



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

Region 13

(Clinton, Jefferson, Marion & Washington Counties)





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Region 13 Executive Summary

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 decision-makers 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 decision-makers 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.

An Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment was created to present publicly available quantitative data and qualitative data from caregivers, ECEC professionals, and other community stakeholders collected through Action Council and Family Council meetings, focus groups, interviews, community meetings, and surveys. Throughout the process, regional barriers were documented, and recommendations were developed based on identified needs of families. This Executive Summary provides an overview of key findings from the development of the Region 13 Needs Assessment, which includes recommendations developed by our Action and Family Councils. Additional findings, analysis, and recommendations can be found in the full report.

Key Findings

In Region 13, one common thread from many discussions with ECEC providers is that we are in the midst of a workforce crisis that is directly affecting almost every ECEC program in the Region. Many of the ECEC programs and centers in this Region have discussed that they barely have enough staff to stay open, which often makes it difficult to provide high-quality experiences for the children and families that they serve. Programs and centers are having a difficult time filling open positions, which has led to closures of classrooms and centers. Addressing the workforce crisis is a necessary first step in making broader changes to the ECEC landscape of this Region.

Region 13 has many ECEC programs available to families, including a very strong Preschool For All presence with 31 sites across four counties. However, many families are struggling with access to those programs. While there are a few full-day preschool classrooms in select areas, the majority of preschool classrooms in Region 13 are half-day. Many of our programs also are unable to provide transportation to and from preschool to the child's home or child care location. Half-day programs and a lack of transportation have created a barrier for working families and/or families with limited transportation.

Access to child care is also difficult for many families in Region 13. Sixty-eight percent of children in this Region are without a slot for licensed/licensed exempt child care. The majority of available child care options



are located in the higher populated areas, and options in rural areas are very limited. Many parents have been forced to make many sacrifices in their personal lives and careers due to the lack of quality child care options close to where they live and/or work.

Many providers, organizations, and community partners have shared that they are willing to work together at the local level to address some of the challenges and needs that have been identified in the ECEC landscape of this Region. True collaboration is already beginning to take shape in Region 13, which is the first step to creating lasting change for the families that live here.

Region 13 Needs

1. Additional slots for full day preschool programming including Preschool For All, Preschool For All-Expansion, or Head Start.
2. Expansion of birth to three Home Visiting services across all four counties in the Region.
3. Affordable and accessible child care throughout the Region, including evening and weekend care, to improve access for all families including those who work nontraditional hours.
4. High-quality family counseling and mental health services, including behavior support and services for children under age five in all four counties.
5. On-site mental health services and support for both students and staff, and professional development and training for teachers and staff on mental/behavioral health.
6. A family navigation system to ease the enrollment processes and to help families find appropriate programs and services.
7. Increased information sharing with families about programs and services that are currently available in this Region and/or under-utilized.
8. Increased wages and/or improved benefits for ECEC teachers and staff, for current staff in the field and to entice others to join the profession.
9. Improved longevity and reduced turnover in the current workforce.

Region 13 Recommendations

1. Support the ECEC workforce by expanding funding to improve wages and benefits and increasing pathways to certification and credentialing.
2. Expand access to current publicly funded programs through the addition of full-day classrooms, providing transportation for students, and expanding birth to three programs.
3. Expand licensed child care options across the Region, specifically for infant and toddler care, and explore ways to improve the affordability of child care for all families.
4. Continue funding the growth and development of the Regional Office of Education #13 Early Childhood Collaboration, to support its efforts to become a central navigation system for families and providers.
5. Improve access to high-quality mental health supports and services for parents, caregivers, children, and ECEC staff.

For more information or to learn how you can become involved with Birth to Five Illinois, please contact:

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REGION 13 SNAPSHOT INFOGRAPHIC

Using a Collective Impact Model, between September 2022 and June 2023, we led our Action and Family Councils through data discussions to identify gaps and needs for children and families.

We coordinated focus groups, interviews, and surveys to gather input from community members across the Region.



9,203

Children Under
the Age of 6
in Region 13



4,314

Children 0-5
at 200% Federal
Poverty Level



2,613

Children 0-5
Without Publicly
Funded ECEC Slots

68%

Percentage of children ages birth to five who are without a slot in license and license-exempt child care centers and homes.

“Not having infant care up to this point has been a huge barrier. I get calls every day for infant care. We called every center within a 20 mile radius of the college and every single one was full with a waitlist for infants.”

- Community Member, Jefferson County

After identifying the most common and pressing Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) needs of their communities, Regional Councils made recommendations for how best to meet them.

REGION 13 NEEDS

1. A highly qualified and fully staffed workforce.
2. Improved access to preschool and Birth to Three programs.
3. Additional child care options for all families.
4. Information sharing and a family navigation system.
5. Family counseling and behavior support services.

REGION 13 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Expand access to current publicly funded programs with full-day classrooms, transportation, and Birth to Three programs.
2. Expand access to licensed child care for children ages birth to two.
3. Continue funding the Regional Office of Education #13 Early Childhood Collaboration to become a central navigation system.
4. Improve access to high-quality mental health supports/services.



"When I was transitioning from a babysitter to the day care options, I messaged around 15 places and they said they could put me on the waitlist which was a year and a half long."

- Parent, Jefferson County

Overview & Acknowledgements

Introduction

This Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment presents data on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) from multiple state and local sources throughout Illinois. It is a collaborative data report that relies on the expertise of entities that collect and analyze ECEC data, Birth to Five Illinois staff, Birth to Five Illinois Action Council and Family Council members, and a variety of cross-sector stakeholders in all 39 Regions across the State.

Through these Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments, Birth to Five Illinois seeks to amplify the voices of those who have historically been minoritized, marginalized, or not invited to the decision-making table. Each Regional Needs Assessment offers parents, families, caregivers, ECEC providers, and other community stakeholders a platform for sharing valuable insights about their experiences within their local ECEC system. Additionally, it provides local, regional, and state decision-makers with qualitative information about each Region, adding critical context to the quantitative data that is available.

This report will be used in a variety of ways.

First, each Region's Birth to Five Illinois Action and Family Councils will use it to identify gaps in data that is needed to best understand ECEC in their area. Birth to Five Illinois Council members and Regional Staff will also use this report as a basis for making recommendations on how to increase enrollment in, and access to, ECEC programs and services, as well as to determine what additional services/programs and resources may be needed to support families and caregivers throughout the Region.

Second, this report will be made available to parents and caregivers so they can have a fuller picture of what is happening in their community and Region. It is our hope that families will learn more about the available programs and services, share the resources with other caregivers with young children, become advocates for ECEC, and help to drive long-term, sustainable change in their communities.

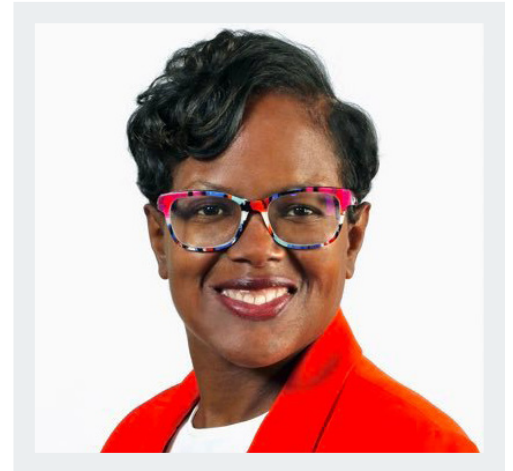
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand data related to ECEC indicators and direct funding to the under-resourced areas across the State based on the feedback received from ECEC system users.

Lastly, the report will be shared with local government bodies, early childhood providers, and organizations so they can use the findings to assess and demonstrate the need for services as funding opportunities become available. Additionally, the data can be used to identify where ECEC services may need to be expanded to support the caregivers and children in the Region.



Letter from State Leadership

In under two years, I have had the privilege of partnering with the State's ECEC community to build Birth to Five Illinois, an extension of decades of foundational efforts that led to the creation of this statewide community system. In true collective impact modeling, we set out to design a system that respects and builds on the work of numerous local organizations that are working hard (often underfunded) to support children, families, and providers' access to our State's confusing and hard-to-navigate ECEC system.



While our work is not perfect, it is genuine and ever-evolving, and I am proud of the effort our Team has made to bring the vision of this equity-focused infrastructure to life. Birth to Five Illinois, while still in the development stage, has made great gains in bringing community members together under one goal, to make Illinois “the best state in the nation for families raising young children”. Our Team has gone above and beyond to make meaningful community partnerships and create space for the prioritization of family voices. My extended gratitude goes to each of the 128 people who shared the vision, brought their passion, and have worked tirelessly every day to improve ECEC experiences for the children and families in their communities.

In collective impact, nothing is done alone. We have many champions to thank, including:

- The Governor, staff in the Governor's Office and the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development (GOECD), and the dedicated members of the Early Childhood Funding Commission for their early childhood visioning and dedication to racial equity.
- The Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) and Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) for their generous funding and commitment to building this community system with families and caregivers at the center.
- Illinois Network of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) for providing the institutional, technical, and organizational support needed to launch the Birth to Five Illinois department and infrastructure.
- Illinois Action for Children (IACF) and the Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM) for training and technical support. Many of the visualizations in this report were developed by staff from both organizations based on data they collected and analyzed on our behalf.

Most importantly, I would like to thank the hundreds of community members who signed up to serve on their Region's Action and Family Councils. It is their perspective and passion that have inspired us and made this report possible. Thank you to the countless parents who trusted their Council peers with vulnerable stories; providers who emanate passion for the children in their care; business owners offering creative solutions for the identified needs; elected officials who are fierce advocates; faith leaders who opened their doors for care and are now encouraging others to do the same; and various ECEC systems partners who offer families step-by-step support through the enrollments process, blending together the supports families need.

These Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments are a compilation of community members' experiences; not ours. We thank them for sharing and hope we have represented them well.

Cicely L. Fleming (she/her)
Director, Birth to Five Illinois

Letter from Regional Leadership

The development of this Regional Needs Assessment could not have been possible without the countless individuals and organizations who served as a voice for Region 13. We want to extend our sincerest thanks and appreciation to those who took the time to provide their insights and experiences to help define our Region and dream with us a vision for the future. We would like to thank the Birth to Five Illinois State Team for their leadership, guidance, and support throughout the entire process. Thank you for providing detailed information about current funding, services, and data for the Region and for inspiring us to capture the many voices in this community that tell the story of Region 13.

To our Action Council and Family Council, thank you for being attentive and engaged in our meetings and for giving us time in your busy schedules. The deep discussions we have had surrounding the data, as well as sharing personal and professional stories and information has provided valuable information about the early childhood landscape of this Region. You have identified the strengths and needs of the Region as a whole and individual communities within Region 13. Thank you for giving us your energy, voice, and passion in each Council meeting.

We also want to extend a sincere thank you to those individuals who took part in focus groups, interviews, surveys, and townhall meetings. Thank you to everyone who advocated for their programs and the families they serve and/or their own families, contributing insights about challenges, unmet needs, and barriers within our Region. Thank you to the caregivers who shared inspiring accounts of successes and struggles. Thank you for allowing us to capture many voices across the Region that provided a wealth of information and valuable insights that allowed us to deepen our understanding and discussions around many of the key topics throughout this Regional Needs Assessment.

Completion of this Needs Assessment was largely possible due to the support and collaboration of many community partners across all four counties in Region 13. While we cannot possibly individually thank every person who shared a story, experience, or information with us, we want to extend sincere gratitude to some key community partners who played a valuable role in this work. We would like to thank our local school districts and child care centers, our local chambers of commerce, the Regional Office of Education #13, Project Child, Child and Family Connections #22, Centralia Regional Library, the Breese Public Library, C.E. Brehm Mt. Memorial Public Library, Centralia Community Youth Association, Gateway Region YMCA, Hospital Sisters Health System, and Sisters of St. Mary Health. Thank you to the many other organizations and community partners that allowed us to set up tables, participate in events, and let us use spaces as a platform for various levels of networking to reach as many people as possible in our communities. It is through these community partners that we were able to connect and hear from so many families across our four counties in this Region.

To the families of Region 13, thank you so much for trusting us with your stories and experiences to make this work possible. It has been an amazing experience to watch the community support and collaboration unfold in front of us throughout this process. Thank you to all who made it possible.

Thank you,

Heather Pruetz (she/her)

Regional Council Manager: Region 13
Birth to Five Illinois



Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) in Illinois

ECEC in Illinois is made up of several programs, including publicly funded programs such as Head Start/ Early Head Start, Early Intervention, Early Childhood Special Education, home visiting, preschool, and center- and home-based child care. ECEC also exists within a larger system of services and supports for families, including pediatric health care, mental and behavioral health care, child welfare, and family-focused economic supports. When available, these services and supports can be confusing and difficult to navigate.

While programs and services for families and children exist across the state of Illinois, they are not accessed equitably. For example, families in rural areas oftentimes live in child care deserts and are forced to travel long distances to place their child in any program, regardless of its quality. Another example is families who speak a language other than English who may live in an area without programming in their home language, making it difficult to find educational options. A family that has little to no access to economic or material resources may live in a city with many programs but be unable to enroll their children due to the excessive cost of tuition and long waitlists for access to publicly funded slots.

Additionally, funding for ECEC has been siloed across multiple state agencies and has lacked a cohesive process for distributing funds to providers. Decentralized funding has led to unintended equity issues, leaving some areas of the State with nominal public funding for ECEC programming and others without enough funding to meet the demands of communities.



In 2019, Governor JB Pritzker declared, “Illinois will become the best state in the nation for families raising young children, with the nation’s best early childhood education and child care. My promise is this: our work won’t be complete until every child in this state enters kindergarten with the cognitive skills to think, learn, read, remember, pay attention, and solve problems, but also the social-emotional skills to communicate, connect with others, resolve conflict, self-regulate, display kindness and cope with challenges.”

To honor this commitment, the Governor’s Office formed the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding to study and make recommendations on funding that would provide more equitable access to high-quality ECEC services for all children ages birth to five. Work groups met throughout 2020 and published a report of findings and recommendations in March 2021.

The Commission made the following recommendations to address the racial, geographic, and economic inequities found in Illinois’ ECEC system:

1. Increase public investment to help better subsidize the cost families pay out of pocket.
2. Create a coordinated funding approach by centralizing state and federal funding and distribute funding in new, more targeted ways.
3. Provide a single source for information and funding for ECEC with designated regional structures to make the system easier for families and providers.

Following these recommendations, the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) established the Division of Early Childhood (DEC) to help centralize and streamline the State’s existing child care, home visiting, and Early Intervention programs.

Additionally, after the Commission report recognized, “community input and data can fuel distribution of funds more effectively and equitably” and urged for the creation of a community and regional infrastructure to ensure input from families and providers is included in the state level decision-making process, the State partnered with the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) to launch our equity-focused regional system. Named Birth to Five Illinois, the goal of this new infrastructure is to create a network of community Councils across the State tasked with identifying the service needs in each region.

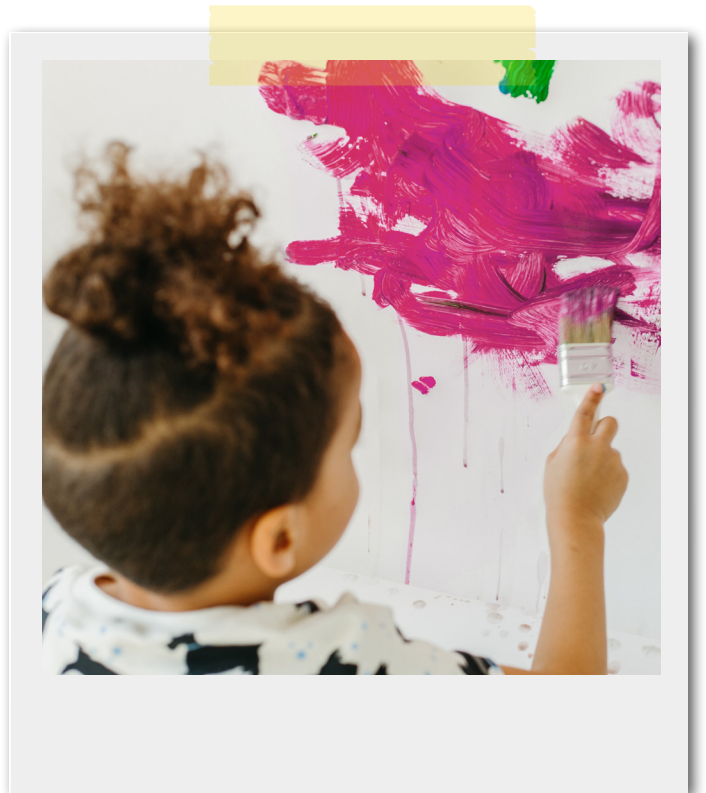
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early childhood services for all children and families in the state of Illinois.

Our **vision** is reimagining a more equitable ECEC system that respects family and community voice and works to ensure it is centered and prioritized at every level of decision-making in Illinois.

Our **values and goals** are:

- **Family Voice:** Through this transformation centered on authentic family and community engagement, we will address the inequitable distribution of resources and services and rebuild our State’s ECEC system.
- **Racial Equity:** In an effort to move our ECEC system to one where racism no longer impacts a child’s success, we will work to dismantle barriers that have limited access to high-quality services for minoritized children in every corner of our State.
- **Collective Impact:** Birth to Five Illinois will build a system that harnesses knowledge directly from families and providers and encourages decision-makers to ensure new and/or expanded services are created to meet community needs. This community-driven framework will directly influence policy/funding at the local, regional, and state level.

Staying true to our mission and vision, Birth to Five Illinois has standardized the use of pronouns to affirm all genders and has included a land acknowledgement in each Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments to honor the Indigenous Peoples who were forcibly removed from their land.

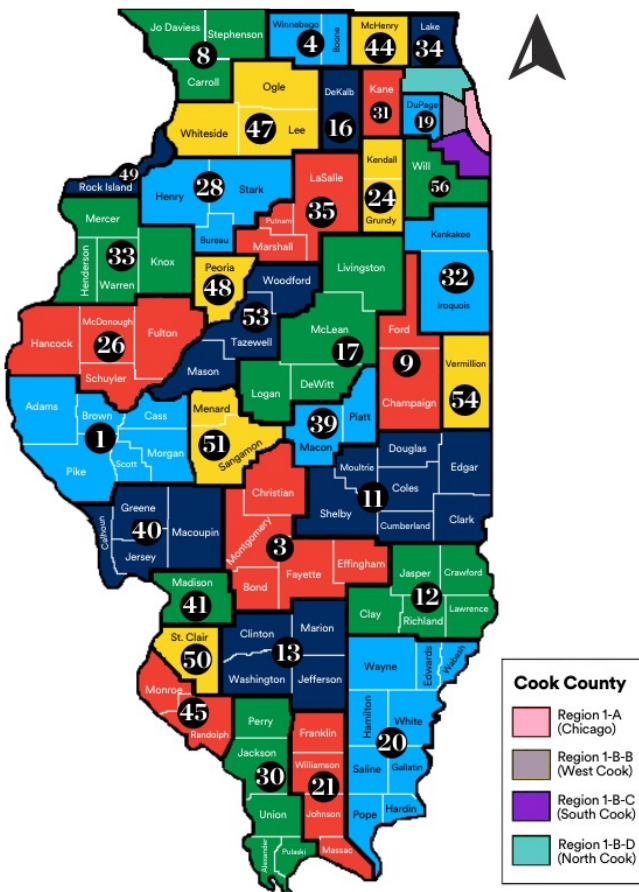


Timeline

- **March 2021**
Early Childhood Commission Report Published
- **September 2021**
Birth to Five Illinois Director, Cicely Fleming, Hired
- **February 2022**
Official Public Launch of Birth to Five Illinois
- **March 2022**
Held Regional Community Engagement Live Webinars
- **April 2022**
Established Partnerships with Existing Regional Early Childhood Collaborations
- **May – July 2022**
Hired 39 Regional Council Managers across the State
- **August – November 2022**
Hired Additional 78 Regional Support Staff
- **September 2022**
Awarded \$2.6 Million to 24 Implementation Grantees
- **October – November 2022**
Established 39 Birth to Five Illinois Action Councils
- **December 2022**
Established 39 Birth to Five Illinois Family Councils
- **January 2023**
Awarded \$575,000 to 9 Planning Grantees
- **January – April 2023**
Council Meetings & Ongoing Community Engagement (Focus Groups & Interviews)
- **June 2023**
39 Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments Released
- **July – August 2023**
Report Dissemination & Public Input



Birth to Five Illinois Regions



To provide a structure for communities, families, and caregivers to engage with the data and share their experiences, our new statewide infrastructure was created across 39 Regions. The Regions align with existing Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) Regional Offices of Education (ROE) boundaries. To better match demographic data to the needs for ECEC programs, Illinois Action for Children (IAFC), along with the Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM), provided maps that reflect the true boundaries of the Birth to Five Illinois Regions. Birth to Five Illinois regional boundaries align with school districts instead of strictly following county lines, which can be a challenge for gathering and interpreting data because many early childhood services are provided by, or tied to, school districts.

After the Regions were established and staffed, Birth to Five Illinois Action and Family Councils were created by Regional Selection Committees. To ensure diverse perspectives, outreach efforts focused on community members who might be new to this type of work. Action Councils are comprised of ECEC professionals, healthcare providers, faith leaders, elected officials, and other community members. Each Action Council reserved two seats for parents/caregivers to ensure

family voices were included in every discussion. Family Councils are comprised of parents/caregivers from a wide variety of family types: single parents, adoptive and foster parents, caregivers of relatives, underage parents, two parent families, multi-generational families, and more. Each Regional Selection Committee reviewed Interest Forms, and recommendations were made based on a full consideration of a submitter's role/sector, location within the Region, race/ethnicity, gender, and answers to open-ended questions.

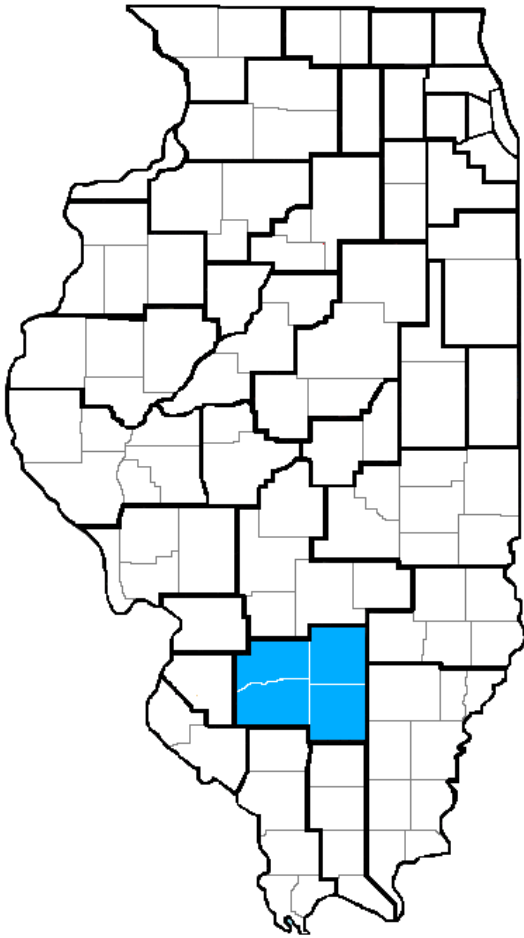
Regional Needs Assessment Methodology

Regionally based demographic, programmatic, and service provider data from IECAM and workforce data from INCCRRA were presented to Action and Family Council members during meetings and is included in the following section. The data comes from both IECAM (2020-2021) and INCCRRA (2021), unless otherwise noted. Some Regions included additional data collected during Community Based Planning or from state and/or local organizations and agencies. Action Council members were invited to bring additional aggregated data on programs and services provided by their agency/organization to complement IECAM data, while Family Council members brought their stories and experiences with the ECEC system to help contextualize quantitative data presented and discussed during meetings.

Additional qualitative data was collected community-wide through focus groups and interviews, and all Council members were invited to provide input on their Region's report. Council members developed the strengths, needs, and recommended next steps that are unique to each Region. Regional Teams, along with the support of their Action and Family Council members, created a dissemination plan and are holding community meetings virtually and in-person to share their report's findings. Throughout the fall of 2023, Regional Teams will lead their Councils through implementation planning based on the recommendations made in their report.

Spotlight on Region 13

Regional Community Landscape



Regional Boundaries

Region 13 is comprised of Clinton, Jefferson, Marion, and Washington Counties in the central part of southern Illinois. The communities that make up this Region are approximately 45-60 minutes east of St. Louis. Region 13 is made up of many small rural farming communities and small towns. Mt. Vernon, in Jefferson County, has the largest population with approximately 14,600 people living there. The next largest population is Centralia, in Marion County, with just over 12,000 people living there. From there the population decreases dramatically across the Region into many small townships, towns, and villages.

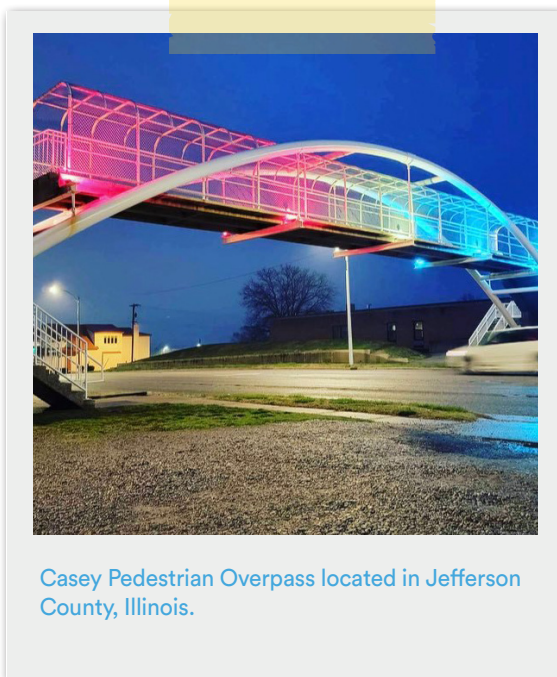
Many of the communities would consider themselves to be family-oriented and lacking in racial diversity. Some areas in Region 13 have limited access to economic resources and are considered at risk for issues with housing, substance use, parental employment, high instances of preterm births, and exposure to violence. Many of these same areas also have limited access to home visiting programs.

Many of the job opportunities across Region 13 are in the agriculture industry, healthcare industry, factory-based work, or in the education system. The community has reported that many families with work shifts which make it difficult to find child care that aligns with their schedule. The Region is home to two healthcare systems: Hospital Sisters Health System (HSBS) and Sisters of St. Mary Health (SSM), which provide employment opportunities for many people in our communities. The Region is also home to 60 different schools across four counties, including both public and private schools.

Across the Region are tight-knit communities where family, friends, and neighbors are often utilized for care, as a support system, and when looking for referrals for goods and services. It is not uncommon to see people eager to assist others on social media sites and through community-based organizations.

Land Acknowledgement¹

Region 13 acknowledges that the four counties are the traditional homelands of the ᏍᏌᏍᏌ ᏊᏊᏊᏊ ᏍᏍᏍᏍ ᏆᏆᏆᏆ (Osage), Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Sioux), Kiiikaapoi (Kickapoo), Kaskaskia, and Myaamia (Miami) Nations. We acknowledge the historic and ongoing injustices experienced by Indigenous communities and honor all the Native Peoples who came before us and continue to contribute to our community.



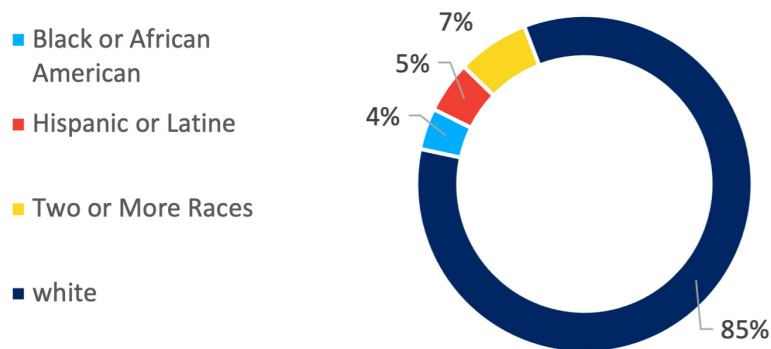
Casey Pedestrian Overpass located in Jefferson County, Illinois.

¹Based on information provided at <https://native-land.ca>

Regional Demographics

The total reported population for Region 13 is 126,814. Our Region has 9,203 children under the age of five, 4,602 children are birth to age two and 4,601 children are aged three to five. Figure 1 displays the breakdown of race and ethnicity data for children under age five in the Region. Region 13 is predominately white, with the percentage of those who self-identify as Black or African American, Hispanic or Latine, and two or races making up 16% of the total population in the Region.

Figure 1: Children Under 5 by Race and Ethnicity²



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Children in Priority Populations

State-funded ECEC programs have systems and eligibility guidelines in place to identify and enroll priority populations. The Early Learning Council (ELC) identified groups across the State as priority populations, defined as a population with limited to no access to economic or material resources that does not receive equitable resources compared to other students in the academic pipeline, and does not have adequate access to Early Childhood programs due to the programs' location, cost, enrollment requirements, or capacity to serve the comprehensive needs of families.³ While the priority populations list addresses the access issue, Birth to Five Illinois strives to focus the attention of policymakers and Early Childhood stakeholders on identifying ways to engage these impacted communities to remove the systemic barriers causing the access issue within each Region. Identifying the priority populations in the Region is a critical step to improve and expand access to high-quality programs in a way to ensure that resources and attention are driven toward families experiencing systemic barriers.

Priority populations that have been identified in Region 13 include, but are not limited to, children of migrant or seasonal workers, children and families living on poverty-level income, children experiencing homelessness, children and families with Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) involvement, children with disabilities, and children in families with low caregiver education attainment. Quantitative data on these priority populations is limited; however, qualitative data has been obtained and is shared throughout the report.

² Some Census race/ethnicity categories not reported due to small number of respondents, shown in parenthesis: American Indian or Alaska Native (4), Asian (6), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (0), Some other Race (5).

³ <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/earlylearningcouncil/access/documents/priority-populations-updated-2021.pdf>

It was reported in the 2020 Census that 190 households in the Region spoke Spanish or a language other than English. ECEC providers in communities throughout the Region provided feedback that the numbers of households speaking a language other than English may be larger than what the data reports. Discussions with the community suggest that there is a growing migrant population in our area, but there are few services in place to serve those families and they remain underrepresented in available data. It is important to recognize that underrepresented and undercounted populations may be present in the Region to ensure that ECEC program and service providers are prepared linguistically and culturally to meet the needs of the changing needs of communities throughout the Region.

Data shows that most children in households in the Region have at least one working parent or caregiver (Figure 2). However, there are families in each of our four counties with no working parents. According to the Erikson Institute’s 2019 Risk and Reach Report⁴, Jefferson County has the highest number of children ages birth to five who live in households with no working parents/caregivers. With rising costs for child care and housing across all four counties of the Region, while many households have at least one source of income, it cannot be assumed that they are not living on poverty-level income.

Figure 2: Children Under 5 with All Parents Working



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) is a measure of income level created by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that calculates the minimum amount of money needed by a family to cover their basic household needs, such as food, housing, utilities, and other necessities. In many cases, it is used to determine eligibility for programs and services. Someone living at or below 50% FPL is considered to be “living in deep poverty”; someone living at or below 100% FPL is considered to be living at “the poverty line” (Figure 3).

“It was a lot of money to have our children in child care. To put my son in child care I would have been just working to pay for child care.”
- Community Member (Marion County)

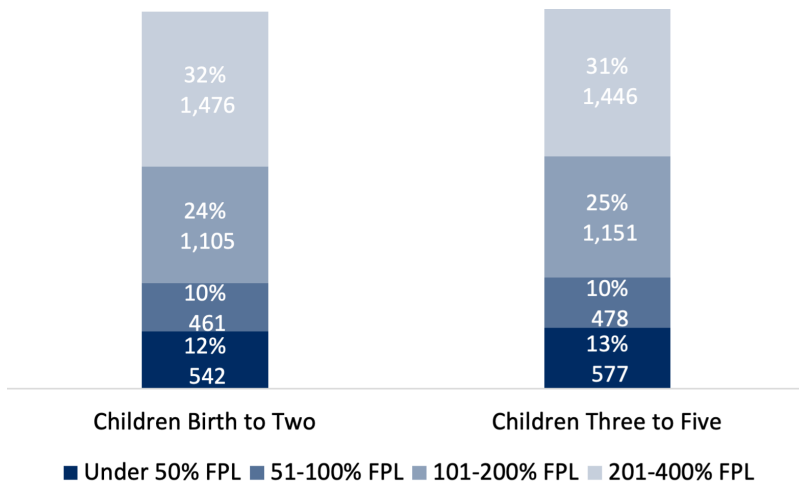
Figure 3: Federal Poverty Guidelines at 50%, 100%, 200% for a Family of Four

	50% FPL	100% FPL	200% FPL
Family of 4	\$13,100	\$26,200	\$51,500

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

⁴<https://riskandreach.erikson.edu>

Figure 4: Children Under 6 by Age by Federal Poverty Level



Source: IECAM

Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Figure 4 shows the breakdown of children in the Region under the age of six by FPL. Approximately 47% of children ages 0-5 in the Region were reported to be living at or below 200% FPL. While these percentages reflect the Region as a whole, there are families in each of the four counties living in what is considered “deep poverty” at 50% FPL (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Number of Children at or Below 50%, 100%, 200% FPL by County

County	Number Of Children Birth to Five at or Below 50% FPL	Number Of Children Birth to Five at Or Below 100% FPL	Number Of Children Birth to Five at Or Below 200% FPL
Clinton	55	155	743
Jefferson	500	965	1700
Marion	530	890	1723
Washington	37	60	189

Source: IECAM

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

While Clinton and Washington Counties both reported significantly lower populations of families living in deep poverty, the numbers of Kindergarten students in families experiencing homelessness in those counties, as well as Marion County, are at a level that is considered to be high to moderate risk, according to the Erikson Institute’s Risk and Reach Report. The high to moderate risk range indicates that 3-6% of Kindergarten students across the County were reported as homeless per the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. Jefferson County had a slightly higher percentage of Kindergarten students in families experiencing homelessness, a level that is considered high risk at a range of 5.64-15.23%.

Figure 6: Number, Percentage of Kindergarteners Experiencing Homelessness by County

County	Number Of Kindergarten Students Experiencing Homelessness	Percentage Of Kindergarten Experiencing Homelessness	Risk Level
Clinton	13	4%	High-Moderate
Jefferson	30	7%	High
Marion	27	6%	High-Moderate
Washington	7	5%	High-Moderate

Source: Erikson Institute
Created by: Erikson Institute

It is important to understand the demographic make-up of the Region before recommendations are made so that stakeholders are able identify what the specific needs of the Region are to ensure that the proper supports and services in place effectively meet the needs of the families who live here.

Local Community Collaborations

A Local Early Childhood Collaboration can be defined as a formal partnership between several community-based organizations serving children and families within a defined geographic area. A Collaboration takes a cross-sector approach with representatives across the broad Early Childhood system. Currently, there is not a formalized Early Childhood Community Collaboration in Region 13. However, there are several groups that meet monthly throughout the year to provide services and resources for the families in this area. These groups can serve as a community-based network for families and businesses to work together toward a common good.

When a problem is presented, the community will often come together to help by whatever means they can, which can be as simple as helping a family find furnishings for their home or clothing for their children. There are also many faith-based service groups who will coordinate efforts to support families in the Region.



An adult holding a child in the arms.

“

Searching on Google you never know when something is a reliable source. Facebook is the best source that I found when asking these questions. There are moms that have been through a lot of these situations and willing to divulge that information to help others.

- Parent (Marion County)

”

“

We have a better understanding of our community and know that it requires us to work together, know where the resources are, and know the people. We are more community-based, and that helps a lot to make people feel more comfortable and feel like they trust where they're at.

- Community Member (Marion County)

”

Referrals for Early Childhood services in this Region often happen through word of mouth and by making connections on social media, and recommendations for providers often come from family members, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. It is important to note that while the Region currently does not have a formal Local Community Collaboration, there are many informal collaborations that occur every day.

There is one group that is beginning to establish itself as a formal Early Childhood Collaboration in this Region. While in early phases of development, the Regional Office of Education #13 Early Childhood Collaboration serving Clinton, Jefferson, Washington, and Marion Counties, will serve as a Coordinated Intake and family navigation system for the entire Region. This Coordinated Intake is a process that will serve as a point of entry into many different programs in the Region. Once a child is screened, they can then be referred for enrollment into whatever program(s) will best meet their needs, which could eliminate barriers for parents, families, and caregivers who are attempting to navigate the ECEC programs and services in this Region. This Collaboration will be a much-needed addition and valuable resource for families in all four counties.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

Region 13 is home to several different ECEC programs that serve children from birth to age five in various capacities. These programs include publicly funded programs and programs in the private sector.

Figure 7: Number of Sites by Publicly Funded Program Type

Program Name	Number of Sites	Ages Served
Early Head Start	2	Birth to Two
Head Start	4	Three to Five
Prevention Initiative	1	Birth to Three
Preschool for All	31	Three to Four
Preschool for All Expansion	1	Three to Four

Source: IECAM

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Preschool For All (PFA)/Preschool For All Expansion (PFA-E)

PFA programs are the most prevalent program for three- to five-year-old children across the Region, with 31 sites across all four counties (Figure 7). PFA and PFA-E programs are funded through the Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) through the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). Twenty-six of the 31 PFA sites operate through the Regional Office of Education (ROE), while the rest are housed in individual school districts. The school districts that host these programs are: Breese District #12, Wesclin CUSD #3, St. Rose School District #14-15, and Germantown School District #60 all in Clinton County; and Dr. Andy Hall Early Childhood Center District #80 in Jefferson County. Most preschool programs in Region 13 are half day programs. However, there are a few full day programs in select areas. There is currently only one site, Dr. Andy Hall Early Childhood Center District #80 in Jefferson County, in all four counties that offers a PFA-E program. Many of the PFA programs that exist in the Region are unable to provide transportation for the students. Without additional funding through ECBG, transportation will continue to be an issue, as many districts do not have the means to absorb the cost and staffing issues associated with transporting additional students.

“

The problem with transportation is that my child is missing preschool because we don't have any options to transport him there and back. No one can commit to transporting him every day and there isn't a bus offered from his child care location. I am disappointed for my child and feel like I'm not able to provide something he needs because of my job.

- Parent (Jefferson County)

”

Head Start

There are also four Head Start sites in Region 13 that serve eligible children aged three to five. Head Start is a federally funded program aiming to improve the school readiness skills of preschool children in priority populations by enhancing their cognitive, social, and emotional development. This program prioritizes services to children in income-eligible families, children in foster care, children and families experiencing homelessness, and children with disabilities. In Region 13, Head Start programs have the capacity to serve 484 children across all four counties. There are half-day and full-day center-based options available, as well as a weekly home visiting program with included socialization opportunities and extensive family and community engagement opportunities. Center-based sites operate in Breese, Salem, Centralia, and Mt. Vernon. Transportation is available for students enrolled in the center-based programs.

Prevention Initiative/Early Head Start/IDHS Home Visiting

Publicly funded services for children birth to age three are extremely limited in this Region. BCMW Community Services offers Early Head Start services for Clinton, and Marion Counties and there is one Prevention Initiative program serving Jefferson County. Prevention Initiative (PI) is funded through ISBE's ECBG and is designed to provide intensive and comprehensive child development and family support services for expectant parents and families with children from birth to age three. Eligibility for this program is based on weighted criteria including, but not limited to, income, homelessness, child welfare involvement, currently receipt of Early Intervention services, and diagnosed developmental delays. Similarly, Early Head Start is a federally funded program designed to support expectant parents and families with children from birth to age three. Early Head Start uses the same eligibility criteria for enrolling children and families as the Head Start model, prioritizing income-eligible families, and priority populations. There are over 2,000 children in this age group who could qualify for these programs and the Region only has the capacity to serve a small percentage of those children.

The Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) home visiting programs includes the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV) and state-funded home visiting. These programs support expectant parents and families with children from birth to age five who live in communities with numerous barriers to access. Publicly funded home visiting and parent/caregiver education for the birth to three-year-old population are services that are under-utilized but greatly needed in this Region.

“ I loved the Parents as Teachers program that I previously worked in. We had an underage mom program. We would go to their houses. There was a curriculum that we would follow. It was a great program. It was wonderful to teach parents that they could be a part of their child’s learning and the children really excelled. I’m sad to see that it’s not around here anymore. ”

- Community Member (Marion County)

Figure 8: Child Care Sites and Capacity by License Type

Program Name	Number of Sites	Capacity
Licensed Child Care Center	26	1,871
Licensed Family Child Care Home	63	679
License-Exempt Child Care Center	11	350

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Child Care

Child care is even more difficult to access in Region 13. There are 26 licensed child care centers throughout Marion County, Jefferson County, and Clinton County, while there are none in Washington County (Figure 8). Seventeen of these 26 centers accept the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), which is funded by IDHS to assist income-eligible families with child care payments through the Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (CCR&Rs). Many of the licensed child care sites indicate that they have an extensive waiting list, especially for infants and toddlers. There are 63 licensed family child care homes throughout the Region, and 27 of those homes accept CCAP. Many of the licensed family child care homes in the Region are also full and with a waitlist. There are also 11 license-exempt centers in Region 13, four of which accept the CCAP. Due to the difficulty in accessing licensed child care, many families in this Region rely on Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) Care or other license-exempt care options. There are 70 license-exempt family child care homes that accept CCAP. FFN Care providers can also offer the off hour, wrap around care that many families in this Region desperately need.

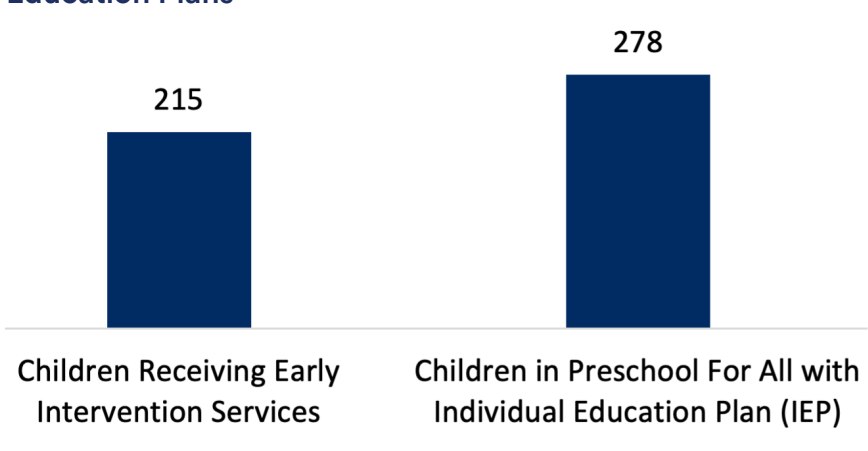
“ Many of our families who get help paying for their child care do not select a licensed home or center. They are using a family, friend, neighbor, or relative because they have odd-hour care, have infants, or there are no slots available. ”

- Community Member
(Jefferson County)

Early Intervention (EI)/Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)

EI in Region 13 is provided through Child and Family Connections #22. Children under the age of three can be referred for EI services from a variety of sources, including the parents or caregivers themselves. Whenever a concern is noted about a child’s development, a referral to EI can be made. Once a child is enrolled, EI providers will work with the family to set up all appropriate services at a time and location that works for the family. EI services include, but are not limited to, developmental evaluations and assessments, physical therapy, occupational therapy, developmental therapy, and speech/language therapy.

Figure 9: Number of Children Receiving Early Intervention Services and Children with Individual Education Plans



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

In 2020, 215 children were enrolled in EI, while 278 preschool age children were receiving services through an Individualized Education Plan (Figure 9). When a child is over the age of three, a referral for ECSE services can be made through their local school district or directly with the local special education districts. Kaskaskia Special Education District serves Clinton, Marion, and Washington Counties while the Franklin and Jefferson Special Education District serves Jefferson County.

There are many factors that influence a family's decision when choosing ECEC programs and services. Conversations with families in the Region have identified a few common threads when choosing care for their children, including but not limited to quality, cost, location, values, availability, love, and trust. Many families are currently willing to make sacrifices in their personal lives to ensure that their children are in a safe and welcoming environment.



Birth to Five Illinois: Region 13 Team: Heather Pruett (left), Brittany Lemons (middle), and Jessica Chin (right).

“ I had concerns, I just made a Facebook post asking if anyone had any suggestions and luckily many people have been through the Early Intervention programs and told me to call to make an appointment. The issue I would like to see get fixed is Early Intervention education for pediatricians, so they can encourage these referrals. ”

- Parent (Marion County)

“ The most important thing for me is quality of care, knowing that my kids are well taken care of. I've had two kids at different times in child care centers and I have actually been willing to pay more and drive farther for a center where I knew they had higher accreditations and better-qualified teachers. ”

- Parent (Marion County)

Slot Gap

A slot gap exists when there are more children eligible for enrollment in ECEC programs than actual available spots in those programs. A slot gap is a comparison of how many children are eligible for a program versus the capacity of children a program can serve. This number can be used to identify which programs and services would benefit from expansion across the Region. While a good quantitative indicator, it does not account for families/caregivers who chose not to enroll their children into an ECEC program, even if a space were available.

Figure 10: Child Care Capacity Slot Gap



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

There is a significant gap for child care in Region 13, with over two thirds of the children birth to age five without a slot (Figure 10). In 2020, child care programs in the Region had the capacity to serve 2,900 children ages birth to five: 1,871 children in licensed child care centers, 679 children in licensed family child care homes, and 350 children in license-exempt child care centers. Many licensed child care centers and licensed family child care homes have indicated that they have an extensive waitlist for children aged five and under.

The parents and caregivers of over 6,000 children have had to find alternative care for their children or have potentially had to adjust their school or employment to meet the needs of their family. Discussions with community members revealed that many parents and caregivers in this Region rely on family, friends, and neighbors to care for their children.

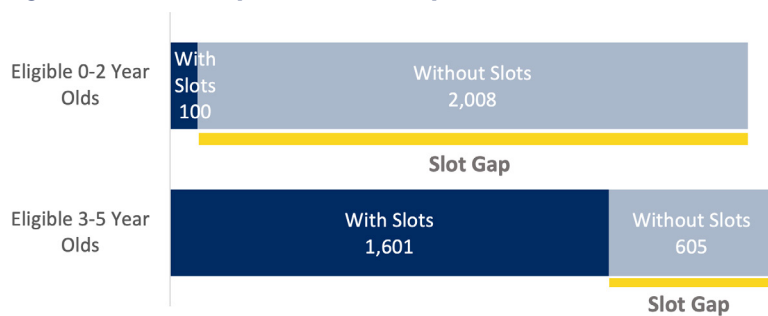
“ Not having infant care up to this point has been a huge barrier. I get calls every day for infant care. We called every center within a 20-mile radius of the college and every single one was full with a waitlist for infants.

- Community Member (Marion County) ”

“ Child care is definitely the most needed service in our area. I am unable to find a job in Jefferson County that is understanding of the hours I have to work due to no child care availability.

- Parent (Jefferson County) ”

Figure 11: Publicly Funded Early Childhood Education and Care Slot Gap



Source: IECAM

Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Each publicly funded program has enrollment requirements, some of which include children living at or below 185% or 200% FPL. Because of the income requirement, the publicly funded slot gap takes into consideration only children living at or below 200% FPL. Figure 11 shows the slot gap for children living at or below 200% FPL in the Region and the number of publicly funded slots for children birth to age five. In 2020, Region 13 had the capacity to serve 82 eligible children from birth to age two in Early Head Start programs, and 18 children in a Prevention Initiative program. Over 2,000 eligible children birth to age two are without a slot for publicly funded programming. At one time, there were several programs in this Region that offered birth to three services; however, many of these programs lost their funding for various reasons and have not considered writing for additional funding in several years.

Region 13 had the capacity to serve 1,601 eligible children ages three to five in publicly funded programs such as Head Start, Preschool for All (PFA), and Preschool for All Expansion (PFA-E). PFA is prevalent in this Region, with 1,077 slots available. There are currently 60 slots available in PFA-E classrooms. While Head Start does exist in this Region, there are only 464 slots available across all four counties. This leaves over 600 eligible children aged three to five without slots. Washington County is limited in all types of ECEC programs; there are currently no Head Start slots available. There is more three-to-five-year-old programming available across the Region than there are services for children zero to three; the largest funded program slot gap for Region 13 is in the birth to three-year-old programs. Many discussions from the community have indicated that while there is a slot gap, there are many other factors that need consideration to understand if more slots would be a solution for the problems that parents and caregivers are facing.

While this data shows that we have a sizable gap in ECEC programs in our Region, many questions were raised about this information. Head Start programs in the Region have reported that while they have the capacity to serve those children, their enrollment has not been at capacity since before the pandemic. This is reportedly due to, among other factors, a lack of staff and a qualified workforce. Adding slots to a program that does not currently have enough teachers or classrooms will not benefit the families in this Region. Additionally, transportation for preschool students is seldom provided in this Region, which limits the ability for children to attend both publicly funded programming and enroll in child care. Full day programming is scarce, and many families indicated that they do not choose the publicly funded programs available because they are unable to provide transportation for their children at midday.

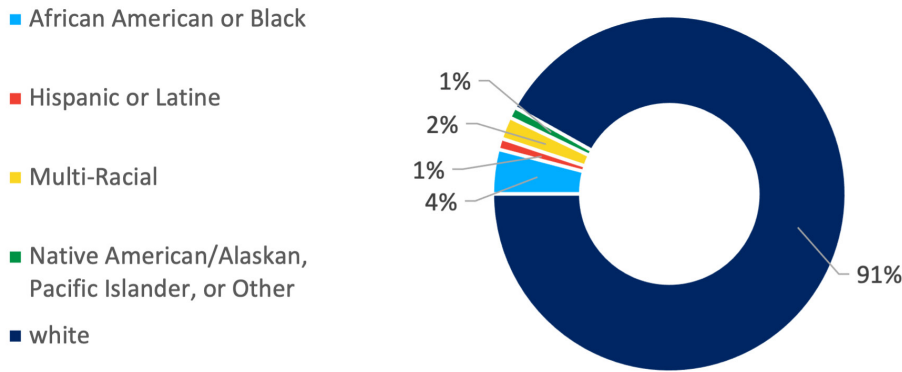
“ We regularly see that parents with job changes or promotions have to pull their children out of school mid-year because they can’t handle the transportation to and from any longer. It is really hard for families. This is a huge problem they face. They would love to participate in these great programs, but it [the barrier] is the transportation. ”

- Community Member (Clinton County)

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

In Region 13, 96% of the ECEC workforce is female and 91% are white (Figure 12). This data is not surprising considering the limited racial diversity of the Regio. However, it is important to note that while this lack of diversity may explain the findings, it does not diminish the significance of striving for greater inclusivity and representation. Ideally, a more diverse population in the ECEC workforce would bring forth a multitude of perspectives and experiences and allow for the enrichment of social and cultural aspects within the Region, while promoting greater tolerance, equity, and a more vibrant society overall.

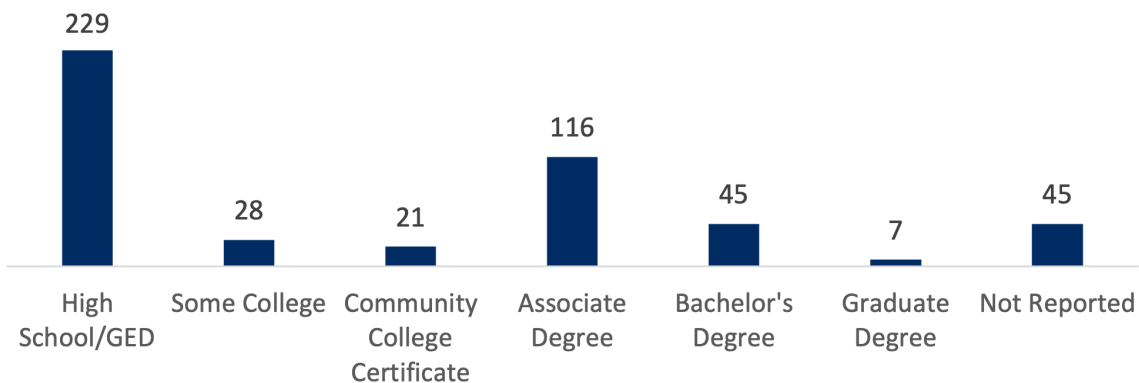
Figure 12: Licensed Center Teaching Staff by Race and Ethnicity⁵



Source: INCCRRA
Created by: INCCRRA

When talking about the education level of the workforce, specifically in the child care arena, most of the teaching staff have a high school level education (Figure 13); “Center Teaching Staff” includes both assistant level teachers and lead teachers. To be qualified as a lead teacher in a licensed child care center, one must have obtained 60 credit hours of some college with six of those hours specifically in Early Childhood Education or Child Development. Conversations from the community indicate that the workforce data could be incomplete because centers who do not accept the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) are not required to report this data.

Figure 13: Highest Level of Education of Licensed Center Teaching Staff



Source: INCCRRA
Created by: INCCRRA

⁵Those who self-identified as Asian not included in chart due to small number of respondents (>1%)

“

When it comes to continuing staff education, I find that 80% of my staff have a child and their family is their focus rather than their career. Unfortunately, most people that work for me view their position as a job, not a career. The most common reasons employees give for accepting a position is that they get to bring their kids to work with them and the child care discount we offer.

- Community Member (Marion County)

”

To better prepare students for the workforce, many high schools in this Region have started to offer dual credit courses in Early Childhood Education and Child Development. There are two community colleges in Region 13, both of which are participating in the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) scholarship program. The ECACE scholarship and grant program was created to address the shortage of qualified Early Childhood educators by encouraging initial credentialing and advancement of already-held degrees in the field to build a stronger workforce. Kaskaskia College has reported that 43 students received and used the ECACE scholarship for tuition for at least one semester in the 2022-2023 academic year. Additionally, 31 students have received funds through the ECACE grant to help with child care costs, gas cards, computers, and food assistance while enrolled in classes. Rend Lake College has reported that 28 students received and used the ECACE scholarship in the 2022-2023 academic year. Both Rend Lake and Kaskaskia College have indicated that the addition of the ECACE scholarship has led to increases in students enrolling in their Early Childhood programs.

Discussions from the community have indicated that there are some school districts in the Region that have partnered with Southern Illinois University-Carbondale to offer the Grow Your Own Illinois program to help those in their communities who are interested in obtaining degrees and credentials to come back and teach in their local schools. The program offers forgivable loans and resources to help candidates pay for tuition and hidden costs associated with attending college to make getting a degree more attainable. Southern Illinois University-Carbondale also offers an off-campus cohort in Teacher Education at the Rend Lake Marketplace in Mt. Vernon, which has provided an additional opportunity for those who are living in this Region to obtain a bachelor's degree in education close to home.

“

My sister teaches in a school district, and they have a Grow Your Own program. Her aide is going back to school and the district is helping her so she can advance to become a teacher instead of an assistant.

- Community Member (Jefferson County)

”

While education level and credentials are an important part of the workforce discussion, the issues in this Region run much deeper. Many of the ECEC programs and centers in this Region barely have enough staff to stay open, which makes it difficult to provide high-quality experiences for the children and families they serve.



Two children going on a stroll together.

Teachers and staff in the ECEC system have been leaving the field at an alarmingly high rate. Programs and centers are having a difficult time filling open positions, which has led to the closure of classrooms and centers in this Region. Discussions from the community indicate that low wages and limited benefits are resulting in high staff turnover. According to the Illinois Early Childhood Education Workforce Report, the median wage for a teacher in a licensed child care center in Illinois was \$13.85 per hour. The median wage for child care teachers in Clinton, Jefferson, and Marion Counties is \$12.00 per hour, while there is no data available on the median wage for child care teachers in Washington County due to there being no licensed child care centers in the County.

Some of the reasons why employees are leaving the ECEC workforce include, but are not limited to, low-paying positions, high-stress, lack of benefits, lack of resources, decline in mental health, and wanting better work-life balance. Teachers have also indicated that they are seeing a rise in challenging behaviors and needs from their students, leaving them feeling unprepared and overwhelmed in their work, a common thread throughout many discussions in this Region.

Many programs, centers, and schools in this Region have indicated that they want to offer additional supports, services, incentives, and benefits to increase longevity in their staff, but the main barrier that prevents this from happening is a lack of funding.

“It’s not set up to be a professional career. It’s set up to be a temporary stepping stone. It doesn’t offer any benefits, long-term longevity options, or even pay increases. You’re not going to keep people if you can’t pay them or offer them any benefits.”

- Parent (Marion County)

“We are trying to meet standards that are above the DCFS minimum. It is so hard day by day to do that when I don’t know if I will have enough teachers to staff my classrooms. We are unable to provide the quality of care that we want to, and we should every single day because of a lack of workforce.”

- Community Member (Marion County)

“One of the biggest struggles we are having right now is finding and keeping qualified staff. We have multiple open positions and have two classrooms shut down due to staff shortages. There have been several qualified applicants who have gone through the interview process, and when offered the job, they have decided to not accept due to finding another position with higher wages. We are federally funded, so although the state minimum wage mandates are going up, the funding we receive has not. This has made it difficult for us to provide competitive wages.”

- Community Member (Marion County)

“Teachers have voiced that being understaffed and not having resources or supports causes them to take on a larger load, which causes more stress and is pushing people out of the industry. On a good day, it is mentally exhausting. When we have to do the extra work, it is even harder.”

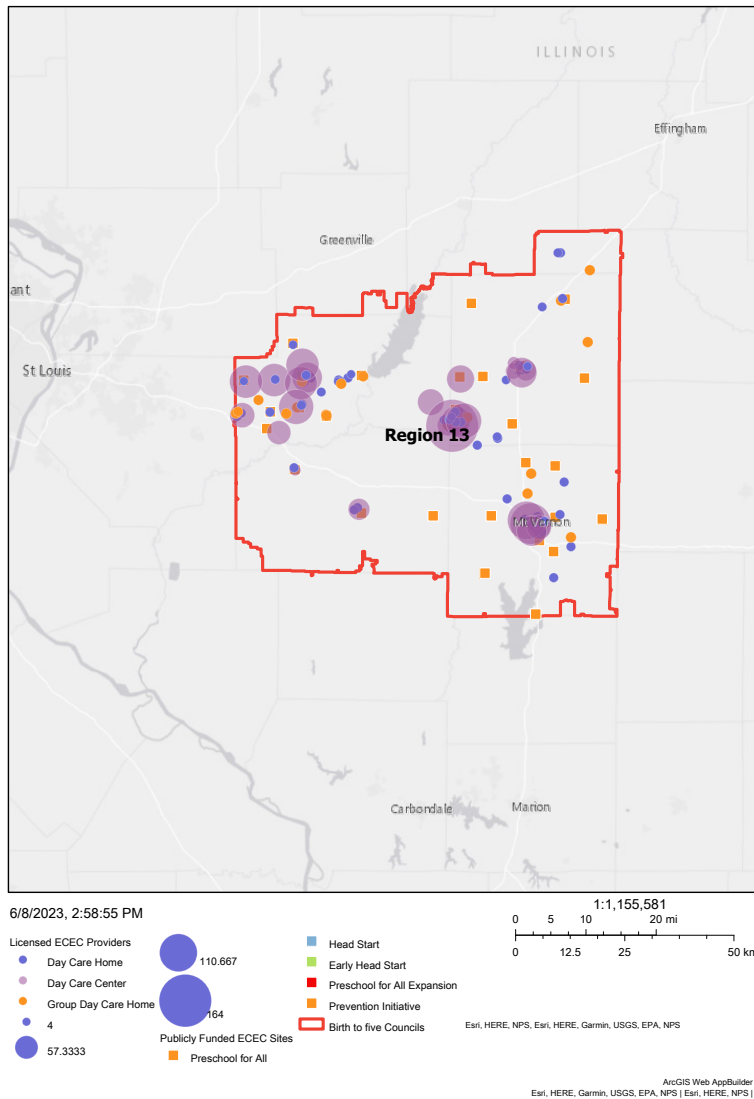
- Community Member (Washington County)

⁶https://www.inccrra.org/images/SDA_Profiles/DR4522-SDA-14.pdf

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

Meaningful family engagement is a critical component in high-quality ECEC programs. Family engagement is the systematic inclusion of families in activities and programs that promote children’s development, wellness, and learning. There is a substantial difference between parental and family involvement versus engagement. To involve parents and families, the school or program would provide opportunities for active participation in planned events and activities. To engage parents, schools and programs must take it one step further and listen to parents and families as they provide input on programs, services, and activities, and provide an opportunity to give feedback on the needs of the children and families in the community. Many of the ECEC programs in this Region have opportunities for both involvement and engagement; however, parents, caregivers, and families are still facing barriers when trying to access these programs for their children.

Figure 14: Location of Publicly Funded Preschool and Licensed Child Care



Publicly funded programs are scattered across Clinton, Marion, and Jefferson Counties, while there are few programs in Washington County (Figure 14). Similarly, there are few licensed child care options in Washington County. In Marion and Jefferson Counties, child care options tend to be centrally located around Centralia, Salem, and Mt. Vernon with few options in rural areas. There are many more in-home child care options than center-based options in this Region. Conversations with child care providers across the Region have indicated that the vast majority of both licensed child care centers and licensed child care homes have extensive waiting lists, especially for infant and toddler care.

“Availability has been and is continuing to be difficult to find. When I say availability, I mean quality options. When I was transitioning from a babysitter to the child care options, I messaged around 15 places and they said they could put me on the waitlist which was a year and a half long.”

- Parent (Jefferson County)

Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

The lack of child care availability has led many parents to lean on Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) Care or they have had to make decisions around their own employment options. Child Care costs have also had an impact on the ability to access high-quality child care in this Region. According to the Erikson Institute's 2019 Risk and Reach Report, both Marion and Jefferson Counties are at high risk for child care costs, meaning that the cost of care in both counties is more than 14% of the median family income.

Publicly funded programs have a similar story when it comes to access in this Region. There is a strong Preschool For All Presence in Clinton, Jefferson, and Marion Counties, while Washington County is home to only three Preschool For All sites with a capacity to serve 100 students. Many of the programs across the Region are half-day only programs and few can provide transportation. Families in this Region have indicated that they have had to make difficult choices regarding preschool education and child care.

Transportation, or the lack of, has become a common thread among both providers and parents in this Region. Many districts are not able to offer transportation due to insufficient funding in rural areas. While at the same time, many parents and caregivers are not able to provide transportation because of work schedules and lack of reliable transportation. Additionally, many families in the Region shared that their family does not have a support system, such as grandparents or other family members who are willing or able to provide transportation and/or wrap-around care for their children.

“Grandparents used to keep the kids at home, but now grandparents are still in the workforce. We have three generations in the workforce, which is a change from what we've had before. The family support structure isn't there like it has been in the past.

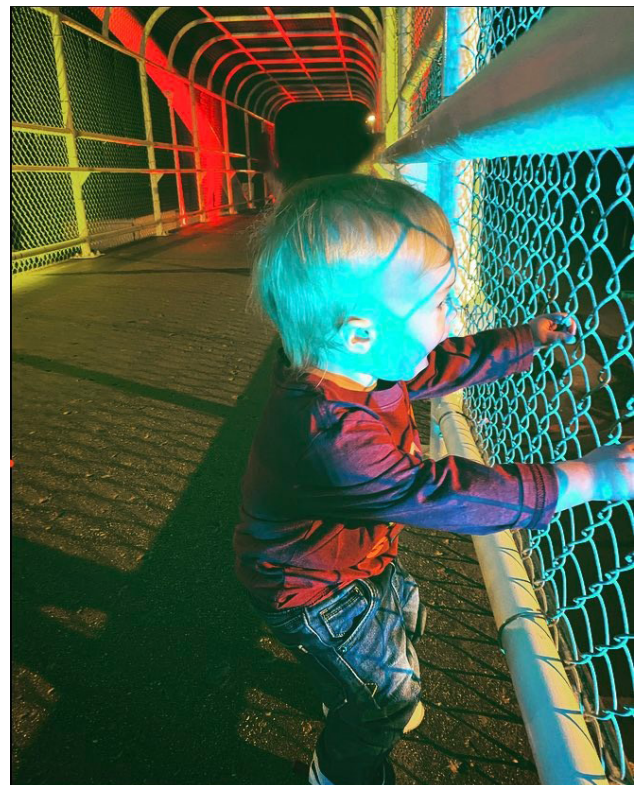
- Community Member (Jefferson County)

“I wish child care was not as expensive so we could have a two-parent working household. Being with your children 24/7 without breaks doesn't give you the chance to just be your own person. Trying to better yourself as a person while also trying to be a full-time mom has to be one of the hardest things I have ever done. It is very trying on your mental health.

- Parent (Marion County)

“There are not a lot of preschools that are full day. We have to hold our kids back from preschool and know it's not the best option.

- Parent (Clinton County)



Fletcher on the Casey Pedestrian Overpass in Jefferson County, Illinois.

Issues around lack of transportation, paired with half-day programming, have created a barrier for many families who wish to access publicly funded preschool programs in this Region. While there is a gap in publicly funded three to five-year-old slots in many of the communities across the Region, in several areas the current slots are not at full capacity due to these barriers.

Birth to three services are extremely lacking in this Region. Conversations from parents, families, and caregivers in the community have indicated that this is a program that would be beneficial and utilized by priority populations. Many families have indicated that they did not have a strong source of information or someone to go to when they had concerns about their child's development. Birth to three home visiting services such as Parent Education, ongoing developmental screenings, home-based education for their child, as well as direct referrals to Early Intervention services are components that parents, families, and caregivers have indicated that they would like to utilize for their families.

“
Transportation is a huge obstacle that my family has had to overcome. Pre-Ks are only offered starting and ending during our workday.
- Parent (Marion County)
”

“
Due to COVID-19, speech therapists now only do evaluations when a teacher refers them. They stopped screening every kid every year. I didn't realize they stopped doing this. Now kids do not even have that one person that could have caught the services they needed and are no longer seeing them.
- Parent (Marion County)
”

“
It is important to have educated and quality teachers at a young age even before preschool. If you have someone working with your family who is experienced with Early Childhood Education, they can refer your child at an earlier age and before they even get into preschool.
- Parent (Jefferson County)
”

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant effect on all ECEC programs. Perhaps the most notable effect was with Early Intervention and Special Education services. Many providers transitioned from in-person services to a virtual format that was not conducive to the development of young children. Some families had difficulty accessing the virtual services since the Region is rural with pockets of limited to no internet access. Parents, caregivers, and providers discussed that there has been a significant increase in children qualifying for services in our Region after the pandemic, potentially due to children missing out on key developmental experiences during the extended period of remote learning. Social skills, challenging behaviors, and speech delays are becoming much more prevalent, and the delay in available data does not yet accurately reflect those issues.

“
Due to COVID-19, speech therapists now only do evaluations when a teacher refers them. They stopped screening every kid every year. I didn't realize they stopped doing this. Now kids do not even have that one person that could have caught the services they needed and are no longer seeing them.
- Parent (Marion County)
”

Conversations from the community have indicated that while many ECEC programs are available to families in Region 13, families are struggling with accessibility and finding resources within their own communities. Parents and caregivers face many difficulties accessing program due to a lack of resources, hours of operation that do not fit in with their working hours, siloed programming leading to calls to different agencies, and an overall lack of available slots in high-quality child care programs.

“

It is such a pendulum. If one thing does not work out or falls out of place it impacts everything else. If your child care falls through, then you can't go to work or you can't get off work to take your kids to speech therapy. It must be difficult to be a caregiver. There are so many battles you have to overcome.

- Community Member (Jefferson County)

”

Regional Strengths & Needs

The Family Council, Action Council, and community members at large all expressed that Region 13 has many strengths in the current ECEC system. While praising the existing programs, they also acknowledged that there were areas in which ECEC may be more accessible and equitable to families and where it may better support providers.

Strengths

- In Region 13, there is a strong desire to create collaboration and provide resources to meet the needs of the families who live here.
- This Region has a strong preschool presence. There are high-quality programs and half-day slots available in most of the communities in this Region.
- Several programs and providers in the Region have achieved a Circle of Quality award through ExceleRate Illinois, and many programs in the Region have obtained the highest rating of Gold Circle of Quality.
- Many of the providers, teachers, staff, and administrators report that they enjoy the work that they do, which is reflected in the loving and caring atmosphere they provide to the families and children in their care.

Needs

Access to Programs/Slots

- Funded transportation to and from publicly funded ECEC programs.
- Additional slots for full day preschool programming, including Preschool For All, Preschool For All Expansion, or Head Start.
- Expansion of birth to three home visiting services across all four counties in the Region.
- Affordable and accessible child care throughout the Region, including evening and weekend care to improve access for families who work nontraditional hours.

Mental Health/Behavioral Health

- High-quality family counseling and mental health services, including behavior support and services for children under age five in all four counties.
- On-site mental health services and support for both students and staff; provide professional development and training for teachers and staff on mental/behavioral health.

Family & Community Supports & Services

- Expanded community services that are more local and easier to access in every county in the Region.
- A family navigation system to ease the enrollment processes and to help families find programs and services.
- Increased information sharing with families about programs and services that are currently available in this Region and/or under-utilized.

Workforce

- Increased wages and/or improved benefits for ECEC teachers and staff provide adequate com-compensation for current staff in the field and entice others to join the profession.
- Increased pathways to certification/credentialing to entice more people to enter the ECEC field.
- Improved longevity and reduced turnover in the current workforce.

Recommendations

Through the process of gathering information, analyzing data, and listening to the stories and concerns from Council members, parents, caregivers, families, and ECEC providers in these communities, recommendations to address the Early Childhood needs within Region 13 have been clearly identified. The work being done on the regional level should be expanded locally to share information, educate community members on local needs, and engage community partners in roles and sectors outside of the ECEC field.

Workforce

A strong and qualified workforce is necessary to move many of the Region's recommendations forward. We recommend that steps be taken at the state and local level to continue to make improvements in the workforce crisis that many ECEC programs are facing.

- The State continues to increase its resources aimed at recruiting and retaining an adequate workforce by increasing pathways to certification and credentialing and expanding funding to improve the wages and benefits of the ECEC workforce.
- Locally, efforts are needed to increase quality by promoting and sharing information about the State's current workforce initiatives, educate the public about the need for more teachers, and advocate for increased public dollars that support adequate compensation.
- Locally, the Region's high schools should continue to work with local colleges and universities to add or expand on the dual credit opportunities in Early Childhood Education and Child Development.
- Locally, to increase longevity and reduce turnover in the current workforce, employers need to create better working conditions by increasing professional development and training, especially in the areas of mental health and social emotional development and provide necessary re-sources and support for teachers and staff in the field.
- At the state and local level, a campaign to change the narrative surrounding the ECEC field is needed. This could be accomplished by highlighting qualified and caring members of the ECEC workforce at every level on social media, newsletters, and other outlets where information is shared to improve the public perspective on the ECEC profession, as well as highlight the importance of the ECEC profession as "the workforce behind the workforce".

Access to Publicly Funded Programs

Expand access to current publicly funded programs, specifically through the addition of full-day classrooms, providing transportation for students, and expanding birth to three programs.

- School districts, the Regional Office of Education, and community-based organizations should apply for additional slots for full-day Preschool For All, Preschool For All Expansion, or Head Start classrooms.
- Advocate for funded transportation at the state level and expanded funding to school districts and grant-funded programs so the rising costs affiliated with transportation in rural areas can be offset.
- Expanding birth to three services in the entire Region, as there are currently only 100 slots for birth to three services across all four counties.

Available & Affordable Child Care

Expand licensed child care options across the Region, specifically for infant and toddler care, and explore ways to improve the affordability of child care for all families.

- Explore ways to add additional licensed child care slots across the Region, especially in rural areas and areas where licensed child care does not currently exist.
- Explore ways to add care during nontraditional hours for the multitude of families who are employed in shift work positions.
- Increase utilization of the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) by families. Expand on the CCR&R's current efforts to promote the CCAP program by partnering with community-based organizations and the newly formed Regional Office of Education #13 Early Childhood Collaboration to distribute promotional materials, share information, and educate families, community stakeholders, and employers about the program, its eligibility criteria, and the changing policies that make CCAP more accessible to families.
- Continue the work to decouple private pay rates from CCAP rates (Illinois Department of Human Services).

Regional Collaboration

Continue funding the growth and development of the newly recognized Early Childhood Collaboration, the Regional Office of Education #13 Early Childhood Collaboration, to support its efforts to become a central navigation system for families and providers, while developing shared values and buy-in from community partners and organizations.

- It is recommended that the Regional Office of Education #13 Early Childhood Collaboration continue its work to become a Coordinated Intake and family navigation system. The Collaboration should work with local ECEC providers and programs, as well as a wide variety of community partners, to break down the siloed programs and services often seen in this Region.
- Local support should be given to promote the mission and goals of the Collaboration to families and community stakeholders through the distribution of materials and information to educate families and community members about the work the Collaboration plans to carry out.

Mental Health Supports and Services

Improve access to high-quality mental health supports and services for parents, caregivers, children, and ECEC staff to counteract the rise in mental health and social emotional challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and other societal changes.

- Provide mental health and trauma-informed training and professional development for all ECEC teachers and staff members with embedded Early Childhood Mental Health consultants for students and staff in every school district and ECEC program across the Region.
- Local providers should work to expand access to high-quality family counseling and mental health services in all four counties in the Region.
- Local providers should work to expand their services to include behavioral support and services for children under age five across the Region.

In compiling this report, it is our hope that local and state leaders will use this information to advance ECEC services in the Region. We will continue our community engagement efforts to expand our understanding of the ECEC needs of local families and providers. If you have further questions about these recommendations or would like to get involved with the work of Birth to Five Illinois in Region 13, please find our contact information on the front inside cover of this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment.

Appendices

Appendix A: Citations

1. Erikson Institute (2019). *Illinois Risk and Reach Report*. Chicago, IL. Site name: <https://riskandreach.erikson.edu/>
2. Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding (2021). *Commission report of findings and recommendations: Spring 2021*. Site name: <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/documents/early-childhood-funding-commission-full-report.pdf>
3. Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (2023). *Report creation page*. Site name: <https://iecamregionalreports.education.illinois.edu/dash-snapshot-report/landing>
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7. Whitehead, J. (2021). *Illinois' early childhood workforce 2020 report*. Bloomington, IL: INCCRRA. Retrieved from: https://www.inccrra.org/images/datareports/Illinois_Early_Childhood_Education_Workforce_2020_Report.pdf

Appendix B: Additional Figures

The following charts highlight additional risk factors for each of the four counties in Region 13 according to data and information found in the Erikson Institute's 2019 Risk and Reach Report.

Figure 1: Housing Costs, Risk Level by County

County	Number of families spending more that 30% of income on housing costs	Percentage of families spending more than 30% of income on housing costs	Risk Level
Clinton	2,734	19%	Low-Moderate
Jefferson	3,559	24%	High-Moderate
Marion	3,553	22%	High-Moderate
Washington	997	17%	Low

Source: Erikson Institute Created by: Erikson Institute

Figure 2: Number and Percentage of Children Under Age Five with No Parent in Labor Force, Risk Level by County

County	Number of children under age 5 with no parent in the labor force	Percentage of children under age 5 with no parent in the labor force	Risk Level
Clinton	42	2%	Low
Jefferson	285	10%	High-Moderate
Marion	187	7%	Low-Moderate
Washington	12	1%	Low

Source: Erikson Institute Created by: Erikson Institute

Figure 3: Average Child Care Cost, Percentage of Median Income Spent on Child Care, Risk Level by County

County	Average cost per day for child care	Percentage of the median family income spent on child care	Risk Level
Clinton	42	2%	Low
Jefferson	285	10%	High-Moderate
Marion	187	7%	Low-Moderate
Washington	12	1%	Low

Source: Erikson Institute Created by: Erikson Institute

Figure 4: Number and Percentage of Children Under Age Five Receiving CCAP, Risk Level by County

County	Average cost per day for child care	Percentage of the median family income spent on child care	Risk Level
Clinton	42	2%	Low
Jefferson	285	10%	High-Moderate
Marion	187	7%	Low-Moderate
Washington	12	1%	Low

Source: Erikson Institute Created by: Erikson Institute

Appendix C: Focus Group and Interview Questions

Throughout the development of the Regional Needs Assessment, focus groups and interviews were conducted with caregivers, providers, elected officials, and other community stakeholders. Below are questions developed for caregivers and others. In the interest of time and space, only select questions are included.

Parents, Families, and Caregivers

1. There are many Early Childhood services available in our Region. What Early Childhood services does your family use/has your family used?
2. How have you found out about Early Childhood programs or services, or found care for your child(ren)?
3. Do the child care services you're using now meet your family's needs? If not, please describe what would better fit your family's needs.
4. What, if anything, has been particularly helpful in making Early Child-hood Education and Care work for your family?
5. What barriers or challenges has your family had with using Early Child-hood services in your community?
6. Have any of the children in your care been referred to services? What was that process like?
7. What services don't currently exist in your community that you think would help families, in general? What services would help parent/caregivers, specifically?
8. Is there anything else you think I should know about Early Childhood education, care, or services in your community, our Region, or in the state?

Early Childhood Professionals and Others

1. What challenges do you think families have in accessing Early Childhood Education and Care programs and services?
2. What programs do you know of in the Region that serve children birth through age five and their families?
3. What services don't currently exist in your community and/or this Region for young children and/or their families that you would like to see?
4. What data do you think would be helpful in better understanding how priority populations access Early Childhood care and services, or the barriers/challenges they have accessing care and services?
5. Is child care readily available and close to employers in your community?
6. What accommodations has your business or company made for professionals with young children? How have these accommodations impacted your business or company?
7. Have you connected with child care providers in the community to build relationships and build relationships with partners to provide the care you need for employees?

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