



# Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment **ADDENDUM**

## **Region 33**

(Henderson, Knox, Mercer,  
& Warren 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

Community members provided feedback about the growing immigrant population in the Region and how schools and programs are unprepared to meet the needs of children and families whose primary language is not English.

- “The French African population is beginning to migrate back to rural schools in small numbers. Rural districts don't have EL teachers should the number reach 20 in a building.”  
- Rural School Principal

Providers also expressed the need for more child-specific demographic data because diversity tends to be greater among children versus the overall population.

Some parents offered feedback on the program(s) their child(ren) have attended.

- “The program that works best for me is the Preschool program because it promotes education for all. I have 5-year-old twin girls who benefit from this program. The fact of not stressing financially for the child's school is a very great support which lightens the life of the parents. not to mention that the teachers do an incredible job that awakens the spirits of the children.” - Parent from an Immigrant Community
- “All the programs are important for my families, however the one that does not work well in my opinion is the Prevention Initiative [PI] because many parents, especially immigrant parents, consider visitors to this program to be inspectors or spies coming to collect information from their home at home. through children who will be removed from them as a result. Each culture has its own way of educating its children and when the inspectors do not understand the method used by the parents, they consider them to be dangerous. And can sue the parents at the risk of losing the children therefore they cannot easily enroll in this program. and this program cannot easily have a considerable impact with this limit.” - Parent from an Immigrant Community

Some providers expressed a concern that expanding the income cap for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) for publicly funded programs to 400% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) will decrease enrollment in licensed or license-exempt child care centers and homes.

- “If all the kids are eligible to go to the school's preschool programs but don't have the option to stay in my center with the same type of financial assistance, it will financially break centers. The kids that I have in my preschool program, ages 3 to 5, are the ones that either don't qualify for the school's program or are on CCAP assistance and choose to stay with us.” - Independent Licensed Provider

Another community member discussed the challenges of changing statewide policies that would relieve some of the staffing burdens programs have been facing in recent years.

- The Illinois Directors/Owners of Child Care Centers (ILDOCC) organization has been working for months to get passed a simple rule that was put into place during COVID-19. The rule basically said that, due to the staffing shortage, centers could use a teacher's aide as a lead teacher for up to 3 hours a day with a set of criteria. The goal was to get this put into law as a permanent option for centers since all the COVID rules were expiring. DCFS [the Illinois Department of Child and Family Services] fought them all the way and even after it was approved by JCAR<sup>1</sup>, DCFS went in and implemented a whole pile of restrictions on when and how the 3-hour rule could be used. Thankfully, JCAR suspended those rules so that we could use it at its original intent. My point is that even something that basically everyone agreed on, and was unanimously approved by JCAR, was fought against and manipulated by our governing body. I agree that many of the items in your report need to happen, but implementing them is going to be a massive struggle without

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<sup>1</sup> JCAR refers to the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules in the Illinois General Assembly.

the Governor intervening or a fairly large piece of legislation.” - Independent Licensed Provider

Others spoke to the affordability of ECEC programs, saying that there has sometimes been miscommunication between DCFS and providers about payments. One provider said that DCFS would not approve payments for a foster child, leaving them to either try and recoup the payments from the foster caregiver (who thought it would be covered) or eat the cost of the care they provided. They also reiterated that CCAP payments often take a long time to process.

One spoke about the credentialing system and ExceleRate, and the challenges potential and current providers face with them.

- “...the credentialing system is a big problem for a center because people do not want to go back to college to get these credential requirements. I believe to get these credentials for programs like ExceleRate they should allow specific trainings tailored to specific credentials.” - School Principal

Some community members talked about the need to reach out to parents and offer support and education on topics like establishing routines, nutrition, discipline, and preparing kids for school. They also noted that it is a challenge to get parents to respond or attend meetings and trainings provided. Another talked about the disconnect between government led and government funded programs and how they often lack local responsivity and include too many restrictions on both providers and families.

Finally, community members discussed the need for a more accurate ‘grassroots’ survey tool to gather local data to guide community discussions and decision-making.

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

One school principal discussed some of the challenges Early Childhood professionals were facing in supporting students. There is a need for more pre-K Special Education programs, a transitional Kindergarten class, and support for the higher numbers of children who are experiencing dysregulation; however, they do not have enough resources to provide the supports these children need. More funding to open classrooms, along with funding for staff and training, is needed. Additionally, the paperwork that pre-K staff and teachers must complete is overwhelming for some. As a result, some schools are experiencing higher rates of workforce turnover than they have in the past.

- “I’ve not had a Pre-K teacher do more than 4 years without transferring or leaving for a different position. This is my 14th year.” - School Principal
- “A lack of qualified EC-certified educators is a big concern. It would be nice if the state supported a program to pay for school for folks to complete the major and then work in a rural district for 4 years in return.” - School Principal
- “From my perspective, the family-centered approach of Head Start and PI are beneficial to families. From an employment standpoint, limited hours of funded programs can be challenging for parents/guardians. In our learning center, we see second graders who

don't have consistent letter recognition. I think that is unacceptable.” - Licensed Center Provider

Two parents offered their perspective on the Early Childhood professionals.

- “The greatest strength in the ECEC is that the ECEC professional community works well together and communicates regularly. The regional ECEC community has taken the initiative to expand, improve, and collaborate to increase opportunities for children and families. Community members, including families, business owners, community leaders, and school officials share a common vision that children's success should not be determined by race, gender, religion, or income, and understand the need to achieve and improve the ECEC climate.” - Parent from an Immigrant Community
- “Local ECEC staff are dedicated to nurturing and empowering area children and families. Their work is grounded in best practice and data-driven research, supporting their passion for the Region's youngest learners. but this workforce is faced with daily challenges such as the unmet needs of priority populations, the lack of qualified personnel, and the limited resources, especially for the care of toddlers and infants.” - Parent from an Immigrant Community

## Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

Several parents and caregivers offered feedback on the report and their communities. One noted that communities are more diverse than what was presented in the report.

- “I would just like you to know that there are not only Congolese immigrants in the city of Galesburg. You will also find Cameroonians, Togolese, Malians, Senegalese, Indians, Kurdish, Beninese, South Africans, Nigerians, Cambodians, etc.” - Parent from an Immigrant Community

## Additional Regional Needs

- There needs to be a more concerted effort to recruit from all communities (African, Latin American, Chinese American, Indian, and all social strata, etc.) within Region 33 to create more trust between families and providers and to go to places where there is a huge gathering of men and make announcements of training or recruitment as well as information on the different services existing in Region 33.

## 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.