



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment **ADDENDUM**

Region 26

(Fulton, Hancock, McDonough, & Schuyler
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.

Regional Community Landscape

In recent years, the demographic makeup of Schuyler County has shifted slightly with the welcome arrival of African immigrants, many of whom are from Kenya and Zimbabwe and are employed at a meat packing plant outside of Schuyler County.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

Funding was a central point of discussion among community members during community engagement events.

- “Putting funding in the right places is the major issue of our lifetime; funding is going to the wrong places. We need to create a strong bridge to where the funding comes from to get the funds to the correct places.” - Educational Institution Director (Fulton County)
- “It feels overwhelming to write for grants on the provider's side. We don't have time to apply for grants and still ensure that our child care centers are running smoothly.” - Child Care Center Director (Fulton County)
- “We need more in-home services, especially with our diverse population to get into the home and provide them with resources to aid in the development of their children.” - State Agency Employee (Schuyler County)

Other community members noted that the number of families choosing to keep their children home and/or homeschool seems to have grown over time, but no reason was cited.

Other community members wondered if there was a way to determine the wait times for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) or track where people are in the approval process.

Lastly, it was noted that those who utilize Medicaid have extremely limited access to dental care, as well as mental health and other health services in the Region.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

Community members noted that Spoon River College is preparing to relaunch their Early Childhood program online and go through the accreditation process.

Additional Community Feedback

Some community members provided additional feedback on families and support that is missing from their community.

- “If we truly care for families, we need to start from the ground up. Families need hope and they get that through community connectedness.” - Faith-Based Organization Member (Hancock County)
- “Affordable housing is impossible to come by. We have people living in garages because they can't afford rent.” - Food Pantry Director (McDonough County)

The Region has a strong faith community who offers many family supports and provide feedback on additional family supports needed as well as the impact of increased substance use on families and communities.

Additional Family Experiences or Stories

Some parents and caregivers expressed the need for wraparound supports, such as access to food, along with more local jobs. The need for additional supports is especially critical for grandparents who become caregivers for their grandchildren; they noted that families need to be met where they are, without judgement. Additionally, some families are not aware of where to begin to look for help when they need it.

- “We are quick to say all the bad about our towns, but we need everyone to know that our community will help anyone in the community without questioning their needs.” - Parent and Early Childhood Education Teacher (Hancock County)
- “The struggle to navigate where to start and how to start, the time it takes - there isn’t one place to go to get answers and I wasn’t prepared to navigate.” - Parent and Local Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Educator

Additional Regional Needs

- Affordable housing is a big issue in the Region. One faith-based leader in Fulton County said eviction is common and people struggle with finding affordable housing that is safe and clean. New housing developments are needed to support the demand for the number of people seeking shelter.

Additional Regional Recommendations

- The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) should allow those submitting for background checks to utilize additional fingerprinting providers. For example, a Regional Office of Education (ROE) may have fingerprinting services available daily but local child care center staff would have to wait for the DCFS approved fingerprinting service.
- Capital Improvement grants/funding are needed for local schools and providers to allow them to expand their capacity to service more children,
- There is a need to centralize ECEC content by regional hubs for families when there is an overlapping Child Care Resource and Referral Agency (CCR&R).
- We need marketing to businesses about the importance of early childhood. Some businesses provide \$500 vouchers to their staff to offset the cost of child care. More local business needs to be made aware of how lack of child care impacts the company’s staff attendance.

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.