



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment **ADDENDUM**

Region 51

(Menard & Sangamon 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, and held community listening sessions 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

A new family and parent group started in Menard County, and they identified the following needs: the establishment of an Early Childhood Community Collaboration, another child care center, a before and after school program, and a summer camp program for their children.

Sangamon Heart provided a quarterly data sheet for April 2023 to June 2023, pulled from the Integrated Referral and Intake System (IRIS).¹ The data sheet provides an overview of the average

¹ <https://adobe.ly/48rbPXz>

days to accept and/or reject referrals, monthly referral trends, the number of community partners using IRIS, and the sectors to which families were referred.

Below is some community feedback on Local Collaborations.

- “If there was a way to assure communication between all Early Childhood services and programs to the existing Collaboration, then children would receive the services and resources they need in their area.” - Action Council Member (Menard County)
- “Our community has lost funding which supports feeding 95 families in the Loami area. We need to ensure our rural areas do not lose funding like this in the future. It takes Early Childhood Collaborations having conversations to ensure funding stays in our smaller communities to support our families and children.” - Superintendent (Sangamon County)
- “We will potentially see children being turned away from their Early Childhood programs due to the lack of access to immunizations, vision and hearing screenings, physicals, and dental screenings. As we are aware there are multiple barriers families face which prevent these items from being completed on time or even at all. This is a DCFS [Department of Children and Family Services] mandate, and we are trying to collaborate with our community to come together to try to offer these services on-site for the children and families to prevent the children from losing child care.” - Early Head Start Home Visitor (Sangamon County)

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

Some community ECEC programs provided additional information and data during dissemination of our initial report.

Sangamon County Head Start is a nine-month program (closed in the summer) and Early Head Start is a full-year program serving children birth to age three. Both programs noted that to help remove children from their waitlist, they have considered sharing enrollment slots for licensed Early Childhood programs in the area with programs who need help with enrollment. They are trying to hire in the summer months so staff can get their training done to acquire a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. This, along with benefits and funding for continuing education, has been key for them in hiring and retaining the 22 qualified teachers they need to be at full capacity.

Additional challenges were identified by ECEC professionals and providers.

When there are waitlists for child care, many families struggle because they do not have a support system or extended family members that can help with child care needs.

- “Our own families at Southern Illinois University (SIU) Medicine Department of Pediatrics are unable to locate child care due to the two-year waitlist in Sangamon County, which then is causing workforce issues in certain departments at SIU.” - Community Collaboration Member (Sangamon County)

Head Start/Early Head Start Sangamon County has a waitlist of more than 200 students due to a lack of quality Early Childhood teachers and the low starting pay they offer if the new hire does not have a bachelor's degree; someone who holds a bachelor's degree receives around \$20.00 per hour, while all others receive a range between \$13.00-\$14.00 per hour. The Head Start program has 96 slots, all of which have been full for the past five years. The Early Head Start Home Visiting program has 72 slots available but are only operating at half capacity due to the lack of staffing. While outreach to recruit more teachers is happening, there is still a challenge to keep the program staffed.

- “I would love to see the Early Childhood professionals come together to share their information, resources, and fun activities with the families in our communities to help recruit and educate our community on the importance of Early Childhood Education.”
- Early Childhood Professional (Sangamon County)

There is competition for qualified teachers among programs, as well as a lack of therapists. Child and Family Connections (CFC) #18 reported they have tried to recruit new Speech-Language Pathologists and Developmental Therapists but believe without more funding and outreach from the State, a provider shortage will continue. Because of the low number of Developmental Therapists, children are being placed on a waitlist and are not receiving any services until a spot opens.

- “I have unfortunately been on a waitlist for both child care and for a diagnostic evaluation with the evaluation being a year waitlist. I was able to enroll my daughter in a child care setting but due to the individualized needs of my daughter, the staff was not able to accommodate her needs. Therefore, I had to hire someone to come into my home to care for my daughter so I could continue to work. This has been a frustrating process for my daughter and me, but I have been fortunate enough to navigate this entire process due to the resources and time I have available.” - Community Member (Sangamon County)

One licensed child care center Director noted that screenings could occur within programs, saying, “We need to refocus again on quality and look at using a universal screening tool for our children to ensure they are developmentally on target at their different stages of growth and learning.”

Another challenge identified by a local school district was the issue of the lack of transitioning visits taking place between Early Intervention coordinators in Menard and Sangamon Counties and the school district Preschool for All teachers. This disconnect has caused teachers to be unaware of the students who will need Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for the school year.

Finally, Camelot Care Center, a Child Welfare Agency that specializes in higher-level foster care for children and adolescents who may need extra support. They reported child care programs in Region 51 are denying their foster children care due to those children being on the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) assistance payment, placing additional burdens on foster caregivers who often have a short period of time to find care.

- “Our foster parents who are on waitlists for therapists end up not following through with the services for they feel ‘why bother, if this was important or a big concern, then why is my child being put on a waitlist’”. - Camelot Social Worker (Sangamon County)

The Sangamon County Department of Public Health, along with CFC #18, reported that they made 910 referrals to services in Sangamon County and 42 referrals to services in Menard County between January 1, 2022, and December 31, 2022. They also reported 548 clients served during the same time.

Other community members offered their feedback on ECEC programs in the Region.

- “Our school is seeing some issues with the financial distribution of funds due to the grants we receive. We, unfortunately, do not currently have a Parent Educator due to this issue; therefore, we cannot see the funds needed to do family engagement events for families or to follow through with additional grant stipulations such as home visits for all our Preschool for All students.” - Preschool for All Educator (Sangamon County)
- “Instead of marketing our quality initiatives like ExceleRate Illinois, where we literally showcase the highest quality programs who have ZERO openings and four-year waiting lists, perhaps we should shift our focus to growing our own providers to meet the needs of parents, especially in rural communities.” - Child Care Resource and Referral Staff (Sangamon and Menard Counties)

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

Community partners discussed additional training opportunities available in the Region.

The Capital Area Career Center, which provides technical and vocational training for both high school students and adults, has an Early Childhood program that serves children ages three to five. Students pursuing an Early Childhood Education certification observe the program to gain experience. The Center serves 1,050 students and 22 out of the 23 high schools in the Region, as well as home school students. While enrolled, they can participate in paid internships (although only one licensed child care center is currently participating) and upon graduation, they have attained their Level 1 Early Childhood Credential.

There are currently 41 high school students enrolled in their program, but their capacity is 50. They are unable to be at full capacity because they do not have enough preschool students to observe (although they are considering how to open enrollment to more children). The program currently serves six children in the morning and ten in the afternoon; care is limited to one hour and forty-five minutes. The program reports that only 5% of the high school students in the Early Childhood Department go on to the Early Childhood Field.

Early Childhood Education college programs also face challenges in supporting students while they pursue their degree.

- “Many of the Early Childhood classes that we offer are during the evening, but children under the age of 16 are not allowed on campus, and the Child Care Development program on campus is not open in the evening, which is a barrier we hear from our students. This is

why we are trying to develop more online and hybrid options going forward.” - Higher Education Navigator (Sangamon County)

While program and center owners and Directors try to support staff in their professional development, they face challenges in doing so.

- “To help our children and families, I pull the school resources and have as many trainings for our staff as possible [about children with disabilities and/or developmental delays] but it is very difficult due to the lack of funding. Our program has children who are on a waitlist to be diagnosed with autism. We are also aware that even after receiving an autism diagnosis, there is another year-long waitlist to receive the one-on-one services in a specialized therapy program.” - Early Childhood Director (Sangamon County)

Additional Community Feedback

Community partners reported on additions they have made to their programs since the publication of our initial report.

- Child and Family Connections (CFC) #18 reported that Central Counties Health Centers has a new Behavioral Health Department Program with three Licensed Clinical Social Workers (LCSWs). This Center offers free to low-cost care to the community.
- Healthy Families, in conjunction with Early Intervention (EI) and Sangamon Public Health, is working to get Doulas for their program.
- Compass for Kids’ mission is to provide academic and social-emotional support to empower children and families underserved by our community. They offer regular programming for children and youth enrolled in Springfield Public Schools District #186, aimed at developing social-emotional learning and preparing them as community leaders. There is also a free summer learning program designed to reduce the achievement and opportunity gaps that often exist for children who have little to no access to economic resources. Children are referred to the program by other non-profits, DCFS, and are led in collaboration with local churches, who support transportation from the program to the child’s home.

One community member voiced concerns about families being able to access medical care in a timely manner.

- “We are in a time where we have more sick children due to suppressed immune systems which is causing a waitlist for appointments. This means families are utilizing prompt care facilities and emergency rooms and are not able to see a consistent pediatrician.” - School Board President (Sangamon County)

Additional Regional Recommendations

There were additional recommendations made by community members.

Locally:

- Fund mental health social workers in each school district.
- Additional funding for more Early Childhood Navigators to recruit professionals to the Early Childhood field.
- Establish an Early Childhood Community Collaboration for Menard County.
- Establish a child care facility in the town of Pleasant Plains.

At the state level:

- Increase funding statewide for education (and make it permanent) and capital funding for child care centers.
- Create a statewide publicity campaign to raise awareness about EI services.
- Ensure all high school age students are aware of the vocational training, certification, and licensing opportunities and careers outside of college to address the shortage of professionals across fields, including Early Childhood.
- Ensure all Early Childhood professionals have access to trauma-informed care so they can support their own mental well-being.

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.