



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

Region 20

(Edwards, Gallatin, Hamilton, Hardin, Pope,
Saline, Wabash, Wayne & White Counties)





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Table of Contents

Region 20 Executive Summary	3
Region 20 Snapshot Infographic.....	5
Overview & Acknowledgements	7
Introduction.....	8
Letter from State Leadership	9
Letter from Regional Leadership.....	10
Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) in Illinois	11
Timeline.....	13
Birth to Five Illinois Regions	14
Spotlight on Region 20	15
Regional Community Landscape.....	16
Local Community Collaborations.....	20
Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs	22
Slot Gap.....	27
Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce.....	30
Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice	34
Regional Strengths & Needs.....	37
Recommendations.....	39
Appendices	40



Region 20 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.

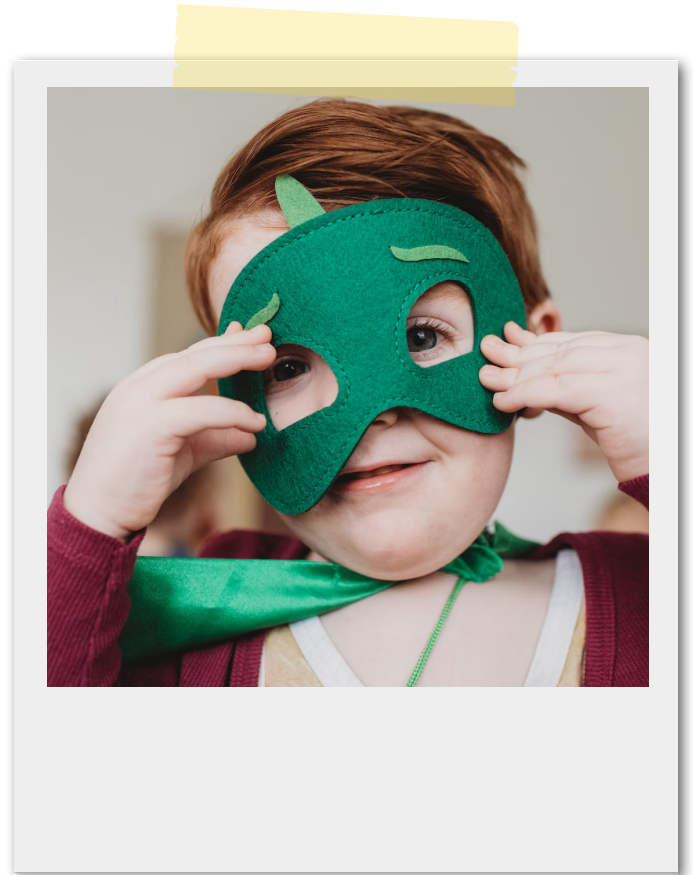
The experiences and knowledge families, caregivers, and early childhood professionals gain while navigating the complexities of the State's ECEC system is valuable, and understanding their lived experience in the local context is vital for decision-makers to ensure communities have access to the programs, 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 20 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

Dependable, reliable, and affordable child care should be available for all families. One community member stated, "We had a family recently reach out to us about enrolling their child in pre school. We had to tell them that we cannot just enroll their child in pre school. We have to have a screening appointment, then we wait for results, then the availability of slots depends on a whole list of factors as to whether or not their child qualifies for pre school. Getting into pre school in our community is like winning the lottery!"

It is critical that all families have reliable, high-quality affordable child care services that are equitable and accessible to all children. Seventy-eight percent of children in Region 20 do not have access to child care due to a shortage of providers in the region; therefore, it is difficult for working parents and caregivers to find the child care they need in order to pursue a better economic lifestyle for their families. For this reason, it is important to work together to bring more child care options to this region by supporting and



encouraging the development of an ECEC workforce through consistent and equitable funding channels and education programs, as well as help existing providers expand and improve their services. By doing so, every child in Region 20 can access the care they need to thrive, and every parent can have the peace of mind they deserve.

Region 20 Needs

1. Each child needs to have access to quality education and care services and supports.
2. Early childhood educators in the region need wages equal to K-12 counterparts along with benefits (health retirement, paid time off).
3. There is a need to address the decrease in the availability of Early Intervention services and professionals in Region 20 brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, including occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech/language therapy.
4. Families/caregivers need more information on resources and available programs in the Region.
5. Working families need more access to full-day, state-funded programs.

Region 20 Recommendations

1. Allocate funding that follows each child from birth so children can receive quality education and care services to enhance Kindergarten readiness and future success, no matter their location or income level.
2. Develop incentives to attract Early Intervention professionals. Families need more access to professionals providing Early Intervention services, such as occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech/language therapy.
3. Establish a centralized resource for families to learn about and begin to use available programs and resources in the Region. Locally, this initiative could be partially accomplished by utilizing Local Collaborations to provide education for parents/caregivers on all ECEC programs through meetings, education, training, and support.
4. Change the CCAP policy to uncouple private pay rates from CCAP rates. As CCAP rates are raised, programs must also raise the private pay rates to an equal amount, forcing many caregivers to find alternative arrangements that are affordable.
5. Increase the CCAP eligibility requirement for Federal Poverty Level from 200% to 400%. This would qualify more families and caregivers to receive ECEC services for their children. Every child needs the opportunity to access quality education and care services and support regardless of the income level of the family.

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

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REGION 20 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.



5,992

Children Under
the Age of 6
in Region 20



2,989

Children 0-5
at 200% Federal
Poverty Level



1,338

Children 0-5
Without Publicly
Funded ECEC Slots

78%

Percentage of children ages 0-5
who do not have a slot at a
licensed or license-exempt
child care center or home

“As a special education teacher, I look forward to seeing the things we can potentially do that will help my classroom in the future. Unfortunately I see a lot of kids that could have benefitted from having more services when they were little.”

- Community 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 20 NEEDS

1. Access to quality education and care services for all children.
2. Increase in salary and benefits for the ECEC workforce.
3. Increase the availability of Early Intervention (EI) services.
4. More construction and building expansion grants.
5. Additional mental health services for children and educators.

REGION 20 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increase the eligibility threshold for CCAP.
2. Additional funding to increase salaries and benefits.
3. Additional incentives to hire and retain more EI specialists.
4. Prioritize funding for construction grants and expansion projects.
5. Increased funds for mental health services and resources.



"I had to quit a job I loved because I had no options, no babysitters or day cares."

- Parent

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.

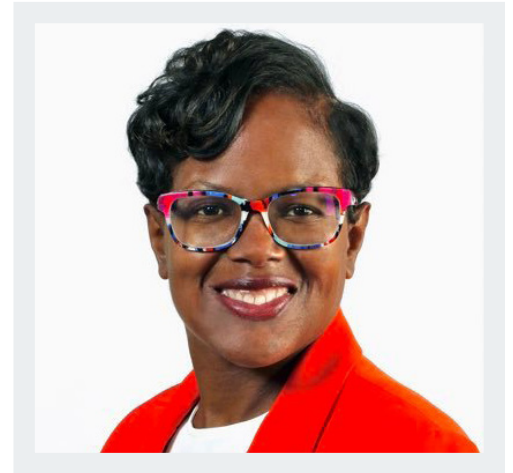
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand 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

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to both our Action Council and Family Council for their tireless commitment and dedication to Birth to Five Illinois: Region 20. Our Councils repeatedly proved responsive to the many meetings, follow-up emails, and phone calls made to coordinate the completion of our Regional Needs Assessment.

We deeply appreciate the Action Council for consistently attending and participating in bi-monthly meetings and offering their expertise and support, sacrificing their time to provide valuable feedback on the current birth-to-five landscape, as well as making suggestions to improve Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services across our Region. We deeply appreciate the Family Council for their transparency, vulnerability, and willingness to share their stories. Our desire is that their strong commitment and aspirations to help future generations access high-quality ECEC for every child ages 0-5 will positively affect many generations to come.

We recognize that Council members have sacrificed time away from their families and we would like to thank their families for being understanding during this collaboration. We also want to thank the community members and groups who took the time to share their stories and experiences in focus groups, interviews, and surveys conducted by our Team. Participants provided valuable feedback that we could not obtain through our Councils alone and we could not have completed the entire story of our Region without the inclusion of your stories and experiences.

In addition, we extend our sincere gratitude to our many community partners who graciously welcomed Birth to Five Illinois: Region 20 to present information at meetings, set up booths and activities at events, leave information and flyers, and assisted us in connecting with families and caregivers. We have enjoyed meeting so many amazing people in all our counties, and we are truly privileged that you have been a part of the process of creating the Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment throughout our region. Your transparency and openness have been invaluable in this process.

We deeply appreciate the Southern Illinois Coalition for Children & Families for their collaboration with Birth to Five Illinois in helping to lay the groundwork in the southern 15 counties by sharing their similar mission, forming linkage, and for their Council members' willingness to serve as members of the Action Council.

Finally, thank you to the Birth to Five Illinois State Team. Without your vision, strong commitment, and guidance none of this work would have been made possible. We are beyond amazed and grateful to be part of the vision of Birth to Five Illinois for families now and in the future.

Thank you,

Janice Crow (she/her)

Regional Council Manager: Region 20
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.

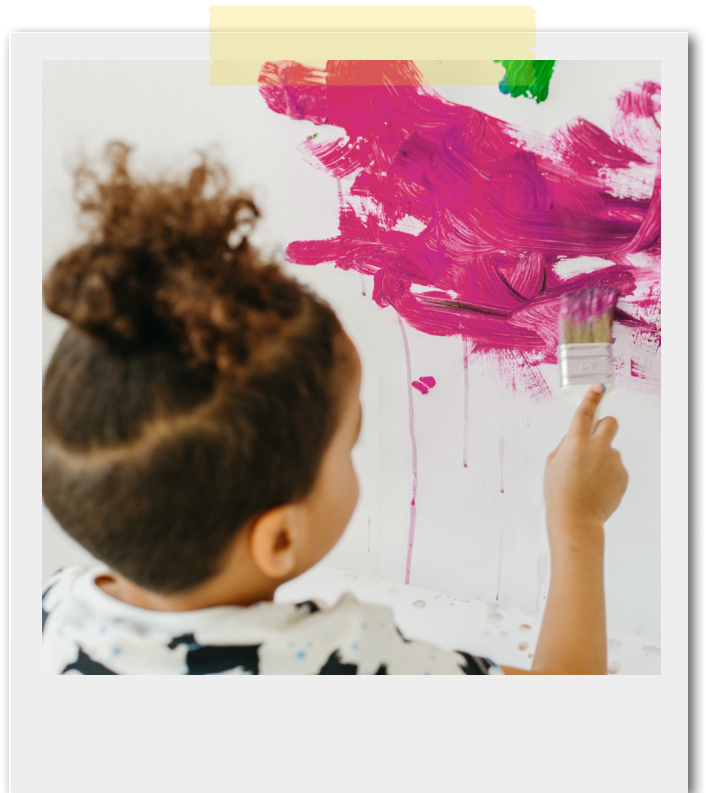
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early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

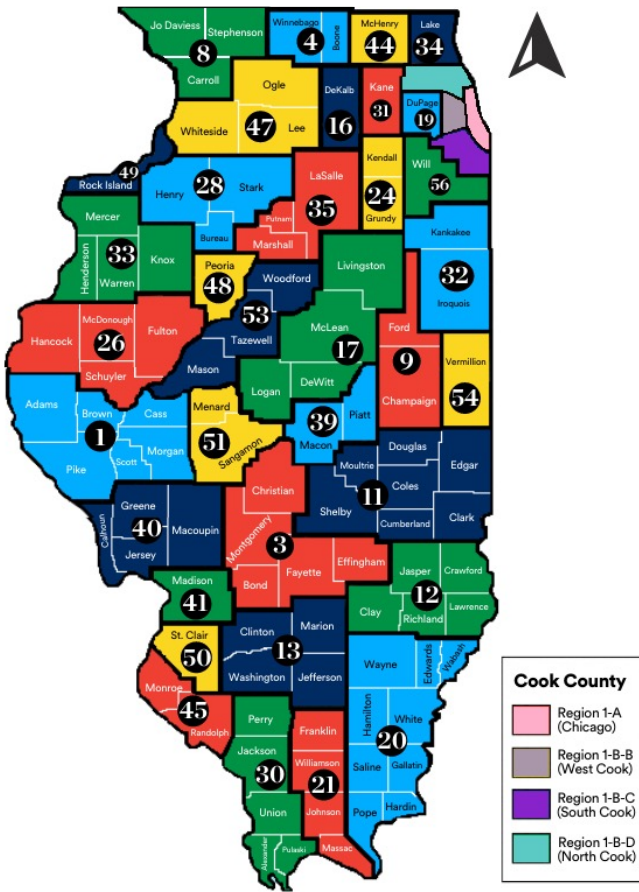


Timeline

- **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.

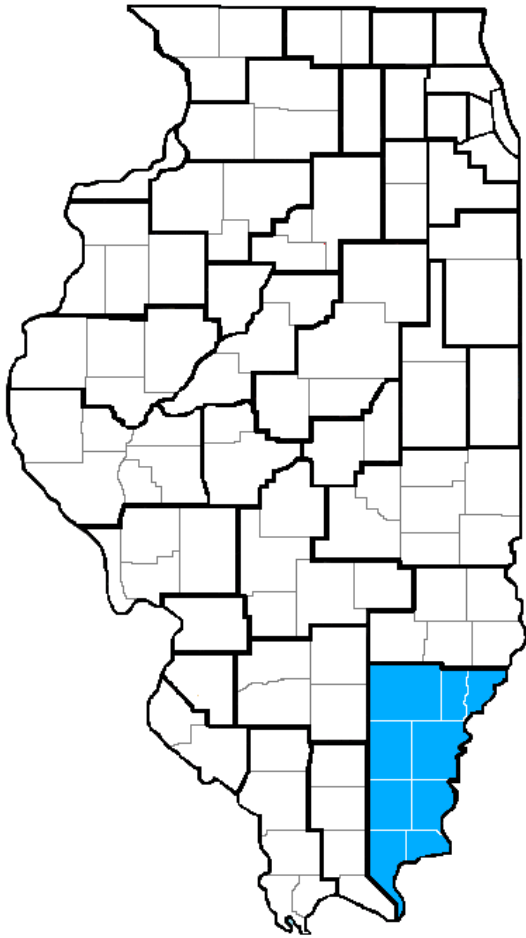
Regional Needs Assessment Methodology

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 20

Regional Community Landscape



Regional Boundaries

Region 20 is a rural community located in the southeastern section of the state of Illinois. It encompasses nine counties that cover 3,375 square miles of territory. Saline County is the largest in population in Region 20. Three of the largest towns in Saline County are Harrisburg, Eldorado, and Carrier Mills. The average homeowner rate for the nine counties was 79% in 2020 with an average median property value of \$87,600.

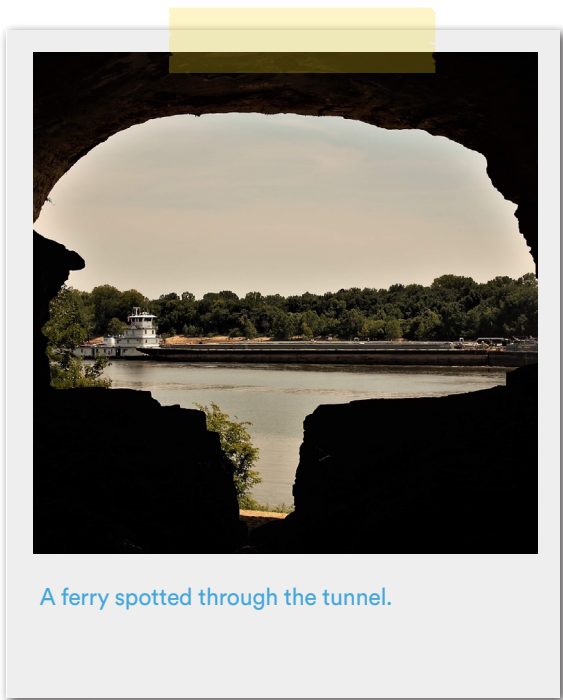
Agriculture is the Region’s biggest industry. This includes farming as well as many other jobs including crop adjusters, crop insurance, buying and selling grain, cattle, pork, and the poultry industry. Many people also work in schools, hospitals, and factories.

Six of the nine counties contain either one or two hospitals, but Gallatin, Pope, and White Counties do not have any hospitals. None have maternity units and are not equipped to deliver babies; however, three hospitals list services for pediatrics, well-baby care, and pediatric telemedicine. At the western end of the Region, Wayne County is home to Shreve’s Pumpkin Patch, rolling hills, and colorful autumn foliage. Edwards County is the home of old-time county fairs. In Wabash County is the Wabash Cannonball Bridge, a one-lane structure that exceeds 1,000 feet.

Hamilton County is famous for the annual Fall Festival held in September, which is a three-day event drawing crowds three times larger than the population of McLeansboro. The natural beauty and wildlife are plentiful at the 4,000-acre property of Sahara Woods State Fish and Wildlife Area. Gallatin County is home to the first bank established in the state of Illinois, Chartered in Old Shawneetown, in 1817. Hardin County is located on the Ohio River and is a popular destination for those who enjoy hiking, horseback riding, picnicking, and fishing in the heart of the Shawnee Forest.

Land Acknowledgement¹

We acknowledge that we are on the traditional land of the ḡḡḡḡ ḡḡḡḡ ḡḡḡḡ ḡḡḡḡ (Osage), Myaamia (Miami), Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Sioux), Kaskaskia, and Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo) in all nine counties of Region 20. Many others consider these counties their traditional homeland, including O-ga-xpa Ma-zhoⁿ (Quapaw), Yuchi, and Shawnee. We acknowledge the historic and ongoing injustices experienced by Indigenous communities and pay our respect to all the Native elders, children, and families, both past and present. Regional



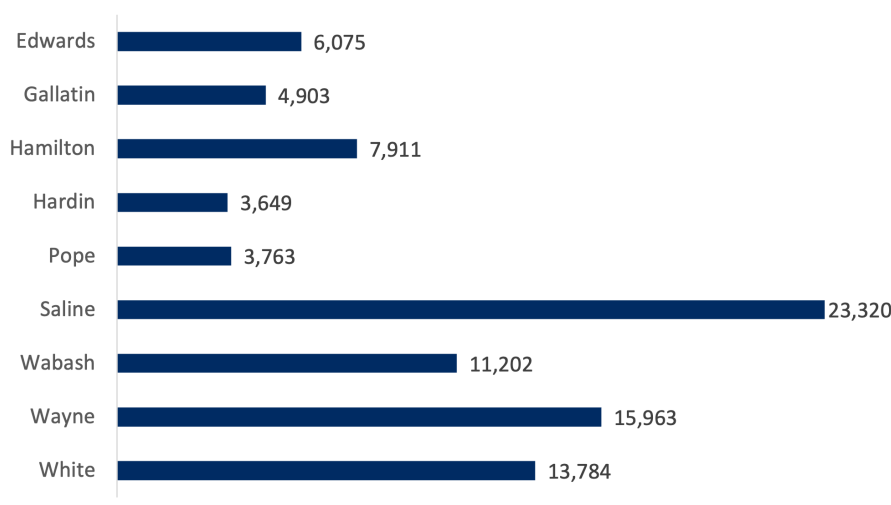
A ferry spotted through the tunnel.

Demographics

Region 20 serves the counties of Edwards, Gallatin, Hamilton, Hardin, Pope, Saline, Gallatin, Wabash, Wayne, and White. These nine counties have a combined U.S. 2020 Census population of 92,235, which includes 5,992 children ages five and under. Across the Region, generations of families continue to work on farms and live in small towns and villages, with a significant number of people over the age of 65.

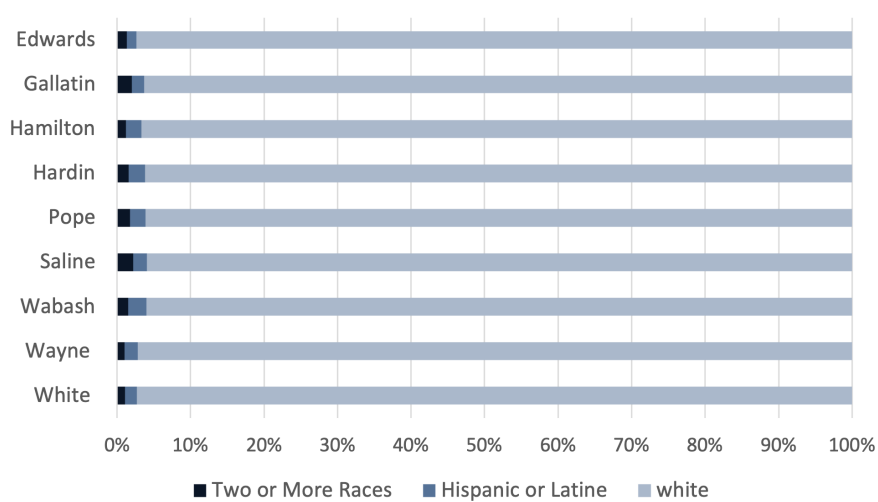
Region 20 is mostly white, but each county has a percentage of racial diversity ranging from 1% to 6% that identify as two or more races, or Hispanic or Latine. Pope and Saline Counties have the highest racial diversity, with pockets of Hispanic or Latine community members and neighbors identifying as two or more races.

Figure 1: Total Population by County



Source: U.S. Census
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 2: Population of Children Ages Birth to Six by Race, Ethnicity



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Region 20 has a variety of employers; however, none of the counties in the Region have an employer or industry that employs more than 500 people. While the farming industry is a prevalent source of income, many individuals do not work where they live. Region 20 community members travel outside of their county to a wide variety of employers where factories and hospitals are some of the larger employers. Among the nine counties, the average commute-to-work time is twenty-six minutes, however many workers travel over an hour to bordering counties or states like Kentucky or Indiana. In addition to the long commute times, a significant portion of the population works night shifts, split shifts, and weekend shifts. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the median household income in the nine-county area is \$46,000 per year.

The Region is home to three community colleges: Southeastern Illinois College in Saline County, Frontier Community College in Wayne County, and Wabash Community College in Wabash County. There are no universities located in the nine-county area. The Region has 21 school districts. For individuals 25 years or older, 89% of them have obtained a high school diploma or higher, but only 16% have a bachelor's degree or higher.

“

I work with a young mother who was unable to get child care services for her toddler because there was no available day care during the hours of the jobs that were offered to her. She had to find a family friend to watch her child so that she could accept a job out of State... and that's a private-pay situation because the person who provides child care cannot qualify for state funds under the rules of a child care provider. As a single parent, this is a financial burden.

- Community Member

”

RIDES Mass Transit has established routes in only 11 towns and 15 of the 40 villages in all counties of the Region. RIDES will transport to appointments if they are scheduled in advance, but availability is limited due to limited buses and drivers. Region 20 does not have established bus stops.

Children and Families in Priority Populations

Priority populations are defined by the Illinois Early Learning Council (ELC) based on the characteristics, communities, demographics, identities, statuses, and lived experiences of members of these groups.² 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.

Data on priority populations is limited and often does not give a full picture of who is included or the challenges they may face. In Region 20, the priority populations include: children and families living on poverty-level or deep poverty-level incomes, children of underage parents, children experiencing homelessness, children with welfare involvement, children from families with low caregiver education attainment, and children being raised by a relative.

² <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/earlylearningcouncil/access/documents/priority-populations-updated-2021.pdf>

Throughout the Region, half of 5,992 children who are ages birth to five live at or below 200% Federal Poverty Level (FPL) (Figure 3). 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. Many state funded programs use 200% FPL to make determinations about enrollment eligibility. Those living at the highest rates of poverty (97%) are concentrated in southern Hamilton County, in the villages of Dale and Broughton.

Figure 3: Federal Poverty Level (FPL) by Household, Family Size at 100%, 185%, and 200% FPL

Household Size	100% FPL	185% FPL	200% FPL
1	\$12,760	\$23,606	\$25,520
2	\$17,240	\$31,894	\$34,480
3	\$21,720	\$40,182	\$43,440
4	\$26,200	\$48,470	\$52,400
5	\$30,680	\$56,758	\$61,360
6	\$35,160	\$65,046	\$70,320
7	\$39,640	\$73,334	\$79,280
8	\$44,120	\$81,622	\$88,240

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

According to the data from the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH), Region 20 had 912 births in 2020. Of these births, 8% were born to underage parents. In Region 20's nine counties, one Prevention Initiative (PI) Program is targeted specifically at underage parents. But to access this PI program, the parent(s) must live in the service area designated by the grant.

In looking at children experiencing homelessness, it is difficult to have an actual number of children under six. School districts count children under six who are enrolled in Preschool For All (PFA), Preschool For All Expansion (PFA-E), and Prevention Initiative (PI) programs. Data on these students is not collected during the summer months. There are additional challenges in understanding the number of young children experiencing homelessness, namely that there seem to be discrepancies in how data is reported. According to the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) Homeless Data for 2020, 7% of Kindergartens were listed as experiencing homelessness; however, according to both recent IECAM data, data from a 2019 Head Start/Early Head Start report, and McKinney-Vento liaisons, there were as many as 10% of Kindergartners experiencing homelessness.

Most of the Region is rural and has limited Early Childhood programs and services. It is important to understand these demographics so that funders and providers can align services, funding, and care with the needs of communities.

Local Community Collaborations

An Early Childhood Community Collaboration brings together local partners and stakeholders who, ideally, represent the full spectrum of people, programs, and services that touch the lives of young children and their families. Together they create goals to address complex issues and to support families as they prepare their children to enter Kindergarten safe, healthy, eager to learn, and ready to succeed.

Region 20's Community Collaboration has two formal Collaborations that cover eight out of the nine counties. These Collaborations have a formal structure, a cross-sector of community partners, a common agenda, agreed-upon goals, and measurable outcomes.

Figure 4: Region 20 Collaborations

Collaboration Name	Head of Collaboration	Counties Served
Southern Illinois Coalition for Children and Families	Toni K. Wright, Chairperson	Gallatin, Hamilton, Hardin, Saline, Pope, and White Counties
All Our Kids Network	Steve Akins, Network Co-ordinator	Edwards and Wabash Counties

Source: Partner Plan Act
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

The Southern Illinois Coalition for Children and Families covers 15 Southern Illinois counties and includes several Region 20 counties: Gallatin, Hamilton, Hardin, Pope, Saline, and White. The Collaboration was incorporated in 2016 and is operated by a Governance Council and Action Teams. The Coalition has set forth core values around children, families, communities, and partnerships with a focus on equity, advocacy, and excellence. The Southern Illinois Coalition for Children and Families strategy priorities are working on Early Childhood workforce, developmental and social-emotional screening, strong families, school readiness, and acting as an advocate for other systems initiatives such as Birth to Five Illinois, and the Carbondale Community and Johnson County Children's Cabinet.

From July 2021 through June 2025, the following priorities have been approved by the Governance Council: promote child development awareness and implement a systemic approach that increases developmental standards, social-emotional screening for all children in Southern Illinois; create a universal definition of school readiness, identify, and prioritize agreed-upon school readiness indicators and support strategies in a variety of settings that promote school readiness; promote effective coordination of services to support children ages birth to six and their families; attract and retain quality ECEC staff and strengthen the ECEC workforce; empower communities with information and tools to better support young children and their families.

All Our Kids Network (AOK) is a state funded, community-based Collaboration whose mission is to engage a diverse group of people who care about the health and well-being of expecting parents, and children ages birth to five and their parents and caregivers. The AOK Network was established in Wabash and Edwards counties in 2018. AOK works together with partners to connect and coordinate services across service sectors as they address current child and family needs. In 2023, AOK has chosen to focus on childhood literacy in Edwards and Wabash Counties. The core mission of AOK is to build network capacity, strive to improve local service delivery, make a positive impact on children and families, and assist families with navigating multiple systems within their communities.

Through outreach and events, the AOK Network is also supporting local efforts to enhance the early language, literacy, and early reading development of birth to three children with a focus on those families who face economic barriers. In partnership with Women Infants and Children (WIC), the AOK is distributing literacy kits. The local libraries have partnered with the AOK Network in encouraging library usage in Edwards and Wabash Counties. In addition, AOK Network is partnering with the Wabash County Health Department H.E.R.O. Foundation to enroll birth to five families in the Dolly Parton Imagination Library. AOK is committed to working with providers to support and encourage parents and caregivers to engage as their child’s “first teachers” by increasing community awareness of the importance of early literacy learning experiences and Early Childhood screening through promotion via social media, podcasts, and YouTube. Through this program, enrolled families will receive one free book each month.



A child exploring nature.

In Region 20, there is an additional community organization that functions as a network comprised of community members and stakeholders. An informal Collaboration is defined as at least two or more people or organizations working together to complete a task or achieve a goal. The Southern Illinois Early Childhood Action Team, Inc (SIECAT) was organized as a membership organization in May 2000. SIECAT’s mission is to promote, support, and enhance the quality of ECEC for children and families in southern Illinois. SIECAT provides center directors in multiple Birth to Five Illinois Regions with free Gateway Registry training, resources, networking opportunities, state and federal ECEC updates, and supports Early Childhood advocacy efforts on a statewide level.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

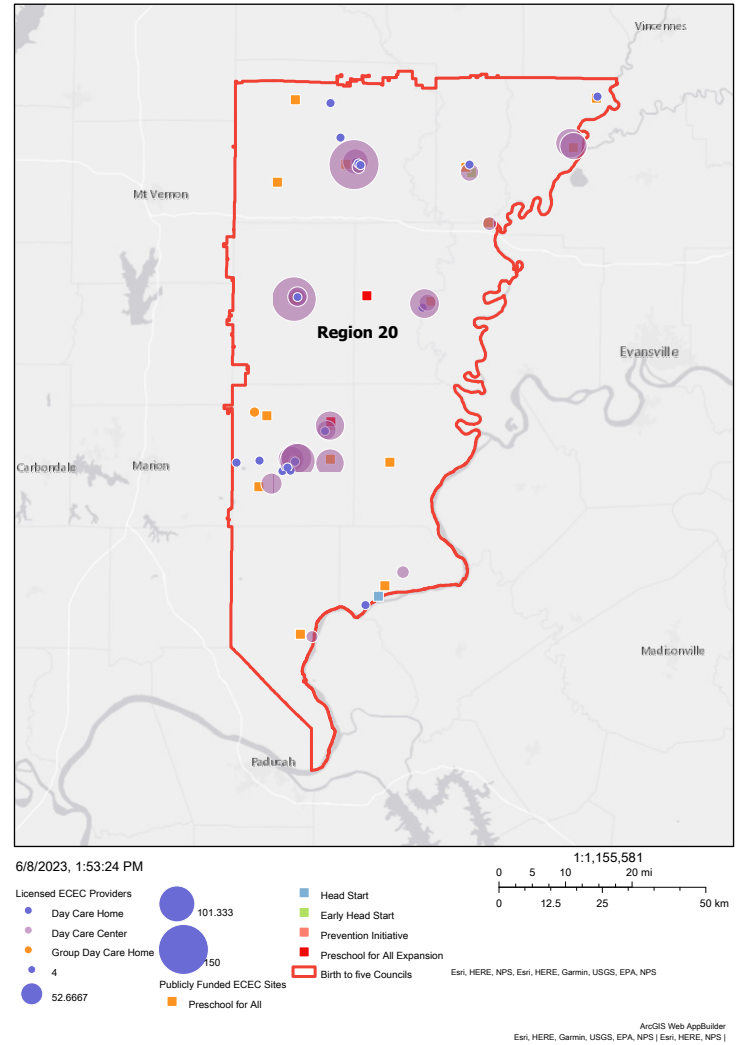
ECEC services and programs are for children from birth until they enter Kindergarten. Region 20 is home to a variety of ECEC programs and care providers, all servicing children based on the licensing, funding, and staffing requirements. Region 20 is home to 15 licensed child care centers. According to the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS), An Illinois-licensed child care center must meet Illinois state-mandated health and safety guidelines. Classrooms are grouped by age and offer developmentally appropriate education. In Region 20, according to IECAM data, most children who require child care services are enrolled in Illinois Licensed Child Care Centers. There is no standardized method of counting available slots versus enrolled children. For example, a licensed child care center may have five available, full-time child care slots from Monday through Friday. However, it is possible that more than one child could fill those five available slots if a child goes less than five days a week or even half-days. Therefore, there is no accurate count of available licensed child care slots for parents and caregivers to know when and where slots are available. CCR&R has a system to identify openings, but this is an ongoing struggle to keep the centralized system up to date.

Wait lists at child care centers and the availability of child care in our region is a significant barrier for families and caregivers. As one community member stated,

“Sometimes wait-lists at child cares are YEARS long.”

- Community Member

Figure 5: Location of Licensed and Publicly Funded Programs



Source: Partner Plan Act
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

“Most child care facilities close at 4:00 or 5:00 PM. Many parents work different hours and the child care hours do not work with everyone’s work schedules.”

- Community Member

Families and caregivers reported that they were highly reliant on grandparents, or other family members to provide child care for their children. Some parents/caregivers have had to quit their jobs or turn down career advancements due to the lack of available child care in Region 20.

“ Availability is really the biggest factor. With there being very limited choices in our area, we can't really eliminate any options.

- Council Member ”

Family child care and Family Group Homes are another form of Illinois Licensed Child Care that takes place in the child care provider's home. Region 20 has 23 licensed child care homes. Family child care offers a home-like setting, caring for fewer children than a licensed child care center, and often offers more flexible hours for child care. This type of licensed child care must also meet IDPH requirements for health and safety.



Older child with a bottle feeding a baby.

Illinois license-exempt home child care is typically provided by family, friends, or neighbors of the family. According to the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS), Illinois license-exempt child care homes can care for no more than three children, or one family at a time, including the caregiver's own children. There is one licensed exempt child care center in Region 20. License-exempt child care can be facilities associated with public or private schools. The schools are operated by elementary, secondary, or institutes of higher learning. Other examples of license-exempt facilities could be operated by shopping centers or services, religious services, or others where the care is temporary while the parents and guardians are on the premises and are readily available. The children served by license-exempt providers must be of three years of age. License-exempt providers cannot receive any government assistance. But the facility must meet the appropriate state or local health and fire safety standards.

“ The pay is not steady enough; you will get paid you just can't count on it to be the exact date each month. There are delays and it can take a long time for providers to get paid.

- Licensed Provider ”

“ With the income guidelines of CCAP, not all families qualify for this assistance. Private pay child care in a center is often not affordable.

- Council Member ”

In all the described child care options, families can qualify for the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). This program provides families with limited access to financial recourses and access to quality, affordable child care while allowing caregivers to continue working and/or completing their education. All families are required to cost share on a sliding scale based on family size, and income. However, not all licensed centers or licensed family child care homes will accept CCAP for a variety of reasons. Of the 15 licensed centers in Region 20, 13 will accept CCAP. Fourteen of the 23 licensed family child care homes accept CCAP. Forty-two license-exempt child care providers accept CCAP, making them the largest group of providers in Region 20 who will accept the financial assistance program.

However, there are some barriers for providers to accept CCAP. Payment delays often place a hardship on providers when they are relying on that income to run their business and pay their monthly personal living expenses. Due to the unpredictability of the payment schedule, most child care providers choose not to accept CCAP as a form of payment for child care services. Providers who do accept CCAP also express frustration in convincing fiscally challenged parents and caregivers to submit qualifying paperwork to apply for CCAP assistance.

“ The paperwork process is cumbersome and difficult, and many parents shy away from it.
- ECEC Provider ”

“ In southern Illinois, our R&Rs are exponentially faster than it is in other parts of the State, but it is still 2-3 weeks to wait for reimbursement.
- Community Member ”

“ We have an excellent one [CCR&R], and they are good directors. Most of the time it is speedy, and they go in on the weekends to make sure we get paid. It has been a blessing.
- Community Member ”

Figure 6: Publicly Funded Programs, Description, Ages Served

Program Name	Program Description	Ages Served
Early Head Start (EHS) & Head Start (HS)	HS programs provide intensive high quality, research based, comprehensive services to preschool age children to foster school readiness	Expectant Persons, Birth to Three, Three to Five
Prevention Initiative (PI)	Provides intensive, research based, and comprehensive child development and family support and engagement services to help prepare children for later school success.	Expectant Persons, Birth to Three
Preschool for All (PFA) & Preschool for All Expansion (PFA-E)	Provides high-quality early education center-based services for preschoolers, to provide children with a foundation for Kindergarten	Three to Four
Early Intervention (EI)	Provides support and services for families to help their children meet developmental milestones	Birth to Three
Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)	Provided through local school districts and special education cooperatives, supports the educational needs of young children and families	Three to Five

Source: IDHS, ISBE, IECAM
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

The state of Illinois provides funding for the Preschool for All and Preschool For All Expansion to children three to five years of age. Of the 2,865, three-to-five-year-olds in Region 20, only 1,414 (49%) qualify for Preschool based upon 200% which was the Federal Poverty guideline for 2020. Region 20 has 18 Preschool for All (PFA) and 2 Preschool for All Expansion (PFA-E) programs. Quality control is monitored by the funding source, which is the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). The evaluator uses the Environments Rating Scale, which is also a part of ExceleRate Illinois. These programs are for children aged three to five. Children must qualify for PFA and PFA-E to receive services. The program can be a full day or two and half hours each day. Some programs can provide busing to and from the program. Others provide busing one way, and yet some programs are not able to provide busing at all.

The state of Illinois also provides Prevention Initiative funds for children birth to three. Region 20 has four Prevention Initiative (PI) Programs, out of the nine counties. IECAM 2020 states that Region 20 has 3,127 children birth to age two; of these 3,127 children, only 1,575 (50%) qualify for services based upon the 200% FPL criteria. This means 1,552 children are not receiving PI services. To serve every eligible child in Region 20 the four PI programs would need to each serve 394 children however, the capacity for the four combined is only 137 children ages birth to two. The PI Programs are evaluated by the Illinois State Board of Education using Prevention Initiative Quality Evaluation Tool (PIQET). PI is a program funded by ISBE that serves pregnant people and children from birth to age three. To qualify for the PI program, eligibility is weighted based on a variety of risk factors and income guidelines.

Early intervention (EI) is a statewide Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) program that provides support and 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, developmental therapy, and speech/language therapy.

Head Start and Early Head Start are programs that are family focused on serving families with limited to no access to economic and/or material resources during the child's first five years.

Services can be offered in a center setting or through home visits. Head Start is available in eight of the nine counties either by a center or home visiting program. Pope County does not offer any Head Start program. Early Head Start is offered as a home visiting program in seven of the nine counties. Pope County has an Early Head Start classroom. Hardin County does not offer any Early Head Start services.

Head Start can provide transportation. The Head Start Centers can even purchase diapers to use at the center. For the home visiting program of Head Start and Early Head Start, families meet with the staff in the home for a total of an hour and half visit weekly. A Council Member stated "The goal is to train the parent to be the child's teacher and they work with the child and set goals and also set goals with the family. This is a family engagement program that includes and educates our families."

ExceleRate is an optional evaluation scale with bronze, silver, and gold ratings that each licensed child care center or program can go through. In Region 20 only 80% obtained a bronze rating. Of the Pre-School For All and Pre-School For All Expansion, 65% of them have received the Gold Circle of Quality, the highest level. Gold Circle programs meet or exceed specific quality benchmarks on learning environment, instructional quality, and all administrative standards; group size and ratios; qualifications; and professional development. Combining Head Start and Early Head Start Centers, 72% of these have a Silver Circle of Quality. Silver Circle programs meet or exceed specific quality benchmarks on the learning environment and instructional quality, along with selected administrative standards; qualifications; and professional development.

When considering the ECEC insights that "stand out" for Region 20, council and community members have considered a wide range of factors. Lack of available child care, transportation, and overnight child care are significant barriers. This information is important to Region 20's Needs Assessment because community, family, and caregiver input paints the true picture of the needs and additional ECEC resources needed in this area.

“Early Intervention services are extremely limited because there are currently no professionals in some of our communities...such as speech services, my county currently has no available in person speech therapists for early intervention.

- Council Member

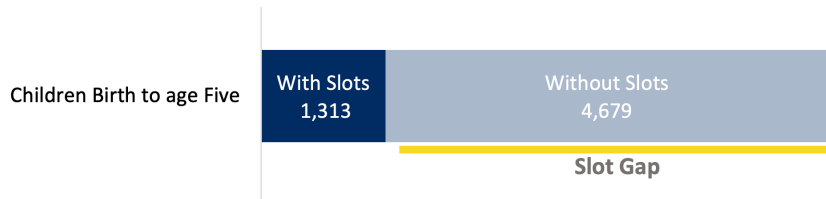
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Slot Gap

Slot gap is a term used to describe the difference between the number of children who might need child care and the number of theoretically available slots across all child care options: licensed child care centers, licensed family child care, Head Start/Early Head Start programs, Prevention Initiative programs, Pre-School for All, and Pre-School for All Expansion.

Across the Region, there were 15 licensed child centers, 23 licensed family child care homes, and one licensed exempt home for 5,992 children birth to age five. In total, publicly funded programs and licensed child care centers have the capacity for 1,313 children. This has left a large majority of families in the Region without an option for child care or services. The most populous county, Saline, has the most slots for child care, with 559 slots in six licensed child care centers and 13 licensed family child care homes. However, Edwards, Gallatin, and Pope Counties are child care deserts because there are no licensed child care or licensed family child care centers in these counties, leaving a gap of 923 (15%).

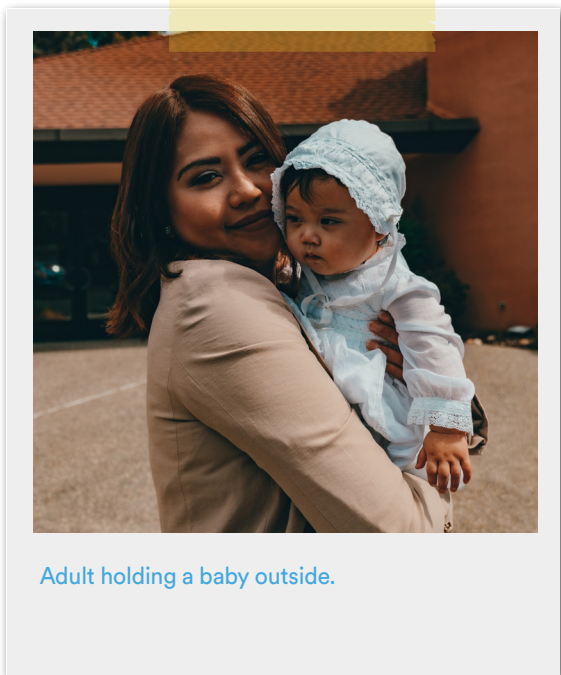
Figure 7: Child Care Capacity Slot Gap



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

“ A lot of missing kids in these slot gaps are being watched by family members or friends. Lots of parents do not know about these programs sometimes.

- Community Member ”



Adult holding a baby outside.

Slot gap has created many challenges for families and caregivers throughout Region 20, including the loss of employment due to lack of child care, parents and caregivers having to travel long distances from their homes to obtain child care, and families with multiple children who have to be transported to more than one child care center due to the limited availability of slots. These challenges were made worse due to COVID-19 because child care centers reduced the number of children they were taking and increased the number of children on waitlists. No additional child care centers opened during this time.

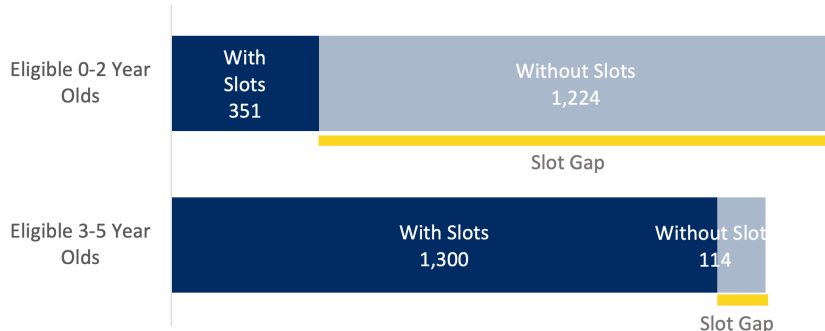
“ There were many restrictions. Child care centers had drastically reduced the number of children they were accepting. My son was going to my mother’s [place] for a couple of days a week and to my sister-in-law’s for a couple of days a week and then my sister-in-law accepted a job opportunity. I had to try and find someone to watch my son on the days when she worked. I called a neighboring day care 20 miles away and they had no open slots. Now I take him to the child care center, 20 miles from my home. Every day I add an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening to my workday to drive back and forth for child care for my son.

- Community Member

One additional source of public funding, the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), helps to supplement payments by families to license-exempt child care providers. In Region 20, there are 93 licensed exempt providers; each can provide child care for up to three children, including the provider’s own children. At most, license-exempt providers can help to fill in the slot gap by 297 children.

Publicly funded programs are programs that receive either state or federal funds to operate their program. The gap between publicly funded programs and children eligible for publicly funded programs varies in Region 20 between birth to two children and three to five children. But the substantial slot gap for eligible publicly funded programs is the birth to two age group. In Region 20, the four Prevention Initiative programs are home visiting programs. They are in Wabash County, Hamilton County, Wayne County, and Saline County. These four programs have the capacity to serve 137 (9%) children.

Figure 8: Publicly Funded ECEC Slot Gap 200% FPL



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

“ I have one child who qualifies for our pre-K program and one child who does not qualify. Therefore, I have one child in pre-K and one child in child care and they are both at separate facilities.

- Community Member

According to IECAM, there is a slot gap of 114 children, ages three to five. In Region 20, there are 18 Preschool For All Programs and two Preschool For All Expansion Programs. Each county in Region 20 does have at least one program for the three to five eligible children. The eligibility for Preschool For All and Preschool For All Expansion varies from program to program. Local community factors, special services, and family dynamics are a few eligibility criteria that are placed on the weighted eligibility with the poverty level to qualify for PFA/PFA-E.

Community members state that even though our slot gap is only 114, there is no room in classrooms or buildings to expand to meet this gap. Classrooms are currently closing due to staff shortages and the lack of qualified professionals who are certified to work in those programs.

“ Not every community has a pre-K program. The slots are prioritized based on children with special needs, income, etc. So, if you do not meet the income guidelines or if your child does not qualify based on a special need or developmental delay, it is a possibility that they will never qualify for pre-K enrollment.

- Community Member ”

Head Start is under-enrolled in all counties in the Region. The Head Start program has experienced challenges in recruiting potential families who are willing to participate. For families who have more than one child, due to the challenge of transporting children to more than one building, most families prefer to send their children to pre-K if older siblings are attending a program or school in the same building. Pope County is the only one of the nine counties in Region 20 that does not offer Head Start. The classroom was closed this past year due to staffing issues.

There are several possible drivers that contribute to the gaps in care in Region 20. The Region has few ECEC programs for birth to five children. When the Councils examine the locations of the ECEC programs, they are in the main cities of the county. Car ownership, maintenance, and fuel are often a significant drain on the income of families who must transport children to and from programs due to the lack of public transportation options. Further, not all publicly funded programs offer a full day of services. Some programs are only two and a half hours per day. In this situation, children of families who work also must have wrap-around child care for their work shift. In some cases, parents and caregivers face the additional challenge of finding transportation from the ECEC program to an additional child care service provider to meet the family’s work schedule.

For Region 20 to have a more accurate analysis of the slot gap, the Councils would need to know the number of children aged birth to five who previously qualified for Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) and, of those children, how many of their parents or guardians no longer qualify for CCAP eligibility and opted for non-licensed care or left jobs to stay home to care for their children. The most helpful data to have would be the actual waiting list of children to get into child care services and birth to five publicly funded programs. There is also no cohesive data on the number of families unable to access ECEC due to shift work, such as working the second shift, weekends, or overnight.

“ We do not qualify for income assistance at our child care center. So, we had to pay full price for child care and the amount per year for two children is staggering, \$17,000 that we had to pay last year.

- Community Member ”

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

Like other areas of the state, Region 20 is experiencing a workforce shortage, preventing programs from operating at full capacity or expanding to meet community needs. Staff turnover is a big contributor to the workforce shortage.

Staff turnover rates remain a concern among community members in Region 20. There are a lot of “short-term” caregivers who are interning to receive a degree or working long enough to gain experience and then leaving child care centers for better financial opportunities.

Many community members report that pay and salaries are also a factor when considering staff turnover. One community member stated, “Working at the pre-school is like a stair-stepper job because of the limited income. Teachers are not really paid a livable wage.” Edwards, Gallatin, Hardin, Pope, Saline, Wabash, Wayne, and White are significantly below the median annual salaries of all child care earnings of persons living and working in each county except for Hamilton.³ The wage disparity is greater in the southern part of the Region, Hardin, Pope, and Saline. There is also a significant variance in salaries when comparing the 2019 vs 2021 data. For example, in Edwards County, the salary in 2019 averaged \$32,154 while in this same county the average dropped to \$20,540.⁴

“

There is some turnover in child care staff at the child care where my children attend, but the turnover is mostly from individuals you would suspect as being short-term staff...for example, students working at the child care center until they can obtain their college degree.

- Community Member

”

As a result of the workforce shortage, Region 20 has limited options of programs and resources for children ages birth to five. When it comes to choosing services for birth to five program and services. Typically, in the more rural areas of the Region, parents and caregivers are utilizing a family member or friend for their child care needs. This means if the family member or friend is not available to provide child care, parents and caregivers are unable to work outside the home or must take off work during times when a family member or friend is not available to care for their children.

The local CCR&R has recruitment and retainment staff who work continuously on ways to recruit new providers into the field and on ways to support and keep the providers that we currently have

³ https://www.inccrra.org/images/SDA_Profiles/DR4522-SDA-15.pdf

⁴ https://www.inccrra.org/images/SDA_Profiles/DR4522-SDA-16.pdf

Figure 9: Educational Attainment by Position Type⁵

Position Type	High School/GED	Some College	Community College Certificate	Associate's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Graduate Degree
Center Directors	0	*	*	22	9	*
Teaching Staff	90	23	17	90	41	*
FCC Staff ⁶	14	*	*	10	*	0

Source: INCCRRA

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

providing care. The CCR&R is available to both licensed and license-exempt child care centers, licensed home centers and non-licensed programs.

Data provided by INCCRRA shows that there are many licensed professionals in the Region who have an associate's or bachelor's degree (Figure 9).⁷ There are different qualifications for different programs, and all the qualifications are important to promote quality and positive outcomes for children. When discussing the importance of formal staff education, a community member reported, "Staff education level is important to me in that they need to have an education in child development that makes them comfortable with meeting the needs of the children. It is best to have both lived experience and some formal education."

“ At the child care where I take my kids, I feel like there is a good combination of experience and education. ”
- Community Member

Many parents and caregivers report that they are comfortable with the balance of experience and education at their child care centers.

Staff burnout is also a concern when considering the ECEC workforce in Region 20. Parents and caregivers as well as both Action and Family Council members and community members (through interviews and focus groups) have expressed their concern for “burnout” among the ECEC workforce. Lack of training and education on children diagnosed with delays and disabilities, the higher rate of children diagnosed with autism, and emerging challenging behaviors were all cited as reasons for staff

“ All children have suffered trauma due to the pandemic and teachers are seeing and addressing behaviors because of the trauma. ”
- Community Member

“ The COVID-19 pandemic isolated families and kept children away from their safe places like school and church. For a time, there were no places they could reach out to for help. ”
- Community Member

⁵ Cells with an asterisk * indicate fewer than five but more than zero respondents.

⁶ FCC includes family child care providers and assistants, substitute/floaters, and other direct and indirect service providers.

⁷ Workforce data reflects those who were registered in the Gateways to Opportunities Registry as of March 2021.

“burnout.” In addition, there is very little (if any) training, education, resources, and guidance in the birth to five landscape of child care when it comes to focusing on mental health needs and trauma focused care in the classroom.

Those individuals who do stay in ECEC careers are typically individuals who are working where they live and raising families where they live. These individuals also have a passion for ECEC and the jobs they do.

“ Those who stay, just have a calling to help children...they want to do something good in this world.
- Community Member ”

There are several initiatives in Region 20 that currently exist to support ECEC providers. Each Child Care Resource and Referral Agency (CCR&R) has a Quality Specialist who can support the program in pursuing quality efforts that help the programs maintain high-quality services. The Quality Specialist works at no cost to the program. The Specialist works with licensed centers and homes to give support in developing a quality environment for children to learn. The Infant Toddler Specialist will support the staff working with Infants and Toddlers.

Figure 10: Race and Ethnicity of Licensed Early Childhood Professionals⁸

	Asian	Black or African American	Hispanic or Latine	Native American/ Alaskan, Pacific Islander, or Other	Multi-Racial	white
Center Directors	0	0	0	0	0	38
Teaching Staff	*	*	*	*	*	267
FCC Staff	0	6	0	0	0	27

Source: INCCRRA
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

A Mental Health Consultant supports programs and providers in any way that they need to provide high-quality care. This could include observations in the classrooms, resources for staff, resources for parents and caregivers, and training.

According to data provided by INCCRRA, most licensed center directors and licensed center teaching staff self-identify as white, correlating with Region 20’s population which is 96% white as a whole and children ages birth to five in the Region are 94% white.

Information provided by the Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) regarding opportunities that are available for the ECEC workforce in our Region includes the Gateways to Opportunity program. Gateways to Opportunity can assist in gaining credentials to be qualified to work in the ECEC profession, such as, Family Child Care, Family Child Care Group Homes, and Licensed Centers. These credentials are recognized by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) Bureau of Child Care and Development. The following certifications are required for some of the Circles of Quality in ExceleRate Illinois: Early Childhood Education Level 1-6. Infant Toddler Credential, Illinois Director Credential, School and Youth Development Credential, Technical Assistance Credential, Family Child Care Credential, and Family Specialist Credential.

⁸ Cells with an asterisk * indicate fewer than five but more than zero respondents.

The Strategy to Attract and Retain Teachers (START) is a wage supplement program for individuals with college coursework and who stay at their current employment as ECEC caregivers. Great START does have eligibility requirements regarding a minimum number of hours worked, their work position, and the income of the individual. They also must be caring for Illinois children.

Illinois Trainer Network is coordinated through the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, along with the Gateway Registry. Training is available to all centers and homes who are licensed through the Department of Children and Family Services. This training can assist staff in meeting the goals to remain current with the completed certifications required to maintain in “good standing” with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

The Gateway Scholarship Program will pay a portion of tuition for eligible individuals who work in early care and education or school-age programs. The Scholarship Program will pay to earn college credit, credentials, or degrees. The Gateway Scholarship Program is based on the eligibility requirements as set forth in the program.

The Professional Development Advisor Program provides an experienced professional who can help guide and provide professional development to individuals who are interested in careers in Early Childhood or, if they are already working in ECEC, in obtaining higher education. Those goals can be towards taking a college class, earning a degree, or earning a credential or certificate. Additionally, the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity Scholarship will help individuals seeking credentials or a degree in Early Childhood Education. This ECACE Scholarship also has a Higher Education Navigator who houses in each CCR&R for assistance to help guide those in the field to pursue higher education. Region 20’s CCR&R and Project Child provide both in-person and virtual training. CCR&R’s will provide Mental Health Consultants to help support programs and centers. A Health and Safety Coach is also available to license-exempt programs to help provide support to staff, teachers, and administrators.

Including this information in this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment is crucial to better understand the workforce challenges relating to the ECEC workforce in Region 20. Communities need to understand the reasons for staff shortages, turnover, and “burnout” in addition to the reason ECEC staff stay in the field.

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice



A family sitting on a bed smiling while a young child jumps.

Every day in the nine counties in Region 20, parents and caregivers are living the reality of birth to five services offered in their communities. These individuals and families are directly impacted by the ECEC services that are available to their children. Families' experiences must be heard to fully understand the regional needs, challenges, and successes of birth to five services offered in this area.

Region 20 has a slot gap of 4,679 (78%) for child care. Parents and caregivers in the nine-county area face the challenge of the limited number of slots for child care, but also the operational hours of licensed centers and licensed family child care and group homes. These child care options are only available for day shift employment.

“The IEP process was intimidating when you are sitting across from a bunch of people who are talking about your kid. The evaluation process can be lengthy and take anywhere from 60 to 120 days and there are several appointments that take place during that process

- Community Member”

“With there being very limited choices in our area, we can't really eliminate any options.

- Community Member”

Parents and caregivers often encounter the “wait list” when applying for child care. A waitlist is one that is not advertised; therefore, parents and caregivers do not know if their child is at the top or bottom of the wait list to be offered an available child care slot.

In considering the rural location of the nine counties in Region 20, transportation challenges have been at the forefront of many discussions when it comes to accessing ECEC services. The ability to access the limited number of publicly funded Preschool For All/Preschool For All Expansion programs can be a challenge for parents and caregivers in looking at transportation because it is such a barrier for so many families.

The advertisement and promotion of ECEC services are often a barrier to access in Region 20. Services and programs are not widely advertised or publicized. Many parents and caregivers are unaware of the resources that do exist that would help them in their search. Parents and caregivers primarily rely on family and friends and “word of mouth” when it comes to learning about the various programs in the Region.

“ If busing is provided, some kids are having to be bussed from towns 30 minutes away from their hometown just to participate in pre-K services. The logistics are difficult, and there’s also a safety concern due to pre-K children riding a bus with older kids.

- Community Member ”

“ Occupational therapy during COVID-19 was virtual and basically made us quit doing occupational therapy. Virtual therapy was not beneficial, I did not look forward to it. It was stressful chasing around my child with a phone. I think his fine motor skills would be more advanced if he would have had in person services.

- Community Member ”

“ We are traveling more than a hundred miles to find a dentist and sometimes you have to see 3 or 4 dentists to get the right service. We need dentists in the area who accept medical cards.

- Community Member ”

“ Just because you make good money and have a good job doesn’t mean your child shouldn’t receive education services before they enter Kindergarten.

- Community Member ”

Accessing specialized services such as speech therapy, physical therapy, and occupational therapy presents more challenges for parents and caregivers. These services are not always available unless parents have completed the process of obtaining an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) with their child’s Preschool or IFSP for Early Intervention for birth to two-year-old children. Even when caregivers can obtain an IEP for their children, the process can often be time-consuming and stressful. Many parents are not aware of the qualifications necessary to obtain an IEP.

In addition to the consistent challenges of obtaining specialized services, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was another barrier many families and caregivers faced when receiving specialized therapies. Many parents and caregivers discontinued Early Intervention therapy services during COVID-19 due to the therapy only being offered during a remote platform and the addition of masking guidelines that hindered the effectiveness of several therapies such as speech and occupational therapy.

In addition to birth to five education and care services, parents and caregivers also expressed frustration at the lack of available pediatric dental providers in Region 20. Currently, according to findadentist.ada.org, there are zero pediatric dentists who accept Medicaid within a 100-mile radius in all directions in the nine counties in Region 20. Parents and caregivers are forced to travel to neighboring counties or even states, located hours away from their homes.

Some parents expressed frustration that ECEC slots were prioritized based on the results of a child’s screening. Not all children from birth to age five will qualify for Pre-K. If children are already reaching their developmental milestones and do not have any special needs or socioeconomic needs, it is likely that these children will not qualify for educational services prior to entering Kindergarten.

“ We live out in the country and have no options until Kindergarten. It can be really traumatic when your child hasn't been away from you in five years and then you send them to Kindergarten. I was also told there was a waitlist for child care and pre-K. All she had ever been around was adults no other children, that was really intimidating for her to be around a school full of children which was a pretty big impact when you throw them into school.

- Community Member ”

Full-day and part-day preschool programs are offered in all nine counties in Region 20, but a full-day Preschool For All Expansion program is to be no less than five hours a day, which is to meet the length of instructional time equivalent to that provided by a first-grade teacher. Preschool For All must offer 12.5 hours of instruction each week or two and half hours a day. Parents and caregivers are very passionate about how their child(ren) receives early learning services in the most critical years of learning. “I think it would be beneficial to have full-day pre-school,” stated a grandparent. Another parent stated, “I prefer an environment where there's some structure for my child.” The consensus was that pre-school programs provide more structure and education than a child care environment or family child care setting.

“ Private pay child care in a center is often not affordable.

- Community Member ”

“ WADI Head Start was a good program for me. They were super helpful with resources for our family, and they bussed my daughter to and from school so that transportation was not an issue. I would appreciate any extra help I can get in raising these kids. I am always excited to learn about new services and organizations that can help.

- Community Member ”

When it comes to the affordability of child care from birth to five years of age, many caregivers were on the threshold of not meeting the financial criteria to qualify for the Illinois Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). Parents expressed frustration that they made “too much money” to qualify for CCAP, but not enough money to comfortably pay for child care and still pay their monthly financial obligations.

Even with the challenges in Region 20, parents and caregivers still felt very strongly that the community, programs, and services could meet some of their needs. In one focus group, a community member stated, “I feel like pre-K has been excellent for helping me meet the needs of my grandchildren. They even helped me find clothing for the kids. They had nothing when they came to me at Christmas time.”

The youngest children truly are the future of these communities and the insight this Region needs to make sure that the children are getting a successful start to success in life.

Regional Strengths and Needs

Region 20 understands that enrollment in high-quality ECEC services can result in improved child development and outcomes that benefit school readiness. Region 20 has worked together to share the strengths and needs of every aspect of ECEC in Region 20 and through strategic collaboration and collective insights, have concluded the following.

Strengths

- The greatest strength in the Region is strong community support in all nine counties and the willingness of community members to come together to share resources and insights to meet the ECEC needs of children and families.
- Council members from Region 20's Action and Family Councils expressed satisfaction with the quality of ECEC programs in the Region.
- There are a variety of ECEC programs and services in the Region including: licensed child care centers, licensed family child care, group homes, license-exempt child care, Preschool for All, Preschool for All Expansion, Preventative Initiative, Head Start, Early Head Start, Early Intervention, and Early Childhood Special Education services.
- Head Start/Early Head Start is available in all nine counties in the Region. Transportation to and from this program is provided in several counties.
- All counties in Region 20 offer Preschool For All/Preschool For All Expansion programs. These programs are offered at no cost to eligible families and caregivers.
- The Southern Illinois Coalition for Children and Families (SIFCC) is a cross-sector Collaboration of agencies and individuals dedicated to working together to improve the quality of life for young children and their families across southern Illinois. Through collaborative efforts, this coalition has developed an infrastructure that promotes better child outcomes, offers resources, and provides strong family support at the local level in Hamilton, White, Saline, Gallatin, Pope, and Hardin Counties.
- In Edwards and Wabash Counties, the All Our Kids Network supports collaboration across service sectors to achieve greater results for young children. Their mission is to engage a diverse group of people who care about the health and well-being of children and families, and they work with providers to support and encourage parents/caregivers to engage as their child's "first teachers."
- The Southern Illinois Early Childhood Action Team (SIECAT) is a strong membership group housed in Wayne County. Their mission is to promote, support, and enhance the quality of ECEC for children and families in Southern Illinois.
- There are several programs that foster higher education opportunities for ECEC professionals and prospective ECEC career seekers (for example, the Gateway Scholarship Program, Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity Scholarship, CCR&R/Project Child training, Illinois Trainer Network, and Strategy to Attract and Retain Teachers).

Needs

- Each child needs to have access to quality education and care services and support.
- We must address the decrease in the availability of services and professionals in Early Intervention services in Region 20 brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech language therapy.
- Early childhood educators in the Region need wages equal to their K-12 counterparts, along with benefits like health insurance, retirement, and paid time off.
- Families/caregivers need more information on resources and available programs in the Region.
- Working families need more access to full-day, state-funded programs.
- Families need more education regarding eligibility and easier access to the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP).
- Early childhood caregivers, educators, and families have expressed the need for mental health services, professionals, and resources for children and families, as well as more available mental health, social-emotional, and trauma-informed practices in the classroom, especially in the post-COVID 19 pandemic era.
- There is an extreme need for dental services in this area. Currently, there are no dental providers who accept Medicaid in any of the nine counties in Region 20.
- Child care providers and early education providers and administrators have expressed the need for building and construction grants in Region 20.
- Due to the rural location of Region 20 and the limited availability of public transportation, there is an overarching need for transportation resources, including both personal transportation and transportation to and from ECEC programs and support services.

Recommendations

The Region 20 Councils discussed dozens of recommendations for systemic changes that could improve the lives of the families and children in the local communities. 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.

- Available funding needs to follow each child from birth so children can receive quality education and care services and support, no matter their location or income level, and so all children are able to receive comprehensive services to enhance Kindergarten readiness and future success.
- Incentives should be developed to attract Early Intervention professionals. Processes could be streamlined to make the most of the professional's billable hours while working with high caseloads. Families need more access to Early Intervention services, such as occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech/language therapy, and an increase in the number of professionals to serve children from birth to age three.
- A centralized resource for families to gain awareness of the available programs and resources in the Region to increase usage of available programs. Locally, this initiative could be partially accomplished by utilizing Local Collaborations to provide education for parents/caregivers on all ECEC programs through offering meetings, education, training, and support.
- Every child needs the opportunity to access quality education and care services and support regardless of the income level of the family. Increasing the Federal Poverty Level from 200% to 400% would create more eligibility for the CCAP program and therefore qualify more families/caregivers to receive ECEC services for their children.
- Change CCAP policy to uncouple private pay rates from CCAP rates. Due to the economy in Region 20, to stay in business it is necessary for more programs to accept CCAP. Per policy, the provider may not charge the State more than its private pay parents. As CCAP rates are raised, programs must also raise the private pay rates to an equal amount, forcing many caregivers to find alternative arrangements that are affordable.
- Increase the usage for CCAP by educating and promoting CCAP to families/caregivers and by streamlining and simplifying the CCAP application process.
- To retain current teachers and attract more teachers in early childhood education, a boost in state funding is desirable to increase salaries and benefits so employees are making a salary commensurate with other teachers and educators who work with children over the age of five.
- Funds need to be available to increase the mental health services, professionals, and resources for children and families.
- Programs need to be developed to entice pediatric dentists to accept Medicaid in the Region. Policy change would be recommended to increase reimbursement rates for services provided and to expedite payments to providers. Another option would be for the State to create a new program with a prepaid dental card separate from existing insurance plans that would pay each provider directly.
- To expand their ability to accept more children engaged and enrolled in ECEC services and maximize the availability of child care slots across the Region, funding should be prioritized for building grants and building expansion projects in Region 20 for community-based programs, as well as for-profit and non-profit organizations, such as schools. Region 20 has not been awarded any recent construction grants.
- Provide public transportation funding to increase routes throughout the Region.

In compiling this report, it is our hope that local and state leaders will use this information to advance ECEC services in the Region. We will continue our community engagement efforts to expand our understanding of the ECEC needs of local families and providers. If you have further questions about these recommendations or would like to get involved with the work of Birth to Five Illinois in Region 20, please find our contact information on the front inside cover of this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment.

Appendices

Appendix A: Citations

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Appendix B: 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, and Caregivers

1. There are many Early Childhood services available in our Region. What Early Childhood services does your family use/has your family used?
2. How have you found out about Early Childhood programs or services, or found care for your child(ren)?
3. Do the child care services you're using now meet your family's needs? If not, please describe what would better fit your family's needs.
4. What, if anything, has been particularly helpful in making Early 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?

Early Childhood Professionals and Others

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

Appendix C: Additional Resources

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

1. Child Care Aware of America: <https://www.childcareaware.org/our-issues/research/ccdc/state/il/>
2. Community Commons: <https://www.communitycommons.org/>
3. Erikson Institute: <https://riskandreach.erikson.edu/illinois-map/>

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Birth to Five Illinois is funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and is a department of the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA).