



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment **ADDENDUM**

Region 28

(Bureau, Henry, & Stark 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

Many districts in the Region have noted the need for more guidance from the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) on what collaborations between district and community programs could look like to expand Preschool For All (PFA) programming. In response to this request, Region 28 has created a support network where districts can go and see firsthand examples of innovative and collaborative Preschool For All/Prevention Initiative (PFA/PI) service models.

Two community members provided their reactions to the data presented in the report.

- “If my former Early Childhood program had been made aware of these different collaboration models, I wonder if they would still be in operation today.” - Former Head Start Teacher (Stark County)
- “I was not aware of what all goes into the creation of an Early Childhood classroom; it is a very different process from traditional district programming.” - School Board Member (Henry County)

Slot Gap

A center in Henry County, licensed for 150 children, had only 40 children enrolled on the first day of the 2023-2024 school year due to not having enough staff to open additional classrooms.

Due to both the school district and Head Start facing challenges with filling half day slots in Stark County, Head Start made the difficult choice to close its Wyoming Center for the 2023-2024 school year.

Some community members discussed that some of the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) licensing agents in the Region are now requiring Child Development Associate (CDA) credentials specific to the age group for whom the provider is caring. Although a practice that does promote higher quality-of-care services, it is preventing center directors from having the ability to move staff within their centers to classrooms with staffing vacancies. Compounding this issue, the Region now only has two active Professional Development Specialists who are certified by the CDA Council to perform credentialing observation visits on their *personal* time.

- “I’m one of only two active CDA Professional Development Specialists covering the area. Since July 1st, I have received three requests per day for CDA observation visits. I’m only allowed to complete two visits per week, and I’m doing the visits on personal time, after my regular workday. I can’t do it all, and I’m exhausted from all the responsibility now being placed on what I once did out of kindness.” - CDA Professional Development Specialist (Henry County)

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

During dissemination of our report, a Prevention Initiative (PI) Home Visitor shared her experience of working in the field. After losing her Gateways scholarship because of switching positions from PFA to a PI program, she was awarded an Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) scholarship to help with the cost of completing her bachelor’s degree in Infant/Toddler Studies.

Additional Community Feedback

In August, the Spring Valley Hospital reopened emergency services. Unfortunately, they are currently unable to reopen their obstetrics unit for funding and staffing reasons. To date, Region 28 is still without an obstetrics unit, forcing parents to travel upwards of 50 miles to the nearest delivery room.

In August, Royal Market reorganized in Sheffield (Bureau County) to assist with the fresh food insecurity concern in the community. Royal received accolades from the Washington Post for its innovative approach to responding to the needs of rural communities.¹

In response to the food insecurity concerns being experienced in some rural communities, Dollar General stores, like the one in Woodhull (Henry County), are piloting the addition of fresh fruits and vegetables to their selection of offerings.

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.

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2023/08/31/royal-super-mart-sheffield-illinois/>