, and the Great Start Wage Supplement Program, among others.

Additional Regional Strengths & Needs

Community members were asked to identify additional strengths and needs of the Region.

Strengths

Coal City Library District has active children's programs available to community members, with eight different programs currently available each month. In total, the library serves over 100 children through these various programs, but many of these programs have a waitlist. The breakdown of these programs is as follows:

- Lap Sit – This program is a 30-minute story time for children two months to two years of age which meets once a week. There are currently 34 children who are enrolled.
- Lap Sit (two to three year olds) – This is 30-minute story time for children ages two to three which meets once a week. Currently, there are 30 children enrolled in this program.
- Homeschool Children's Group – This group meets once a week for one hour to read a story then do a related activity or game. There are 12 children who attend this group.
- Preschool Story Time – The library hosts three groups each week with about 39 total children who attend.
- Toddler Playgroups and Preschool Playgroups
- Story Time in the Community
- Coal City School District has been collaborating with a local child care center to help support children who attend their school and the center.

Needs

- We need a Community-Based Prevention Initiative Program. It was noted that a local school district would be interested in applying to host a program if the requirements of State compliance were lessened.
- There is a need for "wraparound" services, where an individual can reach out to receive supports and resources. The intake person would get to know the individual, learn about all of their needs, then assist in seeking additional resources identified. This would close the gaps of what a person needs to fully thrive. Service, support, and resource providers must see people as a whole, not just pieces.
- The materials and messaging distributed throughout the community need to be more accessible, with resources in both English and Spanish.
- Morris School District, specifically, has a need for bilingual professionals and bus drivers to meet the needs of their students and families.

Additional Regional Recommendations

Community members were asked for any additional recommendations that should be added to the Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment and provided the following:

- There should be collaboration between school districts, doctors, and Early Intervention providers, so everyone is on the same page and the process is more streamlined.

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.