



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment **ADDENDUM**

Region 44
(McHenry County)



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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 broken into the following categories:

Local Community Collaborations

One community member provided feedback on the development of local Early Childhood Collaborations.

"I think there is no agency who might feel they have the capacity to start a Collaboration right now. The Early Childhood field is feeling taxed right now, but if several of us banded together I think it can be done. McHenry County also spreads far so trying to incorporate everyone in the county can seem daunting." - Agency Worker

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

The feedback from community members about ECEC programs largely centered on access to Early Intervention (EI) services, affordability, and funding. A doctor in the Region said that there is an issue with children not getting the services they need when they age out of EI services at age three unless they know about the services for children that start at age three and can then get into a public school program. However, it was their experience that many children are not getting services from ages three to five due to lack of awareness. An EI professional noted that families are not only being waitlisted for EI services, but also private therapy services.

Below are quotes from other community members about EI services.

- “EI is seeing an increase in children qualifying for services because they have such limited exposure to others because their parents have nowhere to put their children. They are working from home, not able to find child care, or may not afford child care if they can find it, so they are struggling to work from home and be a parent simultaneously. Some families are doing whatever they can to make it work, including putting the infants and toddlers in pack n plays during the day, which means the children are not making the gains they should.” - EI Agency Worker
- “Children wouldn’t need as many services if they were able to start young in a quality program.” - EI Service Coordinator
- “As an EI provider for over 20 years, there is a large discrepancy on how Illinois pays its providers versus other states. This includes no way to join a state retirement fund, benefits, or even payment for time driving to and from appointments. This made it difficult to sustain serving/maintaining clients whose families struggled with mental health, significant health issues, etc.” - ECEC Professional
- “Five-year-olds would have been two when the pandemic started, so they’ve had a lot of limited experiences before Kindergarten. They have limited social and emotional skills. They don’t know how to work with other people, they don’t know how to deal with other kids.” - Early Childhood Educator

One community member noted that one program that was not highlighted in the original report is the Helping Us Grow (HUG) home visiting program, which covers every town in McHenry County that does not already have a home visiting program of their own.

Another community member who works with foster families noted that there are not enough child care centers or homes that are willing to take Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) payments. Another community member, who works for Head Start, said that (at the time of the feedback) the budget had not yet been passed for Head Start. They raised concerns that some Head Start programs would be cut, along with some discretionary programs. They went on to say that some Head Start programs in the State have been reducing their enrollment so they can pay their staff.

The following corrections to the Region 44 Early Childhood Needs Assessment should be noted:

- In the report it is stated that there are no “full day publicly funded programs”. There is one full day Preschool for All program and full day Head Start programs. However, families said that because those programs end in the afternoon, they still need to find child care afterwards. Families are saying they do not have access to full day programs, compared to other preschool options.
- In the report it is stated that the Region’s Home Visiting Program is within the Child and Family Connections (CFC) program. This program is not part of the CFC; rather, they are two separate programs.
- Per an Early Intervention (EI) supervisor, children who are in EI do not have IEPs as stated in the report. IEPs cannot be assigned until age three; at age three children no longer qualify for EI.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

The feedback on the ECEC workforce section of the report largely focused on two main topics: staffing challenges and the need for mental health supports for ECEC professionals.

Many Early Childhood professionals reiterated the shortage of teachers and assistants, nothing that some programs have shut down because they do not have enough teachers to cover mandatory breaks or give their staff lunch breaks. One said that time off work was not an option, even if they or their child was sick, because there are no substitutes who can work in any of the classrooms.

- “To me it is inhumane. It is a basic right for a person who is educated working with young children to be able to go to the bathroom when they need to go to the bathroom”.
- “You can’t always leave for a lunch break. You are tied to a classroom for the entire time you are there.” - Former Early Childhood Educator
- “It is not just the public; the way management treats you is also an issue. They are the ones that have to give all the bathroom breaks and when you call them you are pulling them away from something else and they get super crabby, stressed out, and take it out on the staff. It’s why I walked away from working in child care.” - Former ECE Educator, Current Agency Worker
- “How can you love your job when you don’t even have the ability to meet your needs? That needs to be looked at. That needs to be changed. There need to be other opportunities. There needs to be subs. I mean I know we are all saying this, but these children will be our future. And the people who are helping your child develop...that’s how you’re going to treat them?” - Concerned Parent and Community Agency Worker

One spoke to the challenge that Early Childhood professionals faced with background checks:

- “The problem is with DCFS and the slow background check process. I’ve been waiting 5 months for a background check on a sub.” - Family Child Care Owner

The staff shortage has an impact on children who are unable to enroll in programs. One child care worker said, “There is a huge social emotional impact, gross motor delays, and more because children are put in walkers and swings all day until they can get into a child care program.”

Early Childhood professionals also discussed the need for mental health services for those working in the field, provided free of charge:

- “Working child care and Early Childhood in general is a 24/7 job in that you often take your work home with you. The trauma we see in families can be draining and there are not often the supports for staff to process through what they see each day.” - Agency Worker

Additional Community Feedback

Below are quotes from other community members related to ECEC services and the experiences of families in the Region.

- “No child care openings, so there is a lack of exposure to their peers, does that qualify a child for special ed services? So many children are getting diagnosed with autism, is it because their little brains are stuck to electronics all day? If we cannot get them into child care, what services are out there to help their brain development away from home?” - Parent/Community Member
- “As a district we continue to get concerns from parents for before and after school care for our students with special needs.” - ECEC Professional
- “There are no known processes for families that get off DCFS payments. Can they get CCAP [Child Care Assistance Program]? If so, what is the process? Agency workers cannot help families because they don’t know the process. Agency workers don’t even know who to turn to for these answers, let alone the parents.” - Agency Worker

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.