



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment **ADDENDUM**

Region 47

(Lee, Ogle, & Whiteside 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 (EC) 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

The community emphasized that collaborative utilization of the Integrated Referral and Intake System (IRIS) in the Region for Coordinated Intake has changed how families and children in our Region are served and strengthened communication between agencies.

- “The IRIS system has changed the game in regard to supporting each other, sharing resources, and referring families to the program options that will best meet their needs” - Head Start Administrator (Lee, Ogle & Whiteside Counties)
- “If we can grow on current Coordinated Intake and expand throughout the State, it will help us in meeting the initiative of making sure children and families receive equity-driven,

quality Early Childhood Education and Care regardless of their story.” - Head Start Administrator (Lee, Ogle & Whiteside Counties)

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

In the fall of 2022, the Head Start in Lee County indicated they had been working to open a program in Paw Paw (Lee County). In August 2023, they announced the availability of this program.

Additional challenges were identified by ECEC providers. They noted that expenditures for providing child care are impacting the Region. Since 2020, the costs of operating and maintaining a child care program have significantly increased, and the increase in revenue does not match the needs of a quality program.

Furthermore, informing families of programs and how they qualify is necessary when children are young. Families assume EC programs are like kindergarten and they can enroll their child, but then limited spots and prioritized risk factors impact enrollment. Those who do not receive transportation to these programs are further impacted and cannot always attend their spot.

Other feedback was provided by community members:

- “Parents do not have reliable transportation and cannot get their children to and from school. Unfortunately, Early Childhood is not prioritized like other grades.” - Preschool for All (Whiteside County)
- “We need cross-program education on who to ask questions and how to refer students, such as child care knowing when to refer a child and where, schools, early intervention, healthcare.” - School District Administrator (Whiteside County)
- “I’m not surprised but am concerned at the number of openings for child care vs. the number of kids who need child care. I know plenty of parents, almost exclusively moms, who choose to stay home with their kids because they can’t find reliable childcare or because the cost of childcare negates their paycheck.” - Parent (Whiteside County)

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

Community members discussed that the cost of college-level education for someone pursuing a degree in EC versus the salary they will make is a significant factor in growing the ECEC workforce. College credits cost the same for someone pursuing an Early Childhood Education (ECE) degree as someone taking credits in a higher paying field such as pre-law, pre-med, or a business degree, but professionals will make, on average, \$30,000 a year or less in ECEC.

- “Why would someone go to college and get loans to turn around and make minimum wage?” - Child and Family Connections (Ogle County)
- “Child Care teachers make so little they qualify for child care assistance, that itself is an issue.” - Child Care Center Director (Whiteside County)
- “We’ve placed a much greater emphasis on the importance of preschool, requiring ECEC staff to have more credentials and set higher goals, but very little has been done in terms of compensation. In short, we demand more from ECE teachers, but pay them like babysitters.” - Children’s Librarian (Whiteside County)

Wait times for fingerprinting and background checks through the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) has impacted providers drastically and has caused them to lose new staff

or shut down classrooms. Additionally, the limited hours and days open and long travel times to work impact new employee fingerprinting. The turnaround time for licensing approval from DCFS for a new licensed provider is also impacting programs. The community reported that, in some cases, approval takes up to a year to gain.

EC professionals also discussed that the DCFS Sunshine website is oftentimes confusing for families and the Gateways Registry website is difficult to navigate. This difficulty is an important step in employee onboarding and impacts the recruitment and retention of new staff.

Community members discussed that that it was not highlighted that “children are different now,” and displays of atypical social and emotional behaviors are on the rise in EC programs. The lack of resources for children who need help with behaviors that impact the program leads to stress and staff turnover and retention concerns.

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

Some caregivers reflected on their experiences with ECEC programs and family supports in the Region.

- “As the parent of a higher needs (ASD, ADHD) student, there are no quality evaluation services locally. We had our son evaluated at a center 40 minutes away at great out-of-pocket cost, even with good insurance, and still don't have great options for schooling. Again, not surprised, but concerned that there are not enough programs for the eligible population.” - Parent (Whiteside County)
- “I don't believe families in my community have a voice in our Early Childhood programs. It's kind of "you get what you get. It'd be great to have a website or fair where parents could view all the options that are available in the community in one place.” - Parent (Whiteside County)
- “I don't know of any programs in our community for new parents or children in that 0-2, 0-3 range. Even having playdates for those groups at a location where they could connect with other parents would be a help. It can be lonely and isolating to be the parent of a very young child in a small town. Play centers in neighboring towns exist but require transportation and admission costs.” - Parent (Whiteside County)

Additional Community Feedback

One community member expressed concern about the population loss discussed in the report.

- “Illinois is losing population, and Whiteside County was just listed as one of the top 10 in population loss! Imagine what could happen if we moved quickly and effectively! Perhaps citizens wouldn't need to leave...businesses might consider moving back or into the county if they knew families were supported.” - Community Member (Whiteside County)

Additional Regional Needs

Some additional needs were identified by community members during dissemination.

- The use of “telehealth-like” services for connecting parents with ECEC consultations could be helpful both for working parents and those in remote areas.
- The Region could improve technology platform use to connect families with child care, education, and other EC resources.

- Agencies and organizations need to understand that while there is a need for modern, online resources for families, not all families utilize social media, etc. The Region needs to utilize multiple options to connect and communicate with families.
- It is important to ensure that caregivers who have been outside of the EC range for many years (age gaps between children, grandparents raising grandchildren, etc.) are aware of services and resources available.
- Solutions are needed to address children with challenging social and emotional behaviors in child care, especially considering these children are often too young to receive a diagnosis. Parents are experiencing the difficulty of their children being unenrolled from programs or children moving from program to program. Families need a system that is set up to be proactive rather than reactive.
- Providers and programs need to remember that families do not speak EC “lingo” and must ensure that families understand programs, program goals, and how to use and access the system.

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.