



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment **ADDENDUM**

Region 32

(Iroquois & Kankakee 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.

Local Community Collaborations

One local community member noted that other Collaborations, such as Local Interagency Councils, Easterseals/Jump Start groups should have been added to the Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments because their work aligns with the Partner Plan Act definition of an Early Childhood Collaboration. These groups were not included in the directory.

Other community members reiterated the need for additional funding that will support transportation for families, especially those who have difficulties accessing mental health services;

additionally, there is a need for funding to provide parent/peer support for mental health wraparound services.

The Assistant Superintendent, ROE #32 (Kankakee & Iroquois Counties) noted that, “Our community partners are so overwhelmed” due to the number of children and families they are serving.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

CSL Behring (a large corporation in Kankakee County) spoke about their past data indicating a need for shift work and overnight child care for their employees. Other major employers throughout our Region have also shared that their staff have expressed a need/desire for them to open a child care center for staff and community members at their facility.

One local provider noted that Theraplay¹ training, which teaches how to provide best practice therapy for problems resulting from trauma-informed mental and behavioral health challenges, is valuable; however, it is hard to send staff during the day and still be able to operate their child care center.

One mom in Iroquois County reiterated the need for additional programs when shared that she is over income for Head Start and there are no other openings for child care in her rural area. She must now commute to find a preschool program for her daughter.

Another community partner shared:

“We have a Kankakee Community College Student (KCC) student who is an ECACE [Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity] Scholarship Awardee. She works full time at a child care center; however, this center does not have any openings for her personal child to attend, so she is desperate for help. She is traveling to another state to pick up a family member to watch her child while she works until an opening becomes available. She is currently on 10 different wait lists.” - Director of Early Childhood Success at Kankakee Community College (Kankakee County)

Slot Gap

Two programs discussed the challenges they have had with maintaining the number of slots that had been open in the past. One local child care (located in Kankakee & Iroquois Counties) said that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, they were always at capacity of over 600. However, they now have a maximum capacity of around 547 - 550 due to staffing shortages. Additionally, there is a school district-based pre-K program in Kankakee County that has a wait list of 10 children. They chose not to apply for funds because they find the state funding guidelines too strict; instead, they fund the program with local dollars. They have capped their rooms at 15 total: 13 for general education students and two for (EI) Early Intervention students.

¹ <https://theraplay.org/training/training-programs/>

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

Community partners and businesses shared information about potential initiatives and changes they would like to make to support the ECEC workforce. Olivet Nazarene University feels that the priority for current Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) students pertains to funding once the ECACE scholarships ends. Many students require an additional semester of course work and/or student teaching. Once this funding ends, students who have not finished will have to pay out of pocket or take out a loan. They also noted that some students need additional time to complete their coursework due to extenuating circumstances, as many are incumbent workers and parents/caregivers.

Local child care center staff also provided feedback about pay, training, and staffing. One noted that the state funding they have received has helped keep their center open, and they are able to provide stipends and bonuses to staff. However, another noted that if increased hourly wages are not permanent, then their staff will leave for higher-paying positions (some outside of the Early Childhood field).

One also appealed for continued debt relief through the ECACE scholarship, saying: "It takes time to form relationships with these individuals and for them to be able to accept money towards bills they are struggling with." - Director of Early Childhood Success at Kankakee Community College (Kankakee County)

Other child care professionals discussed the need for additional staff training around Social Emotional Learning (SEL), especially for children born during the COVID-19 pandemic or who were not enrolled in school during that time.

Another spoke to other staffing issues:

"It's so hard to find qualified people to work in daycare when the State requires so much. Not too many people want to go to school for two years to make minimum wage, along with everything else they require. I have had employees that were aides here, that have moved to different states around us, and they are considered teacher qualified. It seems nowadays you can work in a school district with less qualifications than you can work in a daycare and be teacher qualified. I have had a few staff leave daycare to go to the school district."

Additional Community Feedback

- "Moms want a mom's group that is not religion based; they are struggling to find friends." - Jump Start Site Lead, (Kankakee & Iroquois County)
- "Parents are declining mental health services due to lack of transportation if they are not offered during the school day." - Project Sun (Kankakee County)

Additional Regional Needs

- There is a need to connect with families in the system experiencing trauma, as well as connect them to services and supports.
- The Regional Office of Education would like to see the Iroquois County Health Department implement the Integrated Referral and Intake System (IRIS). The Kankakee Health Department is working to utilize this program to support children and their families.
- There is a need for additional funding to support school programs such as tutoring, learning loss, development, and summer school that are currently supported by Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds.
- The Kankakee Health Department identified a need for substance abuse treatment, mental health, parenting education, and classes. They also need a better tool to track attempted referrals in their system, as they do not currently have data to support their need for additional resources.
- Illinois Medicaid is a barrier for families. Parents/caregivers find it difficult to navigate the system to enroll in Medicaid. Additionally, the number of providers who accept Medicaid is limited; those who do accept it are overwhelmed with current caseloads.
- More support is needed for pregnant people and families, especially in Iroquois County where there are few programs to support families and children available, including Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) or a Family Care Manager Program.

Additional Regional Recommendations

- Offer Theraplay training virtually, and/or find funding to hire a traveling Theraplay/Sunshine Circle staffer who can rotate to different rooms and/or child care centers in the Region to provide training and services.
- Implement transition meetings between administrators of school districts and child care centers for children leaving child care centers for Kindergarten.
- Expand Care Solace² coordination services from Kankakee School District 111 to other regional school districts and child care centers, with ROE #32 support throughout the Region.
- Extend funding past the summer deadline of 2024 to allow current ECACE students to earn their associate or bachelor's degree and/or state licensure while continuing to recruit new applicants interested in pursuing their associate or bachelor's degree or licensure.
- Continue funding for the Mentor Positions in the ECACE Scholarship program to support student success on the ground.
- Continue Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) debt relief funding and expand it to include neighboring states with students who would like to stay in Illinois.

² <https://www.caresolace.org/services/k12-education>

- Increase access to professional development for ECEC professionals to address the increasing needs and behaviors of children, specifically, children with autism, severe behavior concerns, trauma, and ABA therapy.

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.