



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment **ADDENDUM**

Region 9

(Champaign & Ford 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.

Regional Community Landscape

The Regional Community Landscape section discusses demographic data from across the Region and data that is specific to the State's identified priority populations. Some community members gave feedback on the data presented in this section.

- “Looking at the number of children in families that face barriers based on culture, language, and religion. Just from my experience [with] in-home visiting I am concerned that this may not be the most accurate reflection of the number of families within our Region. I think it will take creative and inclusive approaches to engage these families. In

our experience, families are often private and fearful to engage due to immigration status, etc.”

- “Priority population groups in the Region who may experience underrepresentation could be marginalized groups such as asylum seekers. Due to the complexities of their situation, they could be faced with other penalties when seeking support. Other groups include those from low-income communities, rural communities (as we see many deficiencies in Ford County), gender minorities, disabled and intellectually challenged individuals, teen parents, and those faced with language barriers. Historical biases, systemic discrimination, lack of access, and lack of a diverse perspective in decision-making processes are all contributing factors to underrepresentation.”
- “Representation is complex and multifaceted. Groups that could potentially be missing are refugees, LGBTQ+ communities of color, people with disabilities, and religious minorities.”
- “The figure for language and culture surprises me and honestly concerns me because I do fear it is not accurate.”

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

One community member noted that one gap that is missing from the "care" of families is whether their material needs are being met, such as clothing, diapers, car seats, etc.

Another community member said, “The lack of programs and centers to accommodate the children in our communities is very concerning. This means a lot of children are missing a critical foundation in their education and social development.”

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

Community members had the most feedback on the information from the ECEC workforce section of the report.

- “A truly representative center would reflect the diversity of the community being served. It should include educators and staff from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, diversity in language, socioeconomics, and gender. I also believe there should be generational diversity and openness to exploring various family structures among staff, including staff with physical disabilities and capable of managing the workload. The workforce should seek to offer both employment and volunteering opportunities to its families but also extend to partnering with public schools and other educational institutions. There should always be constant professional development teaching the necessary skills to engage with children and families. The workforce should promote a sense of belonging and self-worth, while also practicing empathy, understanding, and open-mindedness to diverse experiences and perspectives.”
- “A truly representative ECEC workforce would involve people that are better trained to serve those with disabilities and children from various cultures. I think that proper training and experiences are more important than their ethnicities for making ECEC employees representative and supportive.”

- “I am baffled at the lack of gender diversity, cultural competence, and representation of Black and Latine and would hope to see more incentives for future, non-traditional educators in ECE.”

Some of the feedback collected from community members affirmed findings from the Region 9 Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment and provided additional information on the challenges Early Childhood professionals face in the field.

- “The salaries and percentage of staff receiving benefits is a surprise and concern.”
- “Educators are staying because of the passion; however, the cost of living adjustment (COLA) is forcing many out! The turnover in staff has impacted and disrupted the relationships and bonds once established. Having a child with emotional attachment and separation issues, it was emotionally challenging adjusting to new staff. Further, as a parent, my concerns about staff turnover left me wondering "why" and if this program is stable. My confidence and trust in the program decreased and staff morale seemed to reduce.”
- “But overall, teaching staff are leaving the field of ECEC because of low wages. These are the people we trust with our children when parents have to work and, as parents, we expect [our children] to receive excellent care and education. In order to accomplish that, you need genuine and caring individuals to run the programs while also being able to earn a living.”
- “ECEC professionals are leaving due to low pay and high workload, lack of benefits and professional development, and limited autonomy, appreciation, and support.”

Additional Community Feedback

One community member noted that there is only a small number of formal local community collaborators and few numbers of prevention initiative programs to serve the great number of families who need the service (with no prevention initiative program in Ford County). Additionally, substitute providers (such as foster parents) find it difficult to enroll the children in care programs, visit healthcare providers, and receive any types of support.

Another community member said, “Great resources to address those that may fall through the cracks are partnerships with local nonprofits and governmental agencies, academic institutions, DEI [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion] advocacy groups, cultural centers and spaces, and community organizers.”

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.