



# Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

## Region 1-A

(Cook County - City of Chicago)



In Partnership with

**Every Child  
Ready Chicago**



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## Region 1-A Executive Summary

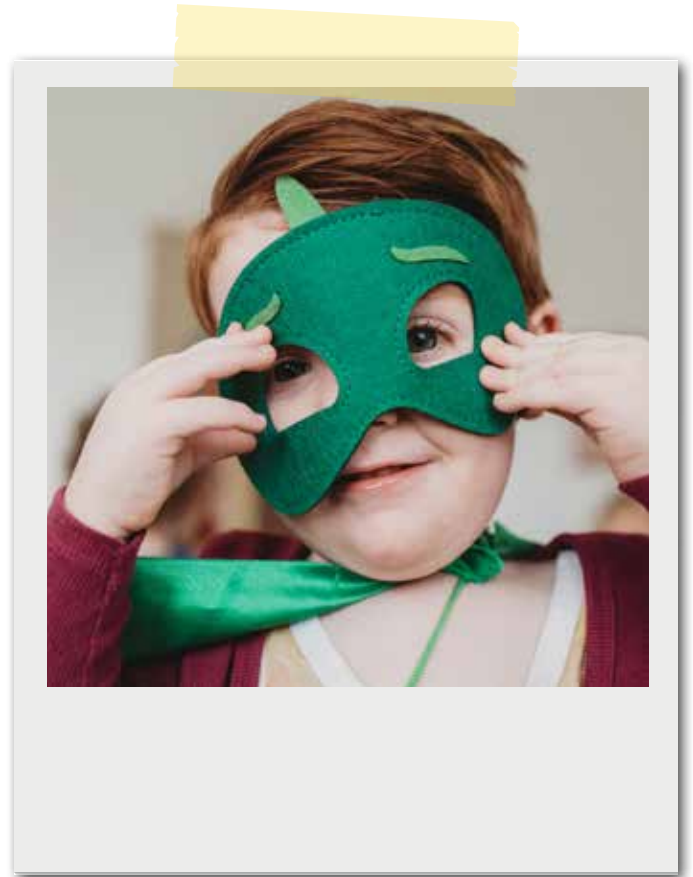
In 2021, the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Funding issued a report with findings that highlighted the inequities in ECEC funding in Illinois and the need to create a better statewide infrastructure to support ECEC professionals, expand services and programs 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 1-A 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

The City of Chicago, Birth to Five Illinois Region 1-A, is not only diverse in race and ethnicity, but also in the variety of ECEC programs available to provide services to children ages 0-5. However, it is reported that there are still many children that are eligible for publicly funded programs but are not receiving service demonstrating a large slot gap especially in the 0-3 age group. The main issue raised was that families are not aware of programs in their community as they must navigate a “spider web” system to figure out the options. Families would like to experience a more accessible system in every part of the city. In addition, there are many ECEC community collaborations in the region however, families, providers and city agencies can benefit from an improved two-way feedback structure to influence programs and an increase in community collaborations.



## Region 1-A Needs

1. Improve public facing ECEC database system
2. Streamline the complex and confusing ECEC system by providing a one-stop shop at the community level that informs families about all of the programs they are eligible for
3. ECEC workforce needs include increasing staff compensation, scholarships and ethnically diverse workforce in higher level positions
4. Need more early childhood collaborations and better resource local collaborations
5. Establish citywide ECEC policy table that identifies and advocates on Chicago ECEC needs and opportunities

## Region 1-A Recommendations

1. Improve public facing data system with current demographic data that includes priority population categories, eligibility, slot gap, enrollment, provider and program quality data by community level and/or zip code (city, county and state)
2. Build upon the Chicago Early Learning ECEC program system and streamline offerings by providing community hubs for one-stop shop services that provides intake support to families about ALL of the programs they are eligible for and “warm referrals” to cross-sector wrap around services) as an entry point.
3. Identify programs with staff vacancies and increase workforce initiatives to programs (ECEC programs, Early Intervention, etc)
4. Create sustainable funding plan that leads to an action plan focused on increasing 0-3 programming, increasing staff compensation and ECEC collaborations.
5. Establish citywide ECEC policy table to advocate for variety of ECEC issues including but not limited to increasing Federal Poverty Levels to accurately reflect current economic needs, universal child care, etc. (city, state and federal policy issues)

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

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## REGION 1-A 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.



**193,623**

Children Under  
the Age of 6  
in Region 1-A



**87,722**

Children 0-5  
at 200% Federal  
Poverty Level



**52,261**

Children 0-5  
Without Publicly  
Funded ECEC Slots

**80%**

Percentage of focus group participants who indicated that their child or family experienced difficulty accessing information regarding Early Childhood Education programs

“Many times, people do not know what is available to in their community until someone else tells them, it comes up in conversations or someone literally knocks on my door to tell me about the programs.”

- Family Council Member

**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 1-A NEEDS**

1. One-stop shop in the community that informs families about all the programs they are eligible for
2. Increased ECEC staff compensation and scholarships
3. A more ethnically and racially diverse ECEC workforce
4. More Early Childhood collaborations and better resourced local collaborations

## **REGION 1-A RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Improve public facing data systems with current and expanded data points
2. Identify programs with staff vacancies and increase workforce initiatives to those programs
3. Create sustainable funding plans that lead to an action plan focused on increasing programming, staff compensation, and ECEC collaborations.
4. Establish a citywide ECEC policy table to advocate for ECEC-related issues



**"Parent voices are strong and important for policy makers to understand parents' perspectives and needs."  
- Family Council Member**



# 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

Reimagining a more equitable Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system in Chicago that respects family and community voice and works to ensure it is centered and prioritized at both the city and state levels of decision making has led our collective work to complete this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment. We honor the work that has been done prior to standing up the Birth to Five Illinois Region 1-A Councils and build upon it by amplifying input from Chicago's communities to shine the light on issues and offer recommendations to continue building and sustaining equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early childhood services for all children and families in the City of Chicago through our partnership with Every Child Ready Chicago. We are thankful for the community support we received throughout this process, but especially want to highlight several partnerships whose input was instrumental.

The role of the Family Council and Action Council is to identify early childhood needs, amplify the voices of families, and provide direction for the collective work. Region 1-A's Council members come from a geographically diverse set of Chicago zip codes and have spent countless hours participating in meetings, reading data, sharing stories, learning about and/or sharing their expertise on the ECEC landscape, and advocating for Chicago's children and families. We are thankful for their diverse perspectives, lived experiences, and expertise brought forward to ensure family and community voice is centered and prioritized in our work.

In addition to the diverse perspectives offered through our Family Council and Action Council, we are grateful to the families, providers, and various stakeholders who shared their lived experiences in nearly 20 focus groups and interviews.

We are in deep gratitude to the families and providers who trusted us and shared their stories to authentically bring our values of family voice, racial equity, and collective impact to life. This community-driven mobilization is critical to influencing policy making and funding at the local, regional, and state levels to make Illinois the best place to raise a family.

Lastly, we are thankful for the numerous ways organizations supported family recruitment, provided meeting space, co-hosted focus groups, provided expertise for Council meetings, and advocated for practice and policy changes along the way. To influence systems-change that benefits children and families, it does indeed take a village.

Thank you,

**Edna Navarro Vidaurre (she/her, ella/la)**

Regional Council Manager: Region 1-A

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.

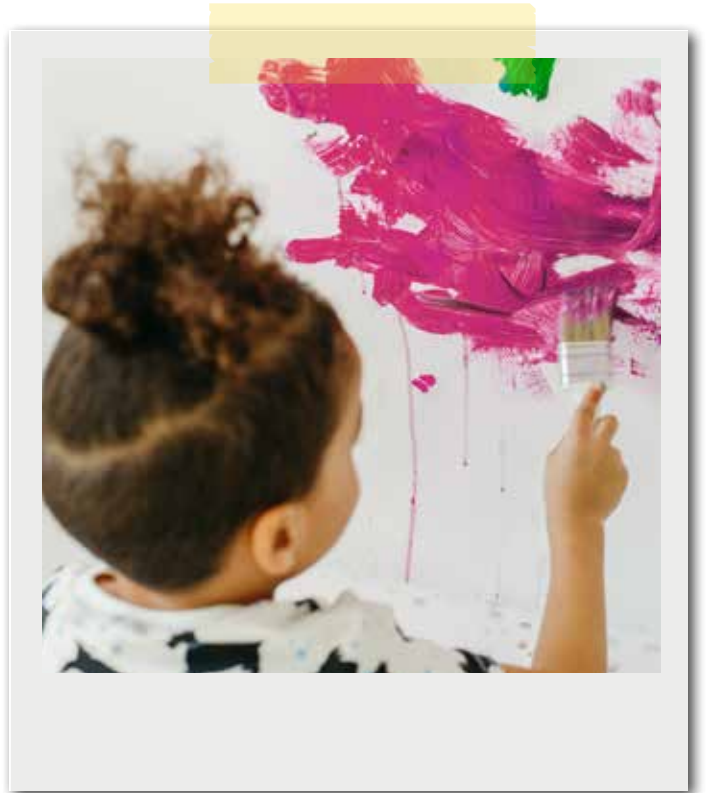
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early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



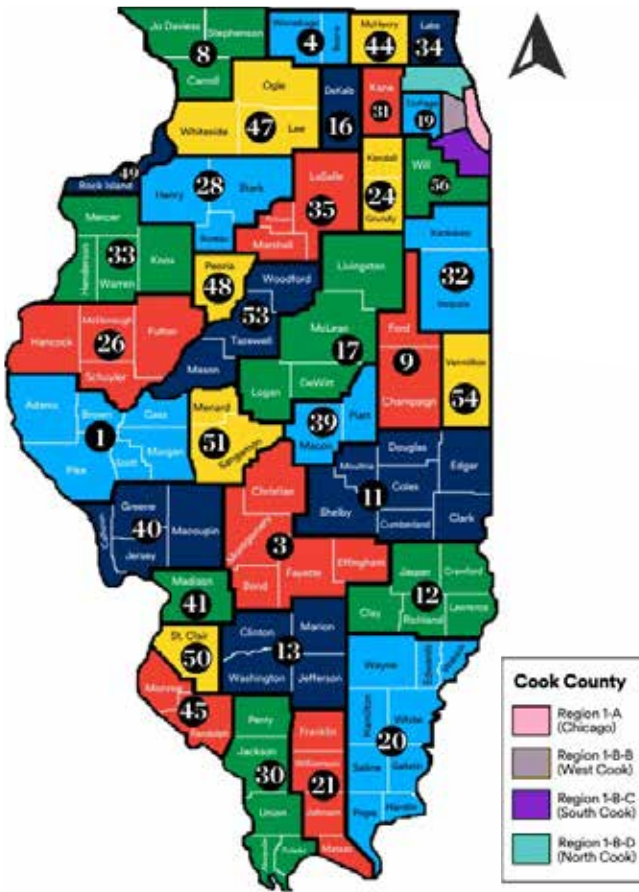
# Timeline

- **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

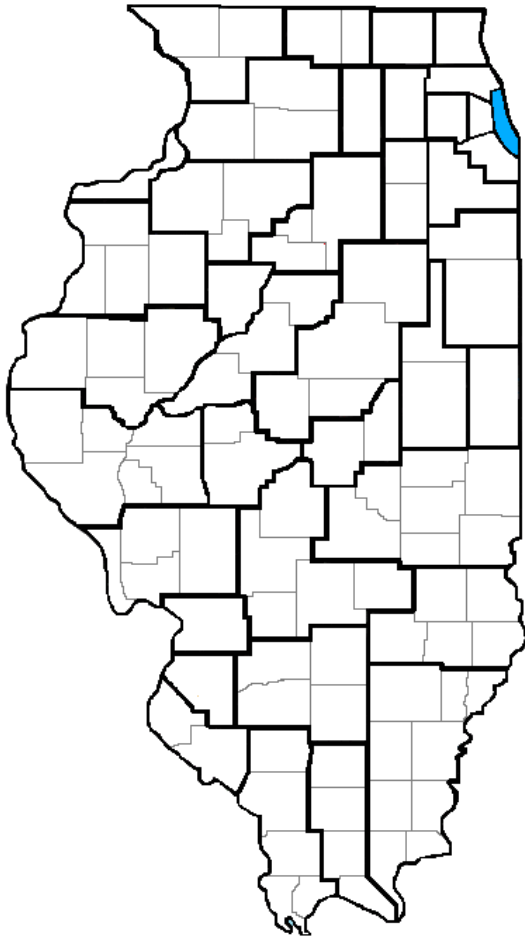
Regionally based demographic, programmatic, and service provider data from IECAM and workforce data from INCCRRA were presented to Action and Family Council members during meetings and is included in the following section. The data comes from both IECAM (2020-2021) and INCCRRA (2021), unless otherwise 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 1-A

# Regional Community Landscape



## Regional Boundaries

Region 1-A<sup>1</sup> is situated in Cook County and represents the communities woven throughout and governed by the City of Chicago. It has 77 communities spanning southeast to the Indiana border, east to Lake Michigan, north to the Cook-North boundary, northwest to O’Hare airport, and west to the Cook-West boundary. Chicago is the fourth largest city in the United States, has the world’s only backwards-flowing river, is home to eight major league sports teams, including two Major League Baseball teams, has 600 parks, 500 playgrounds, 29 beaches, and a very diverse mixed-delivery Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system.

Figure 1: Chicago Communities Map



Source: Birth to Five Illinois  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

## Land Acknowledgement<sup>2</sup>

Region 1-A acknowledges that the City of Chicago is the traditional homelands of the Anishinaabe, or the Council of the Three Fires: the Ojibwe (Chippewa), Odawa (Ottawa), and Bodewadmi (Potawatomi) Nations. Many other Nations consider this area their traditional homeland, including the Myaamia (Miami), Wea, Hoocąk (Ho-Chunk), Kiash Matchitwuk (Menominee), Oᑕaakiwaki·hina·ki (Sauk), and Meškwahki·aša·hina (Fox), Peoria, Kaskaskia, Kiiikaapoi (Kickapoo), and Mascouten. The city specifically acknowledges the contributions of Kitiᑏawa of the Bodewadmi (Potawatomi). With this acknowledgment, we call on our partners across the city to honor the work that has come before us and urgently move to collective action towards dismantling systemic barriers to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early childhood services for all Chicago’s children and families.

<sup>1</sup> Region 1-A is written throughout this report and refers to the City of Chicago within Cook County.

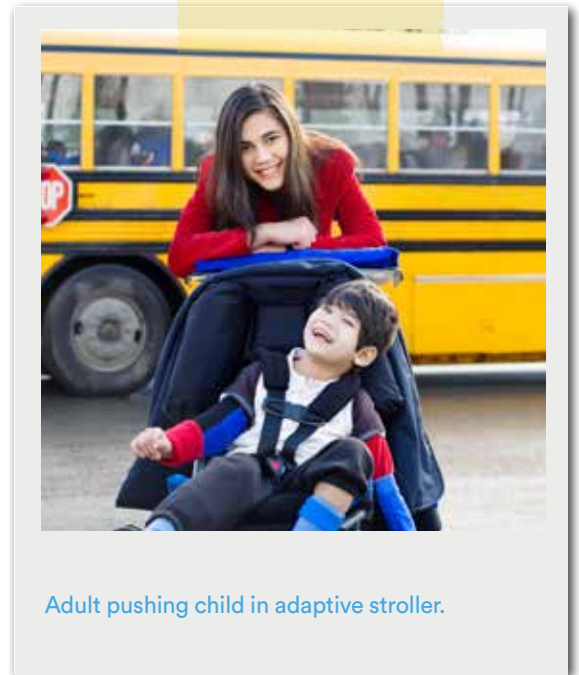
<sup>2</sup> Based on information provided at <https://native-land.ca>

## Regional Partnership with City of Chicago

Every Child Ready Chicago (ECRC) is a public-private partnership led by the Mayor’s Office in partnership with Start Early (formerly known as the Ounce of Prevention Fund) working to ensure all children in Chicago enter Kindergarten ready to succeed in school and life. The multi-year, collective effort works to align the prenatal-to-five systems and supports serving Chicago children and families under a unified vision and to build the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) infrastructure needed for thousands more children to enter Kindergarten ready to learn. ECRC is made up of several committees, including Access and Enrollment, which is led by Birth to Five Illinois: Region 1-A.

Together, Birth to Five Illinois Region 1-A, the Mayor’s Office, and ECRC have focused our collective efforts on access and enrollment in ECEC programs and leveraging existing relationships to complete this Regional Needs Assessment. Through this partnership, we were able to examine the ECRC Initial Landscape Summary and Strategy Map, leverage findings through the Access and Enrollment workgroup and incorporate feedback provided through the Chicago Early Learning Steering Committee.

Through this partnership, Birth to Five Illinois: Region 1-A is also a member of the Chicago Early Childhood Integrated Data System (CECIDS) Executive Committee and has access to the new citywide dashboard, which complemented the IECAM data that was used throughout this report.



Adult pushing child in adaptive stroller.

## Regional Demographics

Region 1-A is the fourth largest city in the country and is rich in diversity across race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, abilities, and geographies. According to the 2020 Census, Chicago’s total population is 2,746,388, with 193,623 children under (and including) age five. There are 101,136 children birth to age two, and 92,487 children aged three (up to and including) age five.

According to the 2020 Census, there are 165,844 children ages birth to age five (before their sixth birthday) from a multitude of racial and ethnic backgrounds (Figure 2). Interestingly, unlike most other Regions, the number of Hispanic or Latinx and Black or African American children are greater than the number of white children living in the Region. While the city offers the chance for people of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to live in the same space, there are some distinct patterns when looking at the racial and ethnic demographics across the Region (Figure 3).

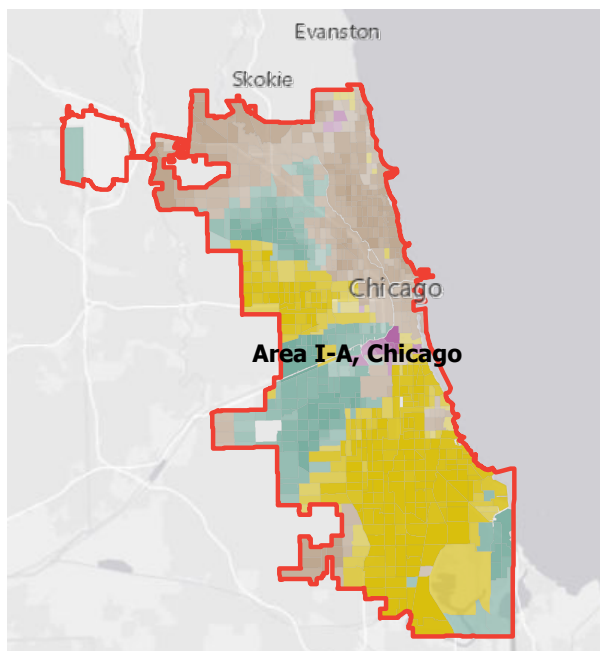
“ We knew Chicago is very diverse and segregated, yet looking at an actual map based on actual numbers makes it more real. Facts and numbers cannot be disputed. Numbers speak for themselves. - Community Member ”

**Figure 2: Total Number of Children Under the Age of Five by Race, Ethnicity**

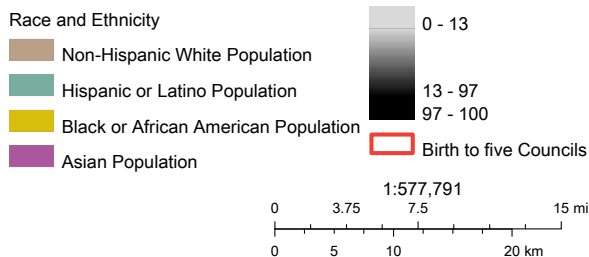
Race and Ethnicity	Number	Percent
Total Children under age Five	165,844	100%
White (Non-Hispanic/Latinx)	43,347	26%
Two or More Races (Non-Hispanic/Latinx)	6,456	4%
Some other Race (Non-Hispanic/Latinx)	443	0%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (Non-Hispanic/Latinx)	10	0%
Hispanic or Latine	56,297	34%
Black or African American (Non-Hispanic/Latinx)	50,162	30%
Asian (Non-Hispanic/Latinx)	9,003	5%
American Indian or Alaska Native (Non-Hispanic/Latinx)	125	0%

Source: Birth to Five Illinois  
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

**Figure 3: Location of Children Ages Five and Under by Race, Ethnicity**



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Source: Birth to Five Illinois  
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

### Children in Priority Populations

When examining the demographics of Chicago, it is important to consider data on the priority populations, as defined by the Illinois Early Learning Council (ELC)<sup>3</sup>. Priority populations are defined by the ELC as groups experiencing risk factors who face economic disadvantage and do not receive equitable resources, and therefore should be prioritized by ECEC programs for eligibility requirements. The Action and Family Councils identified the following priority populations for Region 1-A: families who face barriers due to language (such as English Language Learners), families experiencing poverty-level income, and children with disabilities (i.e., families with diverse learners).

Quantitative data is key to showing the needs of families; however, during the development of this Regional Needs Assessment, the publicly available data that was provided to Birth to Five Illinois was generally from 2020 and limited.

“Demographic information is important to help us understand what is going on in our communities, especially when priority populations have the hardest time obtaining resources when in fact it should be a smooth process.”  
 - Housing Advocate

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



Currently, there is no central location where these data information is housed.<sup>4</sup> Available quantitative data on priority populations will be discussed in this section, and qualitative data from those who are part of the State’s defined priority populations gathered through focus groups, interviews, and community discussions is included throughout the remainder of this report.

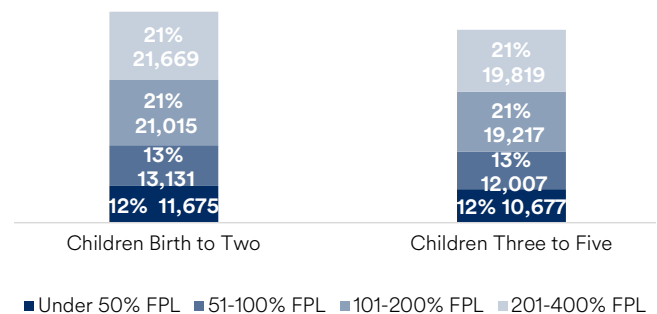
## Families that Face Barriers Due to Language

The available data on the language diversity of our children and families refers to the number of children birth through age five in households speaking individual languages or related language groups. Data is based on responses from parents or head of households indicating the language the child speaks, or is learning, the language. There are a total of 1,081,143 households in Chicago; of those, 48,082 households speak Spanish and 38,948 speak other languages. Additionally, Chicago Public Schools SY 22-23 enrollment data states that there are 1,202 children ages birth to three and 3,087 four-year-old children enrolled in the English Language Learner (ELL) program. The number of households and children speaking a language other than English demonstrates a need for high-quality programming to support language development and engage families in their native language in their child’s development and education.

## Families Experiencing Poverty-Level Income

It is important to understand that families’ access to publicly funded programs is primarily based on household income. Programs use the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) guidelines, and the income levels that are referenced are 50%, 100%, 200% and 400%. The 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 100% FPL is considered to be living at “the poverty line.”

**Figure 4: Children Under Age Six by Federal Poverty Level**



Source: IECAM

Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Most of Chicago’s children live at or below the 200% FPL (Figure 4). According to the Chicago Early Learning Integrated Data System (CECIDS) dashboard, the two communities in Chicago that have 100% of children who are eligible for publicly funded programs are Englewood and Burnside; however, there are an additional 27 communities spread-out across the city that have over 90% of children who are eligible for publicly funded ECEC services.

## Children with Disabilities

Additionally, it is important to highlight the data on children under the age of five who have been assessed to have developmental, cognitive, behavioral, and/or physical needs/disabilities and qualify for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Eligible children may receive services through Early Intervention or Special Education programs. Data is limited on the number of children receiving services but includes the number of children birth through age three with an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for children over age three to support children’s development and education.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix B for listing of Priority Population categories, data availability, and sources

Based on the data on Diverse Learners receiving Early Intervention and Special Education services below, Councils prioritized gathering lived experiences from Early Intervention families and providers, as well as families who have transitioned to Special Education programs. A very important missing component that was heard throughout focus groups and interviews is the high number of families who are waiting to initiate the intake or evaluation processes into and out of Early Intervention, as well as accessing and completing Special Education processes for children to receive services in a variety of settings.

**Figure 5: Diverse Learners Served Through Early Intervention and Special Education**

	Number
Children Receiving Early Intervention Services	4352
Pre-School Ages Birth to Three	1,303
Pre-School Age Four	1,528

Source: CECIDS, IECAM  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

After members of the Councils reviewed the demographic data, many agreed the information is important to understand the actual needs of our communities and make intentional recommendations alongside them. Members also voiced concern and urgency to provide high-quality services since communities with minoritized populations are oftentimes under-resourced.

During focus groups, ECEC providers stated that it is important to include demographics because some communities are experiencing many changes, such as gentrification and loss of affordable housing; constant analysis of the changing demographics is required to meet the community's needs. Including community demographic information is critical to starting to understand the actual needs, and design intentional recommendations which can be used to advocate for funding, policy changes, and programmatic improvements. To do this critical work, more data and additional community input is needed.

Additionally, the purpose of the priority populations list is to drive resources and attention toward improving access to high-quality, responsive services for children and families with limited to no access to economic or material resources. 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.

“ When my child was first diagnosed, the place didn't have enough staff to provide the services and they were giving me conflicting information. I had to wait one year for an appointment, and it may have been because it was during the pandemic but there are still very long waitlists, especially for mental health services. It was traumatic for me because both my children had needs. It would've been helpful to have someone tell me where there were immediate openings [specific locations] instead of me calling/navigating all these different places plus trying to figure out what type of insurance was accepted.

- Parent

”

## Local Community Collaborations

A Local Community Collaboration is a group of ECEC stakeholders that take a cross-sector approach to coordinating and improving the ECEC system within a defined geographic region.

Early Childhood Community Collaborations are critical and known as “boots on the ground”, helping families navigate Chicago and Illinois’ complicated systems. Collaboration staff are trusted community leaders that help to “translate” policy to families’ realities and connect families to supports. In general, Local Collaborations are funded using a variety of funding sources and commonly voice concern with inconsistent funding. Several of the Collaborations in Region 1-A have been funded to support the city’s enrollment outreach and recruitment efforts, partner with programs to support attendance case management, lead provider and family initiatives that support transition to Kindergarten and provide timely feedback to city leaders to improve policies and practices.

In Chicago, there are several ECEC Collaborations who have been engaging families and community stakeholders for varying lengths of time. They include the following:

- Altgeld-Riverdale Coalition
- Chicago Head Start Collaborative
- Chicago West All Our Kids (AOK) Network
- Chicago Southeast All Our Kids Network
- ConnecTeen
- Little Village Education Collaborative
- Bridging the Gap Communal Living Englewood/ Margaret F. Lee Violence Prevention/Intervention Collaboration
- North Lawndale Early Learning Coalition
- The Jewish Early Childhood Collaborative
- Southside Early Learning Network

Chicago has 77 communities, and while the above Collaborations are in a handful of communities, the additional communities that Council members named as needing Collaborations based on factors like high child population and percentages of children not being served were Rogers Park, West Ridge, and Roseland. Family Council members also mentioned the importance of Collaborations, including organizations that focus on literacy, model interactive family activities, and promote community safety or violence prevention initiatives.

Family Council members shared that through outreach efforts such as door knocking, community pop-ups or “meeting families where they already are” is how they learned about enrolling their children in high-quality early learning programs. It was through another trusted parent, grandparent, or community member that they became aware of the value of early childhood programs



Left to right: Tanya Cruz, WIC Grocery Store Site Director, Jacquelyn Ledezma, FACE Specialist, Socorro Hinojosa, Admin Support, and Edna Navarro-Vidaurre, Regional Council Manager.

“

Trabajar en colaboracion nos deja tener una vision mas amplia de los recursos y necesidades que tiene cada comunidad en el estado y asi podemos trabajar juntos para conseguir mas fondos y recursos para las familias.

Translation: Working collaboratively allows us to have a broader vision of the resources and necessities that each community in the State has so we can work together to get more funds and resources for families.

- Family Council Member

”

and were connected to navigation support or even funds to obtain legal documentation such as birth certificates, health examinations, and other documents required for enrollment. One Family Council member mentioned that support provided through the pandemic and to newly arrived families to meet basic needs, such as paying utilities, rent, clothing, and toiletries have made a huge difference in families' lives.

“ Collaborations inform parents of valuable resources, make families feel supported and not alone.  
- Family Council Member ”

During this Regional Needs Assessment process, the stakeholders emphasized the importance of Chicago's Early Childhood Collaborations, particularly how they serve as models to other systems, intentionally connect 'grassroots to grass tops', respect communities' individuality, and lead systems design by authentically providing real-time feedback from families and community stakeholders to decision makers to meet the real needs of families and communities.

“ As I was listening, I think about how we need to better resource local collabs and figure out a better way to connect them to a broader framework that continues to respect community autonomy and centers families, but also allows for easier information flow and collective action on shared challenges/priorities. In a city like Chicago, we probably need many, many local collabs to ensure we are meaningfully and effectively serving families/communities. I'm also thinking about the many other community/neighborhood associations and groups that might not be ECEC focused--how do we better connect all community/place-based efforts?  
- Action Council Member ”



# Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

The City of Chicago has a very robust offering of ECEC programs available to serve families in a variety of settings such as homes, centers, and schools. ECEC programs can be divided into two main categories: publicly funded programs (see Figure 6) and child care programs (see Figure 9). In terms of publicly funded programs, there are: Early Head Start, Head Start, Prevention Initiative, Preschool for All, Home Visiting, Early Intervention, and Early Childhood Special Education. In the category of child care programs, there are licensed child care centers, licensed family child care homes, and license-exempt child care centers. During the development of this report, stakeholders also mentioned families using informal Family, Friend, and Neighbor care as well as private pay child care and preschool programs. Despite the Region’s seemingly widespread geographic placement of publicly funded ECEC programs (Figure 7), caregivers still reported having limited access to the care they need.

**Figure 6: Number of Publicly Funded Programs, Capacity, Ages Served**

Program Type	Number of Sites	Capacity	Ages Served
Early Head Start	165	4,582	Birth to Three
Head Start	6,374	183	Three to Five
Prevention Initiative	131	5,325	Birth to Three
Preschool for All	524	19,180	Three to Five
Home Visiting	-	830	Birth to Three

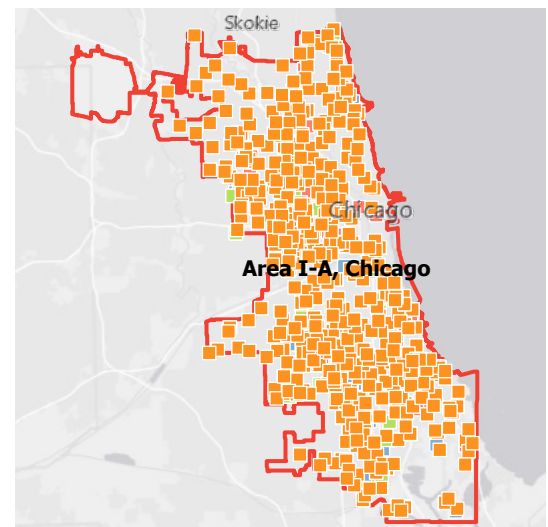
Source: CECIDS, IECAM  
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Looking at available program data provides a framework for how many children have access to programs and where more resources are needed; however, there are limitations to the data and we know that quantitative data available does not reflect true family need. Many programs depend on the blending and braiding of funding for a single child, which may cause data sets to have a duplicated count. Finally, there is no publicly available enrollment data tracking how many children attend these programs.

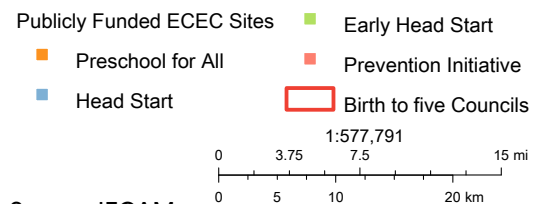
## Early Head Start

Early Head Start serves pregnant people, infants, and toddlers and is available to the family until the child turns three and is ready to transition into Head Start or another pre-Kindergarten program. Early Head Start programs provide comprehensive services to support the mental, social, and emotional development of children at no cost to families. In addition to education services, programs provide children and their families with health, nutrition, social, and other support. Early Head Start is a federal program is administered and funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. In Region 1-A, there are nine Early Head

**Figure 7: Location of Publicly Funded Programs**



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Source: IECAM

Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Start grantees. Children from birth to age three from families with incomes below 100% FPL are eligible for Early Head Start services. Children experiencing homelessness (as defined by the federal government) and families receiving public assistance are also eligible. Foster children are eligible regardless of their foster family's income.

Early Head Start programs are often combined with another funding stream that families must qualify for to extend child care hours. A major benefit of participating in programs like Early Head Start as early as in pregnancy is getting connected to comprehensive services to meet families' needs. Additionally, families receive support as their child transitions out of the Early Head Start program and into a pre-Kindergarten program, increasing positive child and family outcomes.

A Family Council member pointed out that Early Head Start programs are very scarce within the city and some families do not know about them. Council members reviewed the publicly funded map in Figure 6 and discussed how families may not be aware of new program offerings given the ever-changing Head Start grantee landscape and ECEC program partnerships that have developed from new grant opportunities.

## Head Start

Head Start programs provide similar support to the Early Head Start program; the main difference is they serve children from ages three to five. In Region 1-A there are six Head Start grantees that provide services to families across the Region. Head Start programs is administered and funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, and are often combined with another funding stream that families must qualify for to get a full-day program. The main strength of Head Start is that it not only supports a child's school readiness, but it also provides comprehensive services to the entire family through a two-generational approach. Like challenges shared about the Early Head Start program, eligibility requirements, lack of programs and/or program awareness are barriers families are faced with as they try to navigate a Chicago's complex ECEC system, which has been described as an "intricate spiderweb."

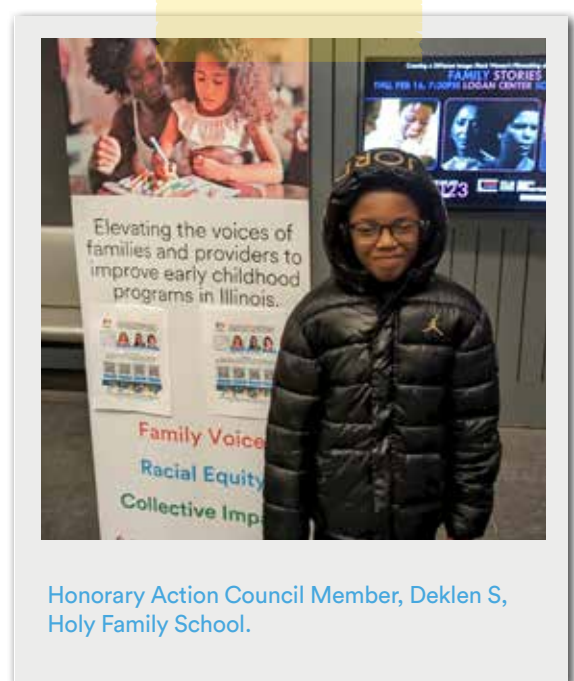
Some Head Start blend/braid funding with Preschool for All funds to provide families with a full-day option, but a lack of funding transparency or a family's awareness of what programs they are eligible for limits their access.

## Prevention Initiative

The Prevention Initiative (PI) program provides intensive, research-based, and comprehensive child development and family support services for pregnant people and families with children from birth to age three to help them build a strong foundation for learning and prepare them for school success. According to the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) website, "eligibility requirements are based on local need to identify children in need of academic support. Children who

“ Because programs rely on multiple funding streams, families must meet the various eligibility requirements, which may become a barrier if they do not know if they qualify for them or if they have to fill out a lot of paperwork, so families get discouraged from participating. ”

-Action Council Member



are 1) Youth in care, 2) meet criteria for homelessness, 3) in households experiencing deep poverty (income at 50 percent of the FPL), or 4) enrolled in Early Intervention or identified by Early Intervention as having measurable developmental delays are prioritized...on the weighted eligibility criteria.” There is no cost to families for services. ISBE provides funding for the Prevention Initiative program. While stakeholders agree accessing early childhood services early has many benefits, they report that the eligibility process, families’ awareness, and the limited number of programs makes it seem like a well-kept secret.

## Preschool For All

The Preschool for All (PFA) program provides at least 2.5 hours of daily high-quality educational programming to children aged three and four who need academic support and live in households at 400% FPL or below. Children who are youth in care or meet the federal definition of homelessness are prioritized. There is no cost to families for services. ISBE provides funding for the PFA program. In Chicago, the Chicago Public School district provides full-day (six hours) Preschool for All programs to four-year-olds and half-day (2.5 hours) to three-year-olds. Preschool for All programs are also offered in centers and often combined with another funding stream/program that families must qualify to extend child care hours.

In Chicago, Preschool for All appears to have the most slots out of all the publicly funded programs, which may contribute to families’ awareness. However, in programs offered at sites like the Chicago Public Schools, they prioritize full-day programming for four-year-olds; families would like to see more full-day options for three-year-olds, especially if the siblings already attend the school and because it is free. As Council members reviewed the data and tried to understand who is accessing programs like Preschool for All, they pointed out the need to know how many children are attending programs within their own community (versus outside their communities) and wanted to know more about what factors are influencing a family’s decision to travel outside of their communities to access ECEC programs like Preschool for All. Having more detailed data could help inform advocacy efforts, recruitment and enrollment supports, as well as meeting families’ ECEC needs.

“The strength of Preschool for All is that the program is everywhere in the city, it’s free, and therefore many families know about it.

- Family Council Member

As Council members reviewed the data and tried to understand who is accessing programs like Preschool for All, they pointed out the need to know how many children are attending programs within their own community (versus outside their communities) and wanted to know more about what factors are influencing a family’s decision to travel outside of their communities to access ECEC programs like Preschool for All. Having more detailed data could help inform advocacy efforts, recruitment and enrollment supports, as well as meeting families’ ECEC needs.

## Home Visiting

Home Visiting supports pregnant people and caregivers with children under age five who live in communities that face greater inequities and barriers to achieving positive maternal and child health outcomes. The program aims to improve maternal and child health; prevent child abuse and neglect; reduce crime and domestic violence; increase family education level and earning potential; promote children’s development and readiness to participate in school; and connect families to needed community resources and supports. Home Visiting programs provide family support and coaching through planned, regular visits with a trained professional based on a family’s needs and schedules. Home Visitors work on practical parenting skills as well as family bonding before birth and as children grow up. Home visiting is a voluntary program provided at no cost to families. Funding comes from the State’s General Revenue Funds or federal funds from the Health Resources and Services Administration.

During the focus groups, families who are currently participating in Home Visiting programs expressed they were happy with the support they were receiving. They appreciated the staff with whom they had positive relationships, learning activities that support their child’s development, receiving resources (e.g., diapers), and being connected to other community programs to support their family’s well-being.

## Early Intervention & Early Childhood Special Education

The Early Intervention (EI) program provides services for families to help their children under age three meet developmental milestones. EI services include, but are not limited to, developmental evaluations and assessments, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech/language therapy, developmental therapy, service coordination, psychological services, and social work services. The EI program in Illinois is a component of the Program for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities (Part C of IDEA), a federal grant program that provides funds to IDHS to assist the states in operating a comprehensive statewide program of EI services for this age group. To be eligible a child: 1) must be under 36 months, AND 2) have a physician's diagnosis of a physical or mental condition that causes a developmental delay, or have an identifiable developmental delay of 30% or more, or be at risk of substantial developmental delay because of certain risk factors defined by the State. An Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) is developed and implemented to provide services that support the child.

The Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) program provides services for children three through five years of age and their families and is processed through local school districts. Professionals with training and expertise in special education services implement the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B by supporting the educational needs of young children and families. ECSE professionals and related services personnel provide specialized educational services to children with disabilities in a variety of settings, such as early childhood, preschool, child care, pre-Kindergarten/Preschool for All, and Head Start and to meet the developmental learning needs of these children. To be eligible to receive ECSE services, the child must have a disability that impacts educational performance. An Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is developed and implemented to provide services to support the child.

Overall families who have experienced either EI or ECSE services reported that once they were able to complete the initial evaluation process, these programs provided individualized supports to meet their child's unique needs, and families learned about their important role in supporting their child's development. Having said that, families have experienced, and continue to experience, many challenges with these services. Below are a few examples:

- Not knowing the status of referrals.
- Waiting a long time to initiate services.
- Having staff changes due to increased staff turnover or shortages.
- Difficulty securing transition meetings as a child ages out of EI and shifts into receiving ECSE services.
- Chicago Early Learning on-line application process not being transparent about next steps, timeframe, real-time support, or not offering a choice in either school or center-based programs if a child has an IEP.
- Receiving placements in programs that complicate family life instead of helping.
- Not having a transparent process to make changes.
- Not being able to access services in child care centers from the school district.
- No centralized supports to help families navigate and secure therapy services, especially if a child needs more than one type of therapy.
- Lack of high-quality therapy services available in all communities that do not have a two-year waiting period.
- Inadequate supports when a child needs transportation services may lead to having to decline services.

“The entire process is very complex and at times feels like it's a full-time job trying to keep up with all the appointments, paperwork, and different people supporting different parts of the programs.”

-Family Council Member



## Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)

The Illinois Department of Human Services' (IDHS) funds the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) that works with local communities to provide funding for families with limited economic or material resources with access to affordable, quality child care. The program serves children younger than age 13 as well as children younger than 19 who are physically and/or mentally incapable of self-care or under court supervision.

CCAP has two primary goals: 1) to support qualifying families by providing child care subsidies, which allows parents and caregivers to maintain employment or educational activities, thereby decreasing dependence on public assistance, and 2) to allow families access to multiple options for affordable, quality child care, early education, and after school programs that offers children the opportunity to grow, learn, and be cared for in safe, nurturing settings that are culturally and developmentally appropriate.

To qualify for the program, an applicant must: live in Illinois, be employed and/or going to an eligible educational activity (i.e., high school, trade school, undergraduate college), have children younger than 13 that need care while caregivers are working or going to school. Additionally, children with documented special needs may be eligible up to the age of 19 if their households meet the income eligibility (below 225% FPL).

Stakeholders reported that the CCAP program allows families to enroll their children in high-quality programs while they work or go to school, reducing concerns about covering the full cost of child care. CCAP barriers that emerged in conversations with families include long wait times for applications to be approved, families declining raises or extra hours in order to keep their CCAP benefits, and families that currently fall slightly above the income eligibility level are unable to cover the full cost of child care, but still need child care. These factors often lead to depending on relatives, friends, or neighbors for care, inconsistent child care due to changing caregivers, families quitting their jobs to care for their children, or limited family income to pay for other basic needs.

In Figure 8, CCAP data shows that in Chicago there are a total of 19,289 children birth through age five with CCAP in the following programs: center based, licensed home care, and Family, Friend, and Neighbor care. Over half of the children in Chicago live at or below the 200% FPL, making them eligible for CCAP and demonstrating the potential demand for CCAP. Stakeholders shared that there are many children in households that make slightly above 200% FPL, making them ineligible for CCAP but still in need of child care. The local Cook County Child Care Resource and Referral Agency (CCR&R) is in partnership with the State to increase usage of CCAP through marketing campaigns, outreach/recruitment grants, and resource fairs.

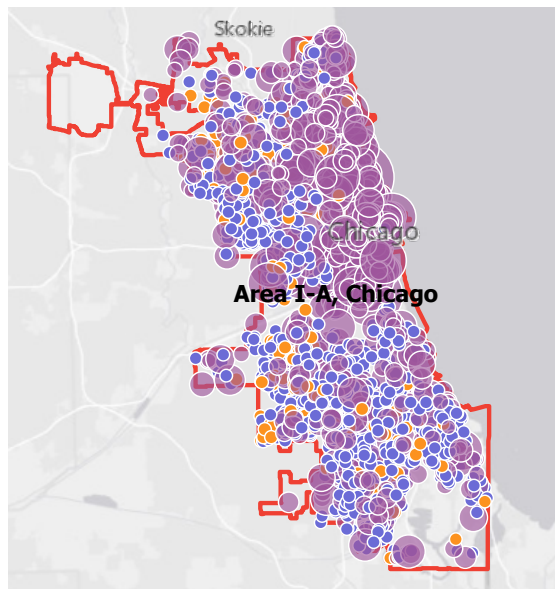
Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM) demographic data shows the largest population of Chicago's children, 56,297, are Latinx/Hispanic, however only 5,369 Hispanic or Latinx children use CCAP (Figure 8). The next largest group of children are Black or African American (50,162) and only 9,626 of Black/Non-

**Figure 8: Number of Children Using CCAP by Race, Ethnicity**

	Asian	Black or African American	Hispanic or Latinx	Multiple Races	Other Race	White	Unknown Race	Total Number of Children
Children Ages Birth to Five Receiving CCAP	474	9,626	5,369	281	648	292	2,599	19,289

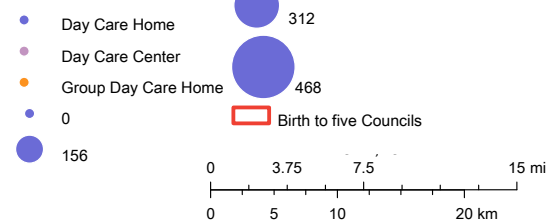
Source: CECIDS, IECAM, June 2022  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

**Figure 9: Location of Child Care Sites**



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Licensed ECEC Providers



Source: IECAM

Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Hispanic children use CCAP. Of the 43,347 white children, only 292 are using CCAP. Further understanding of what factors influence the use or non-use of CCAP is needed.

Eligible families may apply for CCAP to access the following child care programs:

### Licensed Child Care Centers

Licensed child care centers are licensed by Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and regularly provide care for less than 24 hours per day for more than three children in a facility other than a family home, including senior citizen buildings. Child care centers serve families and children from six weeks old up to 13 years of age. Currently, there is no official count of how many centers in Chicago closed due to the pandemic.

### Licensed Family Child Care Homes

Licensed family child care homes provide care for groups of children in a homelike setting and have been licensed by DCFS. Licensed family child care homes may care for up to eight children (including their own), or for up to 12 children with an assistant. They serve families and children from six weeks old up to 13 years of age. Some families prefer a smaller home-like setting compared to a center and reported that home providers offer more flexibility to work with a families' work schedule compared to other ECEC options, especially

during non-traditional hours. A challenge that families have encountered is limited space per home does not allow these programs to accommodate as many children as can centers.

**Figure 10: Number of Licensed, License-Exempt, and FFN Child Care, Capacity, Number Receiving CCAP**

Child Care Type	Number of Sites	Capacity	Number of Children Receiving CCAP
Licensed Child Care Centers	478	36,357	11,031
License-Exempt Child Care Centers	993	10,716	6,167
Family, Friend, Neighbor Care	Unknown	Unknown	2,189

Source: CECIDS, IECAM

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

“Due to the pandemic, various centers decreased their capacity or closed leaving parents to search for other options.  
-Family Council Member”

### License-Exempt Child Care Centers

License-exempt centers, such as faith-based or private schools, are not required to be licensed by DCFS. A license-exempt child care facility regularly provides care for less than 24 hours per day for more than three children in a facility other than a family home, including senior citizen buildings. These child care centers serve families and children from six weeks old up to age 13. Stakeholders shared that they appreciate having license-exempt child care centers as options to meet their family's needs and found that

many times these programs operate like a licensed program since they have to engage with experts to receive designation.

### **Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care**

Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care is license-exempt; individuals can care for three or fewer children (including their own) or children from one family. Families report that this type of care can be offered in the caregiver's home or in the child's home and meets the family's needs for flexibility due to work or school schedules, affordability, or preference to keep their child a trusted person.

In summary, Chicago's ECEC landscape offers many programs in different settings and is complicated for families to navigate. Stakeholders stated that overall, the program that is found in almost every Chicago community is Preschool for All. Early Head Start and Head Start programs were scattered throughout the west, south and southwest sides. A higher number of child care programs in particular family child care homes are found in those same communities due to limited center availability. Due to a lack of program awareness, families stated that there's minimal transparency of where they can easily access special education, bilingual programs, and dual language supports, as well as a lack of program capacity for the 0-3 age group such as Home Visiting and center-based child care. In addition, current data sources limit a complete understanding of the ECEC system and who is accessing or not accessing the available programs and services. Stakeholders agree that while the current application processes are structured to serve the general population, more needs to be done to urgently reduce barriers, streamline the process, and increase awareness at the community level for children and families who have needs outside of the general population.



Haugan Elementary School Partnership - Left to right: Edna Navarro-Vidaurre, Regional Council Manager, Melissa Sanchez, Co-Principal, and Jacquelyn Ledezma, FACE Specialist.

# Slot Gap

A slot gap refers to the capacity (or total number of children who can be served) across programs and the number of children eligible for the available spots. A slot gap occurs when there are not enough slots for the number of children that might be seeking enrollment in a program. Slot gap measures the capacity of licensed child care, licensed family child care homes, or license-exempt child care centers versus the number of all children ages birth to five in the Region. It can also be measured by looking at the number of funded slots in publicly funded programs versus the number of children living at or below 200% FPL. While each publicly funded program has their own set of enrollment criteria, income can be an important factor. Including all children in households at the highest FPL range in the measure of eligibility criteria ensures that all eligible children have the opportunity for enrollment.

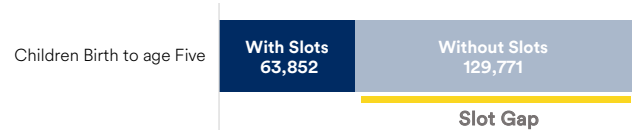
Overall, there are not enough slots to meet families' needs in licensed and license-exempt child care centers in the City of Chicago (Figure 9). During focus groups, ECEC providers and community members shared that there can be many potential drivers of the slot gap, such as staff turnover and the fact that many programs have slots for children but not enough staff to provide the services.

Additionally, there are not enough slots across publicly funded programs, leaving many children without access to the services and care they need. Beyond lack of funding driving the slot gap in Region 1-A, community members noted that personal income is a barrier to accessing services, especially when they receive salary increases from their work and no longer qualify for financial support for ECEC.

“ Is funding there or not there? It's expensive to run these programs, can't pay people well, so it's hard to keep programs open. If funding is there it might be hard to keep programs open. Or is it that we're not funding enough? I do know lots of centers [serving children birth to age two] are having trouble keeping it going. It might also be same for 3-5. - Early Childhood Education Provider ”

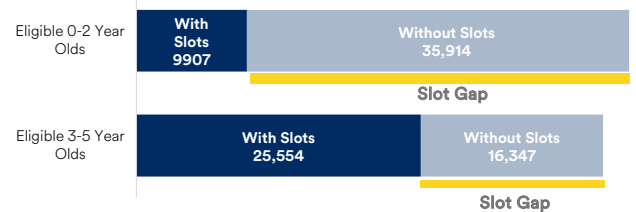
“ I think the focus should be on bringing the slot gap percentages up because currently, the highest served communities are only in the 60s. Looking at the number of eligible children, we need to make progress by putting resources and investments in communities with the greatest need. We see communities are using programs, so let's get more people serviced! - Family Council Member ”

**Figure 11: Child Care Capacity Slot Gap**



Source: IECAM  
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

**Figure 12: Publicly Funded Capacity Slot Gap**



Source: IECAM  
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Council members reviewed the slot gap data and discussed the importance of including it in this Regional Needs Assessment because it can guide recommendations for improving ECEC within the Region; however, they noticed information is missing, which make it difficult to refine recommendations based on available slot gap data. In the future with data made available through CECIDS, neighborhood information will be included in discussions of the slot gap. Understanding the slot gap helps to understand where children are being underserved, which can lead to intentional advocacy efforts to request funding and policies meet local needs.



## Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

Region 1-A recognizes a variety of local workforce initiatives and stakeholders that have been, and continue to, actively work towards addressing Chicago’s ECEC workforce and the challenges they experience. Focus group participants and Council members reported that the ECEC workforce landscape had already changed in the last few years due to a variety of factors, but the pandemic really exacerbated the crisis. Workforce leaders report that they do not have full picture of the current ECEC workforce.

According to the 2020 Snapshot: Workforce Behind the Workforce<sup>5</sup> publication, Chicago’s ECEC workforce, in general, is more highly trained than in other parts of the State<sup>5</sup>, which could be due to the blending and braiding of funding. As of 2020, 43% of Chicago licensed centers report using Head Start and/or Preschool for All funding (18% in the rest of the State).

It takes many critical supports staff to operate a high-quality program, but the following focuses on the highest education level for three positions: licensed family child care providers, licensed center teaching staff, and center directors. The highest level of education for family child care providers reports 353 associate degrees, 233 bachelor’s degrees, and 100 graduate degrees. The highest level of education for center teaching staff reports 2,702 bachelor’s degrees, 1,962 associate degrees, and 612 graduate degrees. The highest level of education for licensed center directors is 575 bachelor’s degrees, 457 graduate degrees, and 293 associate degrees. In Region 1-A, there is an interest in working towards higher educational opportunities. Workforce partners report there were 1,000 scholarship applicants, yet due to funding limitations only 200 scholarships were awarded.

Figure 13: Level of Education for ECEC Workforce Professionals

Position	High School/ GED	Some College	Community College Certificate	Associate’s Degree	Bachelor’s Degree	Graduate Degree
Licensed FCC Providers	813	98	130	353	233	100
Licensed Center Teaching Staff	3,600	358	445	1,962	2,702	612
Licensed Center Directors	147	40	46	293	575	457

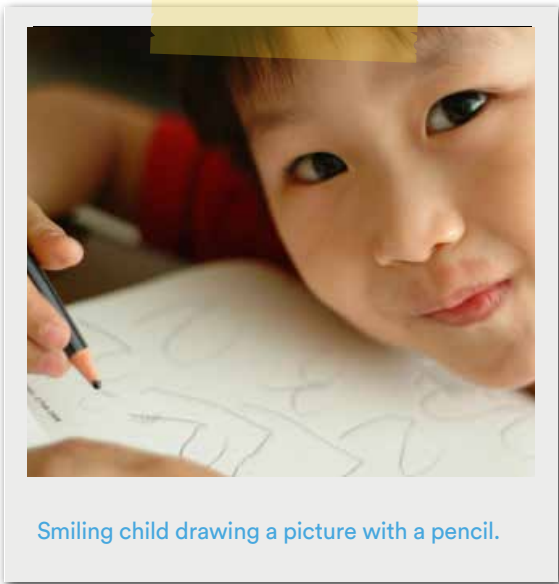
Source: INCCRRA  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

“Educators who speak the language of the children they care for are highly needed.”  
- Early Childhood Education Provider

Chicago’s ECEC workforce diversity highlights include race/ethnicity, gender, and linguistic, which focus group participants and Council members reported as being important, so the staff reflect the diversity of Chicago’s children and families who are being served. The race/ethnicity data shows approximately 40% of licensed center teaching staff is African American/Black, 35% Hispanic/Latinx, 17% Caucasian/White, 4% Asian, 2% Multi-racial and 2% other. In terms of gender, there are approximately 9,493 female teachers, 356 male teachers, and 14 who indicated other. In terms of linguistic diversity, 8,275 reported that their primary language is English, 1,451 reported Spanish, and 1,897

reported other. Close to 4,000 teachers reported as being bilingual. Focus group participants shared that a truly representative ECEC workforce should include teachers that look like the students they teach,

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.inccrra.org/images/datareports/INCCRRA-2020-EC-Workforce-Report-Snapshot-Final.pdf>



Smiling child drawing a picture with a pencil.

teachers with adequate skills to teach, more male teachers working in the ECEC classrooms, and that the staff should be well educated and supported. Chicago is on its way to truly representing the communities that it serves.

There are several workforce initiatives available through the state and City of Chicago to support both current and future ECEC staff, including Illinois Gateways Credentials, higher education institutions granting credit for prior learning, and Grow Your Own programs and scholarships to access higher education opportunities. ECEC staff can receive credits from workshops, training, coursework through Gateways to Opportunity, Illinois' Professional Development System. Another method of getting credit is by having prior learning assessed through Child Development Associate credential (CDA), which is portfolio and performance based. CDA efforts are bringing new people into the workforce and cohorts/cafes

are supporting students to stay in college programs. For example, when a community-based organization partners with a higher education institution to recruit a group of parents/caregivers from their child care program and provides space for both instruction and child care on-site to help reduce access barriers. Another example is providing weekly “cafes” or study halls so students can receive support on-site.

There are many other creative efforts underway by employers and higher education Institutions through Grow Your Own programs to support the workforce, including:

- 2Gen Models
- CDA and employer-lead trainings
- Test prep by institutions of higher education and employers for licensure exam
- Online program development

There are two scholarship opportunities available to support Chicago's ECEC workforce housed at Truman College, one of seven City Colleges of Chicago. The Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) Scholarship was created to address the shortage of qualified early childhood educators by encouraging the pursuit of credentials and advancement of already-held degrees in early childhood education, with an aim toward building a strong, well-prepared workforce. This scholarship is for past or present members of the early childhood workforce serving children from birth through age five. Recipients of the scholarship are expected to continue or return to teaching or direct services in ECEC in Illinois after they complete their program of study. ECACE partners with Illinois Action for Children as Cook County's Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) Agency to provide Higher Education Navigators that assist members of the early childhood workforce access scholarship opportunities and connect workforce members to institutions of higher education that best meets their needs. For FY 2022, there were 412 ECACE Scholarships awarded.

The Chicago Early Learning Workforce (CELWS) Scholarship has awarded 1,056 scholarships that have led to 524 degrees and/or academic achievements and 127 Professional Educator Licenses (PELs) earned since its inception. The scholarship serves an important role in Chicago's efforts to expand access to early learning across the city and build a more robust workforce that can help Chicago expand high-quality early learning

“ There is the associate degree track, bachelor's degree track, Gateways credentials, and many other pathways available for current ECEC workforce or future potential workforce. -Higher Education Provider ”

programs. This scholarship is for current Chicago Early Learning program staff employed at a CPS Pre-K or Head Start/Early Head Start/PFA/PI funded community-based program, as well as Chicago-based individuals interested in becoming early childhood educators. CELWS Scholarship recipients must commit to working in a Chicago-based program for a minimum of three years after completing the degree or approved academic program.

Chicago's ECEC workforce has a variety of pathways to obtain higher degrees, roles, and pay. However, we are facing a workforce shortage. Programs may have classrooms available and children to fill the classroom, but if they do not have qualified staff, they are not able to open the classrooms. Additionally, ECEC providers report that there is high staff turnover due to low compensation and lack of available training to support children entering the system with increased behavioral and mental needs.

Elevating the current issues and initiatives reported by Region 1-A stakeholders is important to ensure the city is supporting its ECEC workforce so they are able to provide high-quality ECEC services that benefit children, families, and the broader economy.

“ Compensation is so low that they need to work multiple jobs in order to supplement their income or leave for a to a job outside of education because they can make a living wage elsewhere.  
-ECEC Provider ”

“ I read that compensation is often skewed based on race. Make compensation and education equal for all in the field to attract more applicants providing quality education.  
-Family Council Member ”

## Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

This Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment focuses on collective inquiry to understand the ECEC landscape from both the family and provider perspective regarding who is not accessing Chicago's ECEC system and why. The word access can mean different things depending on families' lived experiences engaging with or navigating Chicago's ECEC system. One Council member shared, "access to me means that is easy and people don't have to jump through hoops to get a service or resource." Another Family Council member shared, "access is the availability of programs/slots that fit our needs." A member of the Action Council defined access as, "providing correct information to families about the eligibility requirements and process, so families can make an informed decision that meets their needs." Here we highlight families' lived experiences as they navigate Chicago's complex ECEC system.



A family embracing during a photo session.

“When I signed up for the program it was almost like a secret that I found out about, especially the information on income and program availability. Some programs are free but in other programs people must pay, and families are not aware of all the requirements.”

- Family Council Member

“I had four staff changes for the Home Visitor who provided services to my family. It was hard to build a relationship with our teacher, I think, because they were short staffed.”

- Family Council Member

When engaging families from across the city, the largest barrier reported was the lack of awareness of ECEC program availability and qualifications. Families shared many examples of limited access to technology (which is where many public programs advertise), documentation requirements, and not having in-person support to navigate the enrollment process. Focus group participants shared that there is not enough information on the internet about all the organizations that have programs, so when available they choose to call the hotline to understand all their options. Having multiple ways to access programs available to support diverse families is a high need.

In addition to awareness, families experience lack of access to high-quality ECEC programs due to staff shortages. Several shared that programs have the physical classrooms and children on a waiting list, but no qualified staff to open the classroom. Many families end up keeping their children at home. Not having access to a program can be frustrating, especially when some caregivers have already had to overcome cultural beliefs around the appropriate age for school vs. keeping a child at home.



Families also face barriers due to the lack of publicly funded slots that adequately meet their financial situations and non-traditional work schedules, especially for their children from birth to age three. The Child Care Assistance Program does help to alleviate the cost of child care, but families reported not knowing about the program or waiting a long time to find out if they are approved. Families shared that some may not feel safe/secure to leave their children in programs, especially during the pandemic, and not being able to visit a program due to increased health precautions adds to the list of barriers.

It is important to understand family's experiences in hopes of encouraging decision makers and funders to address their challenges so that any family in any one of the 77 Chicago communities can easily access a high-quality ECEC program whether it is in a home, center, or school. Council members want to get to the heart of the kinds of experiences families seek as they navigate the ECEC system. ECEC program leaders have heard from families that if they have a child with special needs, are unhoused, or their legal status falls under "undocumented", they experience even more barriers than other families in the Region. We heard from many ECEC providers who want to engage the whole family in the process and individualize the experience versus walking families through a de-personalized, cookie-cutter process. Our Family Council members believe family engagement can be reimagined across the City of Chicago to better support our families and our youngest learners.

“ We are greatly under resourcing outreach/ engagement/supports for applying and navigating program options and many programs are just not designed for the lives of families.  
-Action Council Member ”

“ Parent voices are strong and important for policy makers to understand parents' perspectives and needs.  
-Family Council Member ”

## Regional Strengths & Needs

The ECEC Stakeholders engaged throughout this process agreed that the City of Chicago has many strengths in the current ECEC system. While rediscovering the diversity and complexity of the ECEC program offerings, they also acknowledged that there are areas in which the system urgently needs to be made more accessible and equitable to children and their families.

### Region 1-A Cook County - City of Chicago Strengths

- Various Public Data Sources Document the City's Diversity:
  - Race, ethnicity, socio-economic, linguistic, community boundaries.
  - Publicly funded programs, eligible children for publicly funded programs, and number of children served.
- ECEC Landscape:
  - Variety of publicly funded ECEC programs – Home Visiting, home child care, center-based, and school-based programs.
  - Enrollment efforts taking place across the city that include various outreach strategies and application supports – centralized application system, hotline support, in-person support at programs and libraries, parent ambassadors/trusted community leaders doing door knocking, canvassing, and providing info at community events.
  - Once enrolled in ECEC programs, families feel informed about their child's development and are connected to other services/supports (e.g., special education services).
- ECEC Workforce:
  - Many existing workforce initiatives and scholarship opportunities in place.
  - Highly educated workforce
  - Racially and linguistically diverse workforce.
- Community Collaborations:
  - Collaborations meet families where they live and work to provide enrollment support and assist with navigating systems and accessing other family supports.
  - Collaborations provide real-time feedback to city and program leaders about families lived experiences to support program improvements.

### Region 1-A Cook County - City of Chicago Needs

- Improve Public Facing Database System, Including:
  - Current demographic data based on State's priority population categories.
  - Breakdown of data by community level and/or zip code.
  - Unduplicated count of children being serviced by all ECEC programs.
  - Unduplicated slot gap data.
  - Unduplicated enrollment numbers.
  - Establish responsive feedback system to improve data sources from community stakeholders.

- ECEC Landscape:
  - Streamline the complex and confusing ECEC system by providing a one-stop shop at the community level that informs families about ALL the programs they are eligible for (i.e., enrollment support and referrals to other services).
  - Increase number of ECEC programs to serve all children, especially those in the birth to age three group.
  - Urgent improvement of enrollment efforts for children/families in State’s priority population categories, especially those in Early Intervention and Special Education programs.
- ECEC Workforce:
  - Increase staff compensation.
  - More funding to meet scholarship demands.
  - Need more ethnically diverse workforce in higher level positions.
- Community Collaborations
  - Need more Collaborations to serve families meaningfully and effectively across communities.
  - Need to better resource local Collaborations: figure out a better way to connect them to broader framework to allow for two-way communication and support collective action.
- Slot Gap:
  - Need actual slot gap data (capacity vs. filled) by community and age group.
  - Need ECEC programs to serve eligible children and meet families’ needs based on priority population categories, work schedules, and location.
  - Address workforce issues because programs may have program slots but not the staff to fill classrooms.
- Family Engagement:
  - Improve messaging and referrals to wrap around services through cross-sector partnerships (e.g., behavioral/mental health supports, child welfare, housing)
  - Identify and improve transition processes through various age groups (birth through postpartum, 0-3 programs, 3-5 programs).
  - Revisit program contracts/expectations to prioritize categorically eligible children and retrain staff to meet expectations.

“ I don’t know about the programs. It’s very hard to differentiate which program I qualified for - EC, HS, CCAP, etc. I didn’t have anyone to really help me figure out what I qualified for. ”

- Focus Group Participant

## Other Needs/Opportunities Identified by ECEC Stakeholders

- Establish citywide ECEC policy table that identifies and advocates for Chicago ECEC needs and opportunities.
- Convene stakeholders already providing urgent supports to recently arrived refugee families to formalize a process for providing access to ECEC programs and wrap around services.
- Create space for collaborations to convene for peer support and connect with local programs.
- Increase parent ambassadors/community leaders/navigators to go to all communities, similar to political canvassing door-to-door, to provide materials in languages other than English and Spanish.
- Identify, improve, and expand program offerings for families with English language learners and dual language or immersion ECEC programs.
- Review Bellwether Report to build up identified workforce needs and influence workforce initiatives. Formally connect to ECRC Workforce Subcommittee to create an action plan.
- Provide program incentives for allowing staff time to go back to school to acquire higher credentials.
- Increased State scholarship funding for new ECEC workforce candidates.

## Recommendations

The Region 1-A Councils discussed various recommendations that could improve the lives of Chicago's families and children. They understood, however, the necessity to prioritize those recommendations that would have the most profound impact on the greatest number of community members throughout the Region.

- Improve public facing data system with current demographic data that includes priority population categories, eligibility, slot gap, enrollment, provider, and program quality data by community level and/or zip code (city, county, and state).
- ECEC Landscape
  - Families recommend building upon the Chicago Early Learning ECEC program system to streamline offerings by providing community hubs for one-stop shop services that provides intake support to families about ALL the programs for which they are eligible and “warm referrals” to cross-sector wrap around services.
  - Increase number of ECEC programs to serve all children, especially those in the birth to age three group.
  - Urgent improvement of enrollment efforts for children/families in State's priority population categories, especially those in Early Intervention and Special Education programs.
- Identify programs with staff vacancies and increase workforce initiatives to programs (e.g., ECEC programs, Early Intervention).
- Create sustainable funding plan that leads to an action plan to address:
  - Increased funding for ECEC programs, especially for the birth to age three group.
  - Identify funding sources for increased compensation.
  - Provide sustainable funding to support existing and new Collaborations that align to city and state ECEC initiatives.
- Establish citywide ECEC policy table to advocate for variety of ECEC issues, including but not limited to, increasing Federal Poverty Levels to accurately reflect current economic needs, universal child care, and other city, state and federal policy issues.

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 1-A, please find our contact information on the front inside cover of this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment.



# Appendices

## Appendix A: Citations

1. Bellwether Education Partners. Early Childhood Education Workforce Partnership Analysis. (2019). Site name: [https://chicagoworkforcefund.org/earlychildhoodeducation\\_workforcepartnership/](https://chicagoworkforcefund.org/earlychildhoodeducation_workforcepartnership/)
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## Appendix B: Additional Figures

Figure 1: Priority Population Categories and Data Availability

Priority Population Category	Data – Available	Data – Not Available	Data Source
Children of underage parents		X	
Children experiencing home-lessness		X	
Children in families in poverty or deep poverty	X		IECAM 2020
Children/families with child welfare involvement		X	
Children with disabilities	X		IECAM 2020
Chicago Public Schools Demographic 20th day SY 22-23			
Children of migrant or sea-sonal workers		X	
Families with low caregiver education attainment		X	
Families that face barriers based on culture, language, and religion	X		IECAM 2020 (lan-guage data)
Children of a parent of legal guardian with a disability		X	
Children/families with refugee or asylee status		X	
Children in families who face barriers due to immigration status		X	
Children who are impacted by Parental Involvement in the Criminal Justice System		X	

Source: INCCRRA  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 2: Action Council Members

Top row (left to right) Socorro Hinojosa, Edna Navarro-Vidaurre, Felipa Mena, and Jacquelyn Ledezma.  
Middle row (left to right) Renee Costanzo, Leslie McKinily, Elizabeth Gonzalez, and Marquinta Thomas.  
Bottom row (left to right) Carie Bires, Bridget Rundquist, Candace Moore and Carrie Comer-Yates

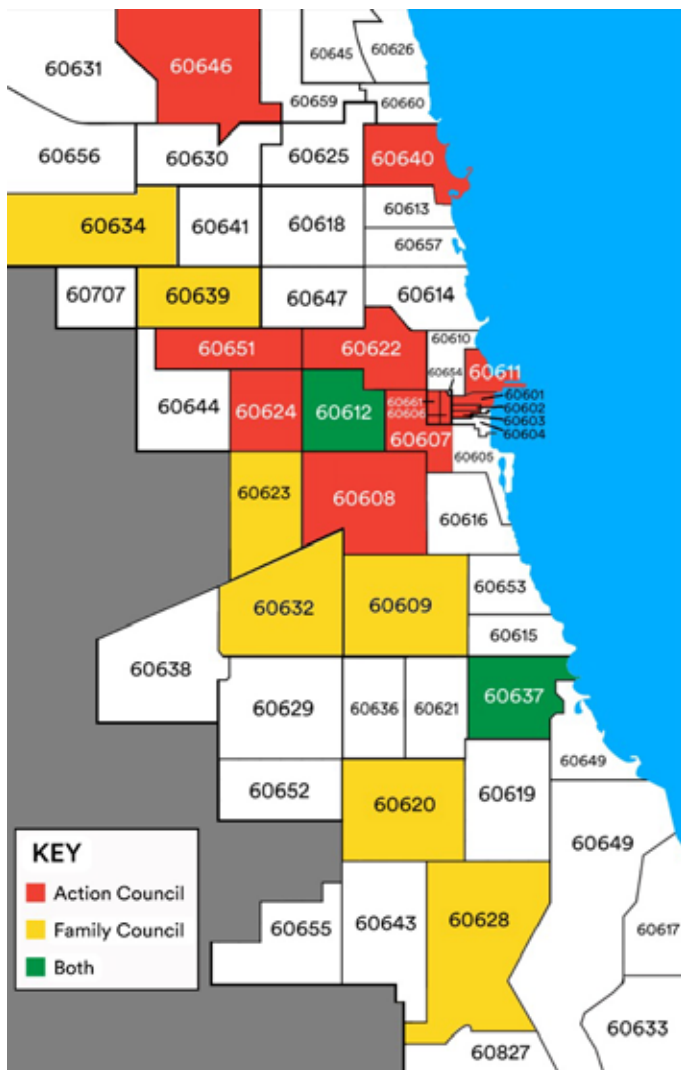


**Figure 3: Family Council Members**

Top row (left to right) Jacquelyn Ledezma, Edna Navarro-Vidaurre, Socorro Hinojosa and Linda Wang.  
 Middle Row (left to right) Cecilia Gutierrez, Edith Rivera, Jerrica Omoware and Alicia Rivera.  
 Bottom row (left to right) Jesenia Briones and Maricela Salazar.



**Figure 4: Region 1-A Council Members' Representation**



Source: Birth to Five Illinois  
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

## 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.

### Families, Parents, 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 childcare 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 Childhood Education and Care work for your family?
5. What barriers or challenges has your family had with using Early Childhood 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?
9. Do you have a recommendation to make it easier for families to access/enroll in these services?

### 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 childcare 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?
8. Do you have a recommendation to make it easier for families to access/enroll in these services?



## Appendix D: Additional Resources

Below are additional data resources that community members may find valuable.

1. Every Child Ready Chicago: Initial Landscape Summary & Strategy Map (April 2021)  
<https://www.cps.edu/ChicagoEarlyLearning/every-child-ready-chicago/>

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