



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment **ADDENDUM**

Region 53

(Mason, Tazewell, & Woodford 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 offered their perspective on local community collaborations during dissemination.

- “Funding is siloed which discourages the sharing of information, resources, and collaboration.” - Community Member (Tazewell County)

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

According to information from the SAL Child Care Connection of Peoria County, the Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) state system administrator, the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS), and Code of America are partners in bringing about some great advances for families and providers in accessing the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). This is a first-of-its-kind, statewide product that will deliver a mobile-friendly, multilingual, online portal that simplifies access. The portal will be available in English and Spanish, and the hope is that application submission for families and caregivers can be accomplished in under 20 minutes. This portal will also improve the application process for child care providers seeking to participate in the program, leading more providers to offer CCAP-funded slots and improving the matchmaking process between caregivers and providers.

Slot Gap

During discussions with community members, it was noted that Early Intervention and child care centers and homes were most in need of additional slots. Additionally, the city of Pekin has a large number of children in need of publicly funded preschool programs.

The Mayor of Havana and Chamber of Commerce members stated that they had multiple people looking for space to open or build child care centers but were unaware of any resources available to help offset the cost for building, remodeling, or opening a center. They noted that they could help those interested find space but could not assist beyond that. Also discussed was the lack of awareness of where to find information about opening a licensed center or home and the need for information to be shared with city offices to help disperse the information to interested parties.

Families, caregivers, and other community members offered additional stories and information:

- “I have two children and the child care I preferred only had space for one, so my children go to two different child care centers. There was space in a half-day program, but there was no child care provided, so that didn’t help.” - Parent/Caregiver (Tazewell County)
- “Experiencing reduced slots year after year. Closed programs, closed classrooms due to operating well below licensed capacity due to staffing and funding to operate a child care program and pay competitive wages and benefits.” - Community Member (Tazewell County)
- “The Mason District Hospital is experiencing a staff shortage due to families not having access to reliable child care.” - Community Member (Mason County)

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

The COVID-19 pandemic certainly had an impact on the Early Childhood (EC) workforce, but one community member noted that specific health-related mandates had a particular impact in some cases. They noted that one publicly funded program in the Region lost 26 staff that were unwilling to follow the COVID-19 vaccine mandate. Additionally, COVID-19 had a significant impact on young children, as staff who lacked their own supports were unable to support the children in their care. This, in turn, led to ongoing burnout among EC professionals.

Another community member noted that not having adequate (or any) mental health support for both providers and children has also led to burnout.

One community member suggested developing apprenticeship programs to help boost the number of available workers. Currently, the requirement of a bachelor's degree is a barrier for entry into the workforce for many.

Some EC professionals also discussed the hiring and retention of staff, saying that it has been easier to retain staff who are older in age than those who are younger in age.

- “The job market has shifted significantly and there are many, many more job opportunities that have higher or comparable wages as a child care teacher and which do not require a degree and/or experience. Lack of benefits and lack of overall support for the field is tough for retention.” - Community member (Tazewell County)

EC professionals provided the following feedback about their program.

- “Our program allows us to have time with each other outside of the building. We go on outings that really bring us together as a team. We don't pay a dime for it. It has been a great self-care tool.”
- “Keeping our staff trained, and all at the same level, has been a nightmare due to turnover.” - Early Childhood Professional (Tazewell County)
- “Our program waited a year trying to find a part-time staff member; the position requires a bachelor's degree. It's hard to find someone to fill a part-time position, let alone one that requires higher ed. Everyone had to take on the families that were served by the teacher who had left.” - Early Childhood Professional (Tazewell County)
- “We have had potential staff wait over three weeks for background checks, who is going to wait that long? They end up finding a different job, sometimes in the school district, where background checks are done in like 45 minutes.” - Child Care Center Director (Tazewell County)

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

Several parents and caregivers discussed additional challenges and barriers to accessing child care or services in their community. Families noted the need for more accessible child development screening and awareness, readily available mental health resources, and corporate-sponsored child care options. Some said they are experiencing long wait times for mental health services or being denied these services due to being on state health insurance; providers, in turn, have expressed frustration over the time it takes the state to pay.

Parents and caregivers also talked about the need for translation services beyond the classroom setting. Families also need translators for education/leadership and screenings.

Some community members said they would like to see more physical spaces open for indoor play and more openings in summer programs to meet the needs of their families.

Lastly, they said it would be beneficial to have one “go-to” person in each county who is able to refer families to all the resources they may need. Ideally, this would be a person who families would visit anyway, such as a pediatrician.

Some parents and caregivers provided the following feedback:

- “Support groups and even play groups would be really nice to have in our area.” - Parent/Caregiver (Woodford County)
- “Bring parents in and include them, paying special attention to fathers and male caregivers, it could be as easy as them coming to read or in leadership roles like running parent groups.” - Parent/Caregiver (Tazewell County)
- “It would be a lot easier for me to participate in things like this if child care and food were provided. I am already struggling with time. Sure, I am free in the evenings, but I am cooking dinner, taking care of my kids, and prepping for the next day.” - Parent/Caregiver (Tazewell County)

Additional Regional Needs

Families need meaningful engagement, with EC professionals and providers meeting them where they are and showing families how important they are in the process through inclusion in planning and preparation.

Additional Regional Needs

Families pursuing Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) benefits, such as care and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), should be provided with a list of Early Childhood resources and be signed up for CCAP.

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.