



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

Region 26

(Fulton, Hancock, McDonough & Schuyler Counties)





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Region 26 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.

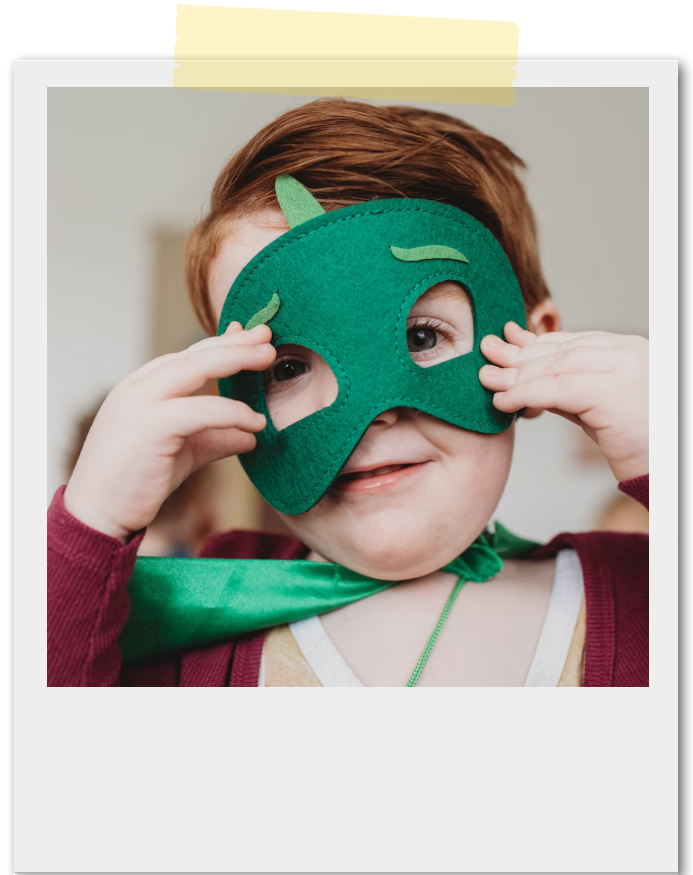
The experiences and knowledge families, caregivers, and early childhood professionals gain while navigating the complexities of the State's ECEC system is valuable, and understanding their lived experience in the local context is vital for decision-makers to ensure communities have access to the programs, 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 26 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

Throughout the year many topics were discussed, and many things were mentioned to be implemented to strengthen the Early Childhood Education and Care landscape in Region 26. Building trust, establishing better communication across county lines, mental health, establishing parental support, more affordable child care, and creating a better pipeline for the workforce are all considered important. Yet, helping parents flourish is the highest priority, "What we can do for parents is to make their lives easier to spend time with their children without the stress of bills and being away from home."

The availability of therapy and services for children with special needs is low. Distance to providers decreases access for many families. School districts can accommodate older children with special needs, but early childhood educators do not receive the same support. Children with special needs can be harder to find care for due to staffing ratios.



Many children aged three to five qualify for half-day preschool, but families still must find care for the other half of the day and their younger children. Finding ways to increase salaries for these valuable workers could increase capacity. Caregivers in the area expressed the need for concrete support and information. They would like consistent messaging about early childhood development and a central location to find services, classes, support groups, and child care options.

The lack of child care and special services is partially due to a lack of workforce in the Region. Providers discussed the lengthy hiring process and wait times for pre-employment approval. They also spoke about educational qualifications not being aligned between schools and early childhood education, making it more difficult to find properly qualified staff.

Long drive times were frequently mentioned throughout interviews and focus groups. Families miss school and work for appointments out of town and out of the Region. Long drives for services can be a financial hardship due to the cost of travel and loss of workdays. Travel also causes interruptions in children's learning and routines. Services and child care more widely available and closer to home could decrease a family's time spent traveling.

Region 26 Needs

1. Greater access to special needs services.
2. More child care slots for children age birth to two.
3. Improved Community Support.
4. Improved efficiency and clearer regulations for providers and staff.
5. Transportation-closer access to services.

Region 26 Recommendations

1. The region would increase its adaptive and therapeutic services by forming a local group of health providers, school districts, and private companies to ensure needs are being met.
2. The region would offer more child care slots for children age birth to two by helping providers know of funding opportunities and help local colleges develop and implement a pathway to increase the workforce for providers in the area.
3. The region would provide a concerted information and educational campaign for parents around developmental milestones for the first three years and publicize existing programs, streamline information between families and providers, and increase community connections.
4. The region can improve efficiency and provide clearer regulations to parents, providers, and staff, ensure qualifications between ECEC and intersecting agencies align and are transferable. Simplify paperwork and information regarding CCAP for families.
5. The region could decrease drive times and reduce wait lists by advocating for more Licensed Family Child Care homes. Licensed providers closer to home reduces travel time. The region could propose local community outreach courses on how to start a home provider location via local community college.

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

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REGION 26 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.



4,598

Children Under
the Age of 6
in Region 26



2,345

Children 0-5
at 200% Federal
Poverty Level



675

Children 0-5
Without Publicly
Funded ECEC Slots

64%

Percentage of children ages 0-2 who do not have a slot in a licensed or license-exempt child care center or home

“After seeing the waitlist, we just had to wait until after our child turned three to enroll him in child care.”

- Parent

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 26 NEEDS

1. Greater access to services for children with disabilities
2. More child care slots for children ages birth to two
3. Transportation or closer access to programs and services

REGION 26 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increase adaptive and therapeutic services by forming a local group of health providers, school districts, and private companies
2. Help local colleges develop and implement a pathway to improve the workforce for providers
3. Educate parents and caregivers about Early Childhood developmental milestones and existing programs
4. Increase the number of licensed family child care homes to reduce travel time for families



**“We are at a point now where you have to find a child care spot for your child before they are even born.”
- Community Member**

Overview & Acknowledgements

Introduction

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

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

This report will be used in a variety of ways.

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

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

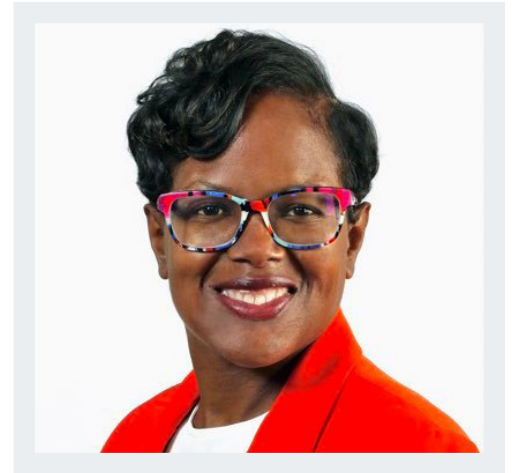
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand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

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



Letter from State Leadership

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Letter from Regional Leadership

The Region 26 Regional Needs Assessment could not have been made available without the help of our community.

The Birth to Five Illinois: Region 26 Team would like to acknowledge our gratitude for those who participated in our Action Council and Family Council. Their commitment to attend meetings and partake in meaningful conversations surrounding the data was exceedingly helpful. Their commentary and poignant questions helped to refine and provide us with a clearer vision of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) landscape in Fulton, Hancock, McDonough, and Schuyler Counties. Many thanks go out to those who took part in interviews, focus groups, and surveys to ensure we captured as many voices as possible across the Region.

We would like to extend our appreciation for those community organizations who supported us at fairs and community events to help inform the community about this important work.

A special thank you goes to all the school districts in our Region, Canton Chamber of Commerce, Carthage Public Library, Family Community Resource Center, DHS Family Community Resource Center in Fulton County, Graham Hospital, Lewistown Carnegie Library, Regional Office of Education 26, STARNET, Trinity Lutheran Church in Canton, West Central Child Care Connection, West Central Illinois Special Education Cooperative, and Western Illinois University.

Most importantly, we would like to acknowledge the families who sat on our Councils and the numerous families we spoke to in person as we traveled across the four counties in our Region. Without them, none of this would have been possible. The stories they shared provided us with a clearer picture of the early childhood landscape and their enthusiasm helped develop a Regional Needs Assessment that honors their lived experiences, feedback, and insight. It is an honor and a pleasure to have been a witness to this level of community strengthening and support.

Thank you,

Paul Larson (he/him)

Regional Council Manager: Region 26

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.

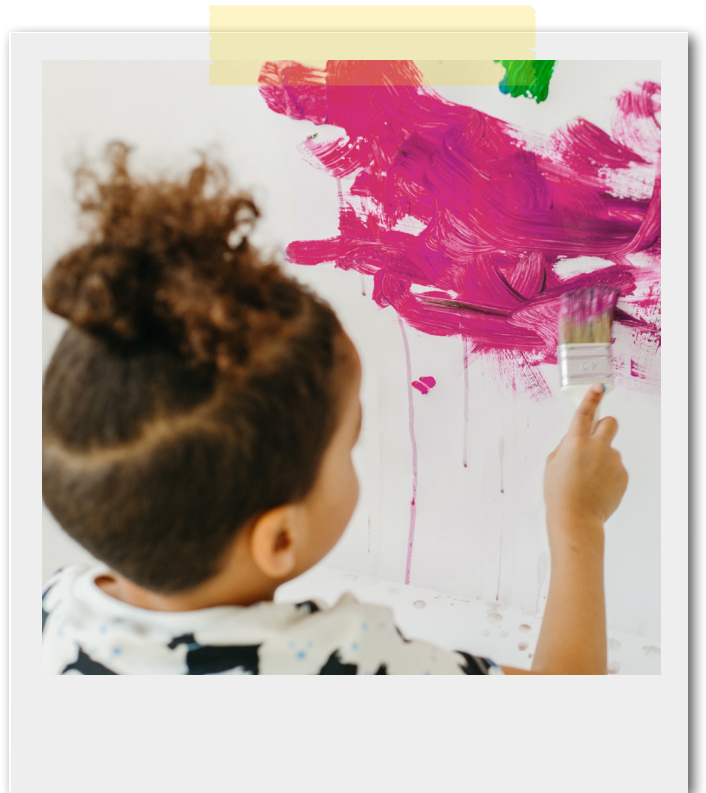
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early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

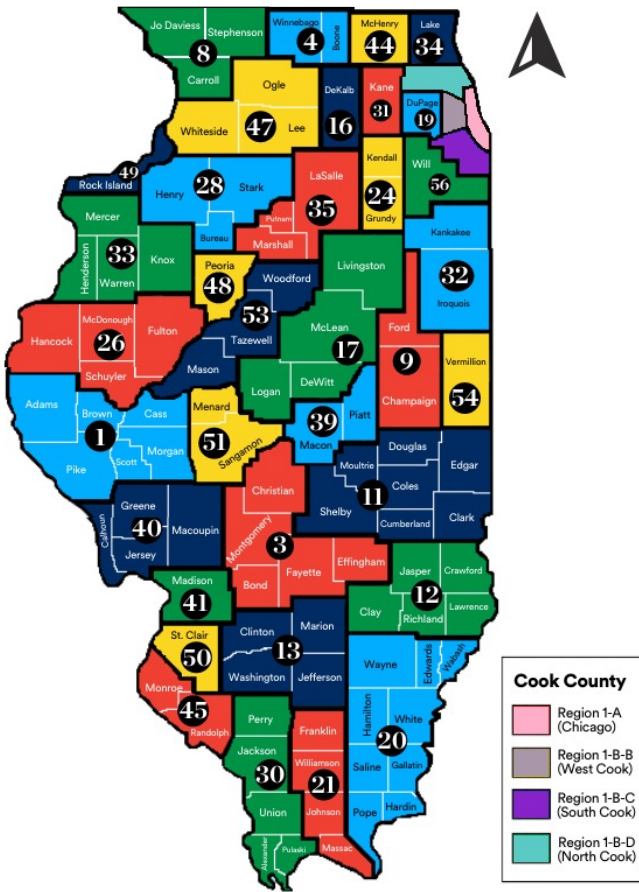


Timeline

- **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.

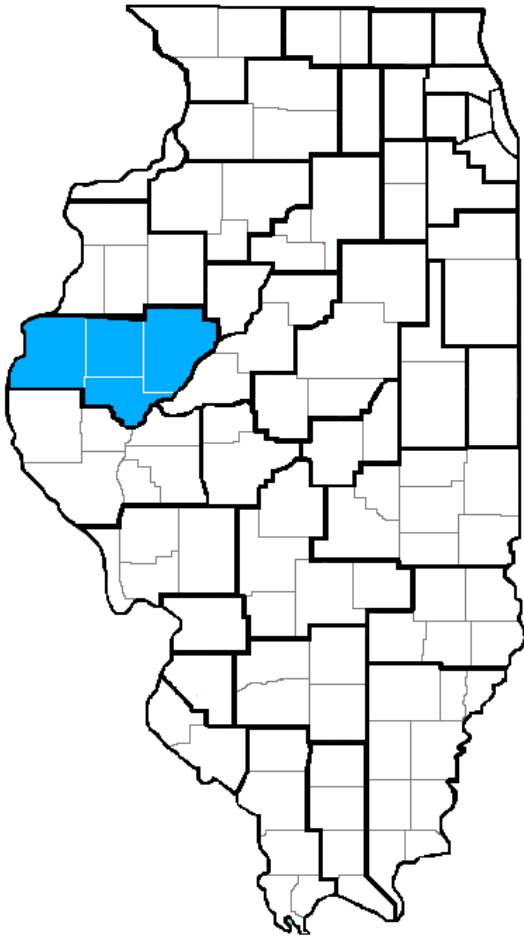
Regional Needs Assessment Methodology

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 26

Regional Community Landscape

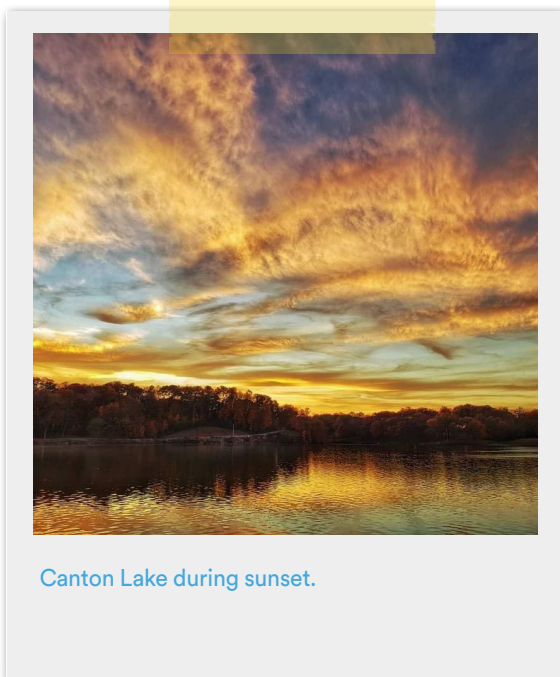


Regional Boundaries

Region 26 is a quiet, rural area located in west central Illinois. Situated between the Mississippi River to the west and the Illinois River to the east, it is known for its vast country roads, National Wildlife Refuges, and Native American History, including the Illinois Mounds. Dickson Mounds is a large mounds burial site, home to over 3,000 people of the Hopewell tradition, or trade routes, which were connected by waterways. They included the following tribes: Potawatomi, Osage, Myaami, Kaskaskia, Sauk, Fox, Kickapoo, and Peoria. They spoke the following languages: Illinois, Eastern and Western Dakota, as well as Bodwewadmimwen. The Museum is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and covers 12,000 years of human life in the Illinois River Valley.

Region 26 includes Hancock, Fulton, McDonough, and Schuyler Counties. It is home to Western Illinois University and Spoon River College. It is also home to Nauvoo, the birthplace of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The community has a blend of agriculture, outdoor recreation, industry, education, and culture. Region 26 covers a large geographical area (2,685 square miles) with the population spread around the Region and not concentrated in any one city. The most populated towns in the Region are home to less than 15,000 people, such as Canton, Carthage, and Macomb.

In Region 26, commuting is a necessity. The communities have small grocery, hardware, and convenience stores, but many families must travel and plan for trips to town. The rural area is made up of older adults, many of whom are self-employed farmers, and people who have spent their lives there. Single family dwellings are the most common housing. Families with children tend to live closer to or in town, but there are some who live down gravel roads or miles from any neighbors. Schools have consolidated over time, increasing the distance between home and school for many families. Free time is frequently spent outdoors fishing, hunting, boating, hiking, and gardening. Some areas of the Region lack reliable internet service.



Canton Lake during sunset.

“ There have been some positive leadership changes and new people in the community. There is collaboration and we don’t have to fight alone. We rely on one another more now. ”

- Community Member



Some notable features stand out in the Region. In June of 2022, Realtor.com listed Macomb (McDonough County) as one of the top ten affordable places to raise a child. The town of Rushville, in Schuyler County, has a thriving arts community, new pool, and fitness center. Rushville has seen an increase in African immigrants attracted to the safety and security of Schuyler County. Nauvoo hosts many visitors to their community each year, with activities centered around community members of the Region, the Mormon Church, and the many vineyards in the area. Several small river towns dot the western border of Hancock County, uniquely situated to work, and conduct business in either Iowa or Illinois. Since 1968, Fulton County has held its annual Spoon River Scenic Drive, which occurs the first two weekends in October and includes craft markets, flea markets, and food vendors set up along more than one hundred miles of scenic roads. Community members describe the Region as friendly, safe, and peaceful. They care about their communities and generously give of their time and resources to take care of each other.

Land Acknowledgement¹

The Region 26 Team acknowledges our communities are the traditional lands of rich Native history and culture. We respect the many Tribes who have called Region 26 home in the last 12,000 years, including the Bodewadmi (Potawatomi), ḡḡḡḡḡ ḡḡḡḡ ḡḡḡḡ ḡḡḡḡ (Osage), Myaami (Miami), Kaskaskia, Oθaakiwaki·hina·ki (Sauk), Meškwahki·aša·hina (Fox), Kiiikaapoi (Kickapoo), and Peoria. We recognize the historic and ongoing injustices experienced by Indigenous communities and honor all Native Peoples who came before us and who continue to contribute to our Region.

Regional Demographics

The Region is heavily interwoven with the school systems which promote community contentedness. The schools in the community typically are the avenue to how families engage, belong, show support, and receive many services. When assessing the population of children, schools are the primary place to consider when reviewing the demographic landscape. Birth to Five Illinois: Region 26 includes many school districts.

Fulton County: Astoria Community Unit #1, Canton Union School District #66, Fulton Community Unit School District #3, Lewistown Community Unit District #97, Spoon River Valley Community District #4, and VIT Community Unit District #2.

Hancock County: Carthage Elementary School District #317, Dallas Elementary District #327, Hamilton District #328, Illini West High School District #307, LaHarpe Community School District #347, Nauvoo-Colusa #325, Southeastern District #33, Warsaw District #316. McDonough County Schools: Bushnell-Prairie City #170, and Macomb District #185 West Prairie CUSD #103.

Schuyler County: Schuyler-Industry Community Unit School District #5, and West Central IL Special Ed Coop which serves children in all four counties in our Region.

The total population of Region 26 is 84,268. Fulton County has the highest population, followed by districts in McDonough, Hancock, and Schuyler Counties. Of the total population, 4,589 are children ages five and under, or about 5% of the population.

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

Figure 1: Number of Children by Age

Children by Age	Number of Children
Ages Birth to One	480
Age One	616
Age Two	999
Age Three	1,140
Age Four	743
Age Five	611
Total children 5 years and under	4,589

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

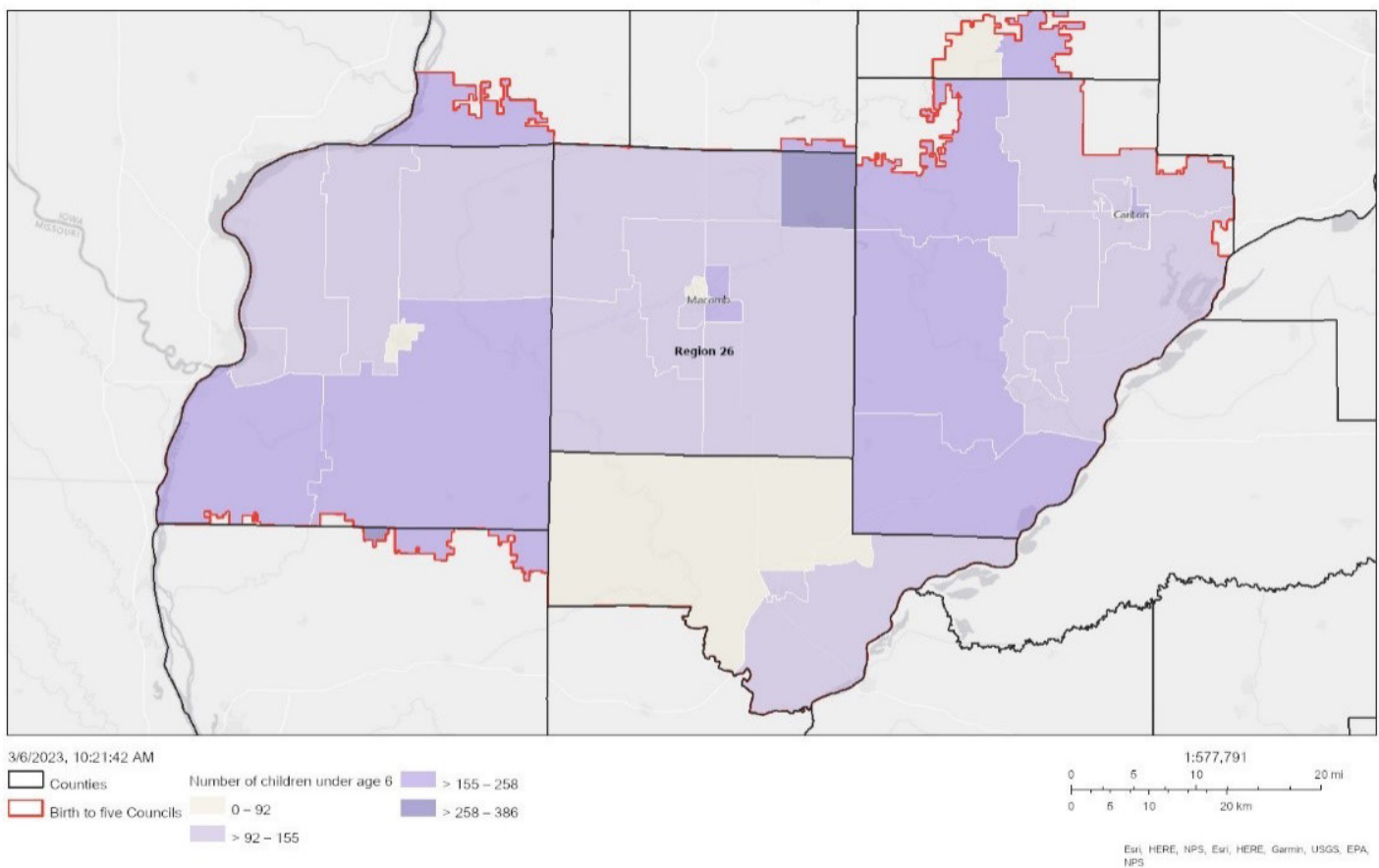
Most (90%) of the Region under the age of five are white and non-Hispanic; 4% self-identify as Two or More Races, 2% self-identifies as Black or African American, 2% self-identifies as Hispanic or Latine, 0.5% self-identifies as Other, and 0.2% self-identifies as Asian. All counties in the Region have recently seen an increase in those who self-identify as Black or African American and Hispanic or Latine, with communities of those who self-identify as Black or African American and Hispanic or Latine, living in or near Canton (Fulton County), Macomb (McDonough County), or in Schuyler County.

Most of the Region is English-speaking with pockets of households having limited English proficiency. Areas of Fulton and Hancock Counties have up to 4% of households with limited English proficiency, while the cities of Macomb (McDonough County) and Rushville (Schuyler County) have 8-11% of households with limited English proficiency. There has been growth in the number of households who speak French, accounting for some of the higher percentages of families with limited English proficiency in Schuyler County. The language barrier and lack of cultural understanding add a layer of difficulty for families who have immigrated.

Children in the Region are not concentrated in any one area (Figure 2). Bushnell-Prairie City school district, in Bushnell, has the highest concentration of children under the age of six (8% or 283 children). Schuyler-Industry School District in Rushville has the fewest children under six but also the lowest population in the Region. The southeastern portion of Hancock County, which includes the Southeastern School District, and the western half of Fulton County are the second most populated areas.

“
To trust people outside of our culture is very hard because we don't know if they will keep our family's values.
- Community Member
(Schuyler County)
”

Figure 2: Location of Children Ages Six and Under



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

The median income level for the area is about \$54,583 per year, below the Illinois state average of \$72,000.

The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) is a measure of income issued each year by the Department of Health and Human Services. These guidelines illustrate a set minimum amount of income that an individual or family needs for food, clothing, transportation, shelter, and other necessities. They are used to determine whether an individual or family qualifies for certain benefits and programs. Often, it is used to determine eligibility for programs and services. Someone living at or below 50% FPL is considered to be living in “deep poverty”; someone living at or below 100% FPL is considered to be living at “the poverty line” (see example Figure 3).

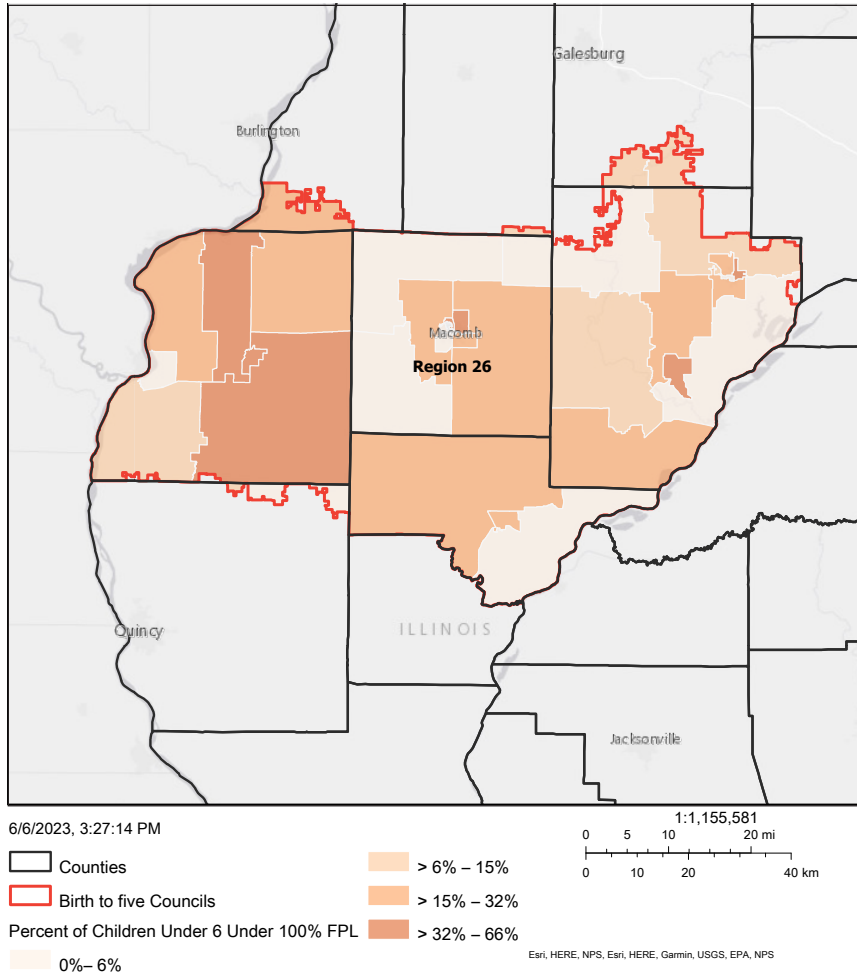
Figure 3: Federal Poverty Level at 50%, 100%, 185%, 200% for a Family of Four

	50% FPL	100% FPL	185%	200% FPL
Family of Four	\$13,100	\$26,200	\$48,470	\$52,400

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

About 20% of total children from birth through age five in Region 26 are at or below 100% FPL, which is the most accurate picture of the number of children living in households experiencing poverty. Many children living in households at or below 100% FPL live in southeastern Hancock County, in or around Ferris, Carthage, Bowen, Plymouth, and Dallas City (Figure 4). In this Region, the Federal Poverty Level for a family of four is about the same as half the median income.

Figure 4: Location of Children Under Age Six Living at or Below 100% FPL



Source: IECAM
 Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Children and Families in Priority Populations

The Illinois Early Learning Council² has identified priority populations and encouraged communities to increase their services and supports to these community members. Priority populations are defined as children and families who face economic disadvantages due to systemic barriers as well as a lack of support and access to economic or material resources.³ The intention of determining a priority population is to bring into focus improving access and high-quality services that will meet the needs of those in the early childhood landscape (prenatal to age five). 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.

In Region 26, there are three priority populations identified in community conversations and discussed in this report: people experiencing poverty and homelessness, those in need of support and inclusion services, and those needing mental health services.

Some of the biggest barriers families face in accessing care throughout Region 26 are a result of having little to no access to economic or material resources. Several communities in the Region are particularly affected. The Southeastern Community School District has one of the highest concentrations of families experiencing poverty. Nearly 40% of elementary-aged students (Kindergarten through fourth grade) in the district live at or below the 100% FPL. Sixty percent of students in the district are eligible for free or reduced lunch. In Astoria, Canton, and Lewistown school districts, families have a median household income of less than \$50,000 per year and more than 50% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Around 20% of students in these three districts live at or below 100% FPL.

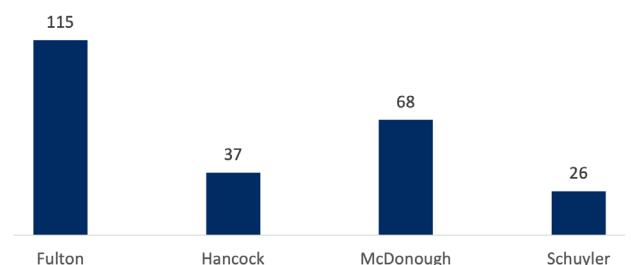
Nearly 7% (272) of all children throughout the Region have been identified as experiencing homelessness or being unhoused. While there is recognition of the growing demographic, there is limited data available to fully understand the needs and barriers to accessing Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services.

Children who have been assessed and identified as having a disability or who need support services are also a priority population in Region 26 (Figure 5). The data that is available shows approximately where the greatest needs are and how many children are being served, but not how many additional children need services. According to the Erikson Institute the number of children ages three to five in the Region with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) varied between 5% and 11%. Programs providing developmental screenings, prevention, and intervention services to children birth to age two served between 2% and 4% of children regionally.

Demographics are an important part of understanding any Region. Understanding the demographics of the Region can help funders and decision-makers better provide direct services and resources, and lead to better outcomes for children and families.

“To move forward we must know where we are. We must know the barriers to know what to overcome.”
- Community Member (Fulton County)

Figure 5: Number of Children Ages Three to Five with IEP, by County



Source: Erikson Institute
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

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

³ <https://www.erikson.edu/applied-research/policy-leadership/early-childhood-data-reports/risk-reach-reports/>

Local Community Collaborations

Local Community Collaborations are an important part of the Early Childhood landscape. A Community Collaboration's role is to determine where innovative solutions can be implemented on a local level to align services in the community and reimagine the Early Childhood system so that it better meets the needs of children and families. In the past, some counties in the Region convened local providers and schools to collaborate and address ECEC topics. Those ceased during the pandemic or because of a loss of leadership/agency providing support.



An adult and a young child embracing each other.

Each county in the Region has an existing inter-agency group made up of diverse stakeholders with some counties more active than others. In some instances, there are partnerships between agencies or programs to provide a service, host an event, or achieve common goals. The lack of an ECEC-specific Collaboration does not mean no one is working on the matter, but rather that no formal group has been established. Communities and agencies continue to build networks of support in general, but there has not been an agency or organization that has taken the lead to bring them together. Region 26 also has three Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) offices that support ECEC in four counties, each with its own Service Delivery Area. This has made it difficult for families to know where their point of contact is if they are commuting to work or using care outside their residing county.

“
We have the players for the team, just not the quarterback.
- Community Member (Fulton County)
”

In January 2023, the Regional Office of Education 26 (ROE26) was awarded a Birth to Five Illinois Planning Grant to build a Collaboration and institute a Regional Integrated Intake and Referral System (IRIS). Birth to Five Illinois grant funds will be used to serve families in four counties: Fulton, Hancock, McDonough, and Schuyler. The new Collaboration (ROE 26 ECEC providers and social service programs. This Collaboration will create a streamlined referral and intake system, to help local early childhood education and social service agencies better coordinate the care and support they are providing area children and families and improve communication to better meet the families' needs. This will be accomplished through purchasing

and implementing IRIS, a structured referral and intake system, and identifying and onboarding key early childhood and social service agencies. The grant money will cover the cost of IRIS, staffing, equipment, mileage, administration, and services provided to the Collaboration. This Collaboration and the execution of IRIS will help alleviate one of the principal barriers to service families face.

The opportunity is great as it will establish a central means of communication, resources, and measurable goals to help ensure people get the information and help they are requesting. Understanding the Local Community Collaboration landscape can help determine where to start building networks, and where to strengthen existing networks to connect families to resources across county lines.

“
The support from our community for when we need help is great, but the disconnect between who needs help is there.
- Community Member (McDonough County)
”

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

ECEC programs are another integral piece of the Early Childhood landscape, serving and supporting families throughout the Region. There are a variety of child care options in the Region, including licensed and license-exempt child care centers and homes, as well as publicly funded programs. Access to child care and programs varies across communities, with cost, commute time, work schedules, and family arrangements impacting how families make decisions about child care. Wait-lists, availability of care, and location often limit families in their decision-making.

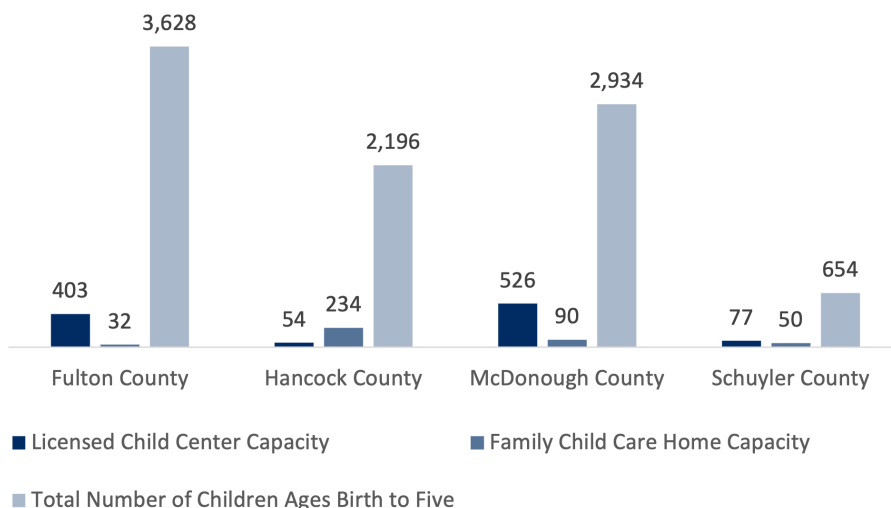
Licensed child care centers, licensed family child care homes, and preschool programs provide the formal child care capacity in Region 26. Overall programs for three to five-year old children have larger capacity and serve more children than those for birth through age two. All the counties have licensed home providers, but capacity varies by county. Fulton County has only five home providers serving about two percent of the children five and under, while Hancock County has 24 licensed home providers serving 21% of the county’s children (Figure 6). McDonough County has nine, serving 6% and Schuyler County has five, serving 15%. Hancock County is unique in the region with home providers filling most of the available capacity.

“ Kids don’t care as long as you love them. - Community Member ”

Hancock County has seen a 50% decrease in home providers over the last several years, impacting the availability and accessibility of child care. According to Child Trends Data there was a 39% decrease in the number of home-based child care programs statewide, declining from 50,755 in 2010 to 30,978 in 2019.

Licensed child care centers provide child care and early learning opportunities for about 23% of children birth to age five in the Region. Licensed by the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), child care centers have larger capacity than licensed family child care homes. There are licensed centers available in all counties of the Region; however, they are in the most populated towns, making them less than accessible to families out in the more rural areas. Even with a newly licensed center in Carthage, licensed child care centers only serve five percent of children five and under in Hancock County. The rest of the Region ranges between 22% and 36% of its capacity filled by licensed child care centers.

Figure 6: Licensed Capacity by County



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Publicly funded programs are those that operate under a grant from the state or federal government. Children eligible for publicly funded programs are generally those at or below 200% FPL, which includes 47% of the children in Region 26. As stated earlier, the median income level for the area is about \$54,583 per year, below the Illinois state average of \$72,000. There are five publicly funded programs available in all four counties of the Region: Preschool for All, Preschool for All Expansion, Head Start, Early Head Start, Prevention Initiative, and Early Intervention (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Licensed Capacity by County

Provider Type	Number of Programs	Capacity	Ages Served
Preschool for All	16	801	Three to Four
Preschool for All Expansion	2	70	Three to Four
Head Start	3	154	Three to Five
Early Head Start	3	93	Birth to Three
Prevention Initiative	3	90	Birth to Three
Early Intervention	-	87	Birth to Three

Source: IECAM
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Preschool For All (PFA) and Preschool for All Expansion (PFA-E) programs are available in all school districts except one (Lewistown) with capacity exceeding need in some instances. PFA has been integral in increasing capacity for ages three to five and providing quality programming; however, PFA is just a half day program. Some children attend Preschool for All at their child care location, excluding them from needing transportation. However, children who are served through the school districts need additional half-day care and transportation. PFA-E is a full day program available in one school district (West Prairie) in the Region.

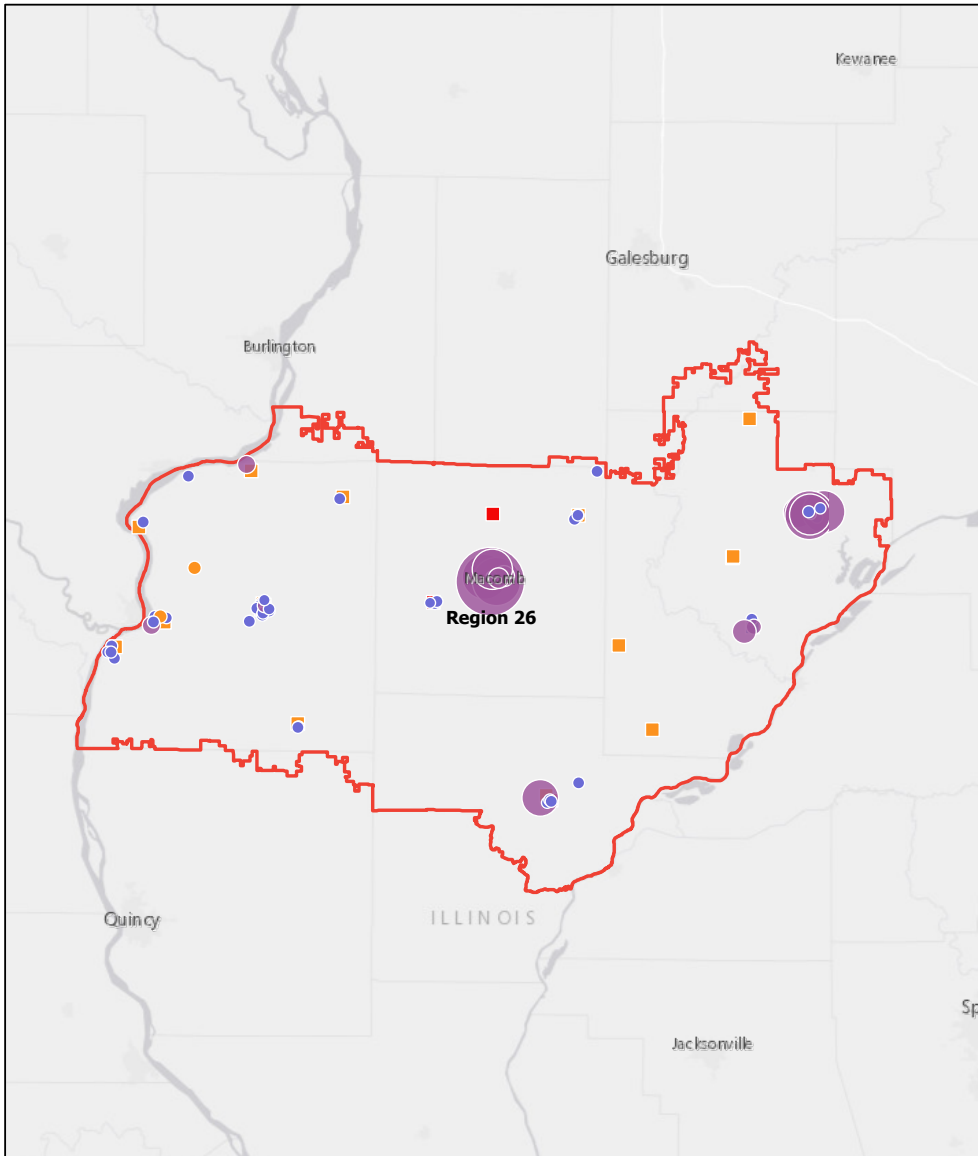
Publicly funded Head Start and Early Head Start programs provide home visiting and center-based child care options with an emphasis on preparing children for school and offering information and resources to families of young children. Head Start serves 154 children with center-based care in McDonough and Fulton counties. Early Head Start serves 93 children region wide with center-based care, home visiting, and education. Each of those programs are placed in areas of greatest need based on population and lack of other programs.

Prevention Initiative (PI), funded by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), does not provide child care but is one of the few programs in the Region that offer children, under school age, evaluations to identify delays, referrals for services, and parent education on child development. PI has the potential to catch delays and risk factors for children, birth to age three, who may not be attending formal care. Prevention Initiative is available in Fulton, Hancock, and McDonough Counties through the Regional Office of Education 26’s Early Beginnings program. Prevention Initiative is available in Schuyler County through Schuyler-Industry School District. PI has the capacity to serve 90 children in Region 26.

Early Intervention (EI), funded by the Department of Human Services (IDHS), offers coordination of services including evaluations and therapies for children birth to age three with a disability or delay. EI services are available through Child and Family Connections under Regional Office of Education 26. Early Intervention is the only publicly funded program available in the Region for getting young children the therapies and interventions they need. They are able to serve less than 87 children in Region 26.

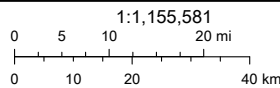
While libraries do not provide any official capacity, they do provide an important service in Early Childhood enrichment programming. The library system is vibrant in Region 26 with locations in many small towns. They offer summer reading programs, story hours, move and groove sessions, and many other events throughout the year that enrich children’s learning and provide a place for families to gather resources. Park districts and YMCA’s also help fill some gaps in learning with weekly and summer programs in many parts of the Region.

Figure 8: Location of Licensed and Publicly Funded Programs



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- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| <p>Licensed ECEC Providers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Day Care Home ● Day Care Center ■ Group Day Care Home ● 5 ● 58.6667 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 112.333 ● 166 <p>Publicly Funded ECEC Sites</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Preschool for All | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Early Head Start ■ Prevention Initiative ■ Head Start ■ Preschool for All Expansion Birth to five Councils |
|---|---|---|



Esri, HERE, NPS, Esri, HERE, Garmin, USGS, EPA, NPS

ArcGIS Web AppBuilder
Esri, HERE, Garmin, USGS, EPA, NPS | Esri, HERE, NPS |

Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Publicly funded or low-cost programs do not provide enough spots to serve children whose families may be eligible. This puts the entire financial burden for care on the family budget, making formal child care out of reach for some families with limited to no access to economic/material resources. Families report making lifestyle adjustments to be able to afford and obtain care.

IDHS offers financial assistance through the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), which pays eligible families' child care costs and is utilized by 10% of eligible families. This low percentage is due to the lack of spots available for those eligible children.

“ Parents are splitting the shift so as to not have to pay for care.
- Community Member ”

There are no licensed child care sites in the Region that provide hours of operation outside of 6a.m. through 6p.m. There is no drop-in or emergency care in the Region available to the public. Caregivers report they are happy with the quality of care their children are receiving, they have had good experiences with providers, but they need more options.

The availability of child care spots and additional barriers to accessing quality child care that families have identified will be addressed in the next sections.

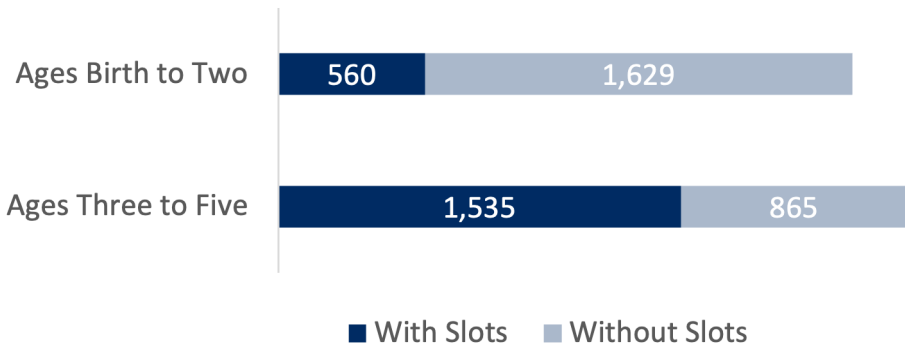
“ A teacher is the best friend for the child and can help the child come out of their shell and they love our children just like we do.
- Parent ”

Slot Gap

One tool used to help determine the need for child care in a community is the slot gap. The slot gap is defined as the number of children eligible for enrollment in ECEC programs and services, versus the number of available placements, or slots. A slot gap is a measurement that can determine potential child care demand and point to where more funding, staffing, and resources may be needed. While the slot gap is a helpful quantifier, it does not give the whole picture because it does not address the variety of circumstances families face in finding care or the complexity of demand for child care, including parent/caregiver choice.

Region 26 has approximately 4,598 children under five years of age, with a total of 2,189 child care slots available. Children ages birth to two have the fewest number of slots in the Region, with over 70% or 3,218 unable to be placed in child care (Figure 9).

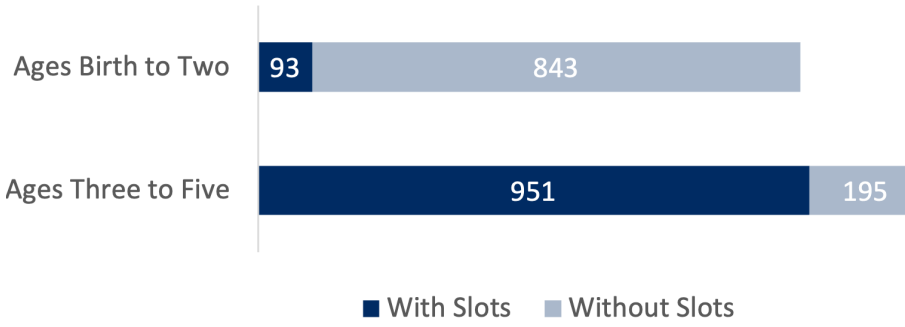
Figure 9: Overall Child Care Slots



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

There are several publicly funded programs available for children based on their age. Children ages three to five are well served in Region 26. Publicly funded Preschool For All (PFA) and Preschool For All Expansion (PFA-E) programs meet most of the needs for that age group. Nearly 40% of preschool-aged children in Region 26 have a spot in a half-day PFA program. For those under age three, however, far fewer options for care are available. The only publicly funded program in the area that provides full-time care for the youngest children is Early Head Start (EHS), which has a total capacity of 93 children. There are 2,095 children under age three and EHS serves about 4.4% of them in the Region. Even with licensed centers and licensed family homes contributing to filling some of the gap for infants, only about 26% of children under three have access to care (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Publicly Funded Slot Gap



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Through interviews conducted, the community voiced that Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) care is common in the Region, especially among members of faith and immigrant communities. Many families often rely on grandparents for regular or occasional child care. There is no clear data on how often family arrangements are out of necessity or choice, and those numbers are not captured in the data related to the slot gap.

Some families value a parent staying home with children and others choose one income out of necessity. Often, it is not economical to work when salary does not cover work expenses and child care. Approximately 75% of children in Region 26 live in families with all working parents/caregivers.

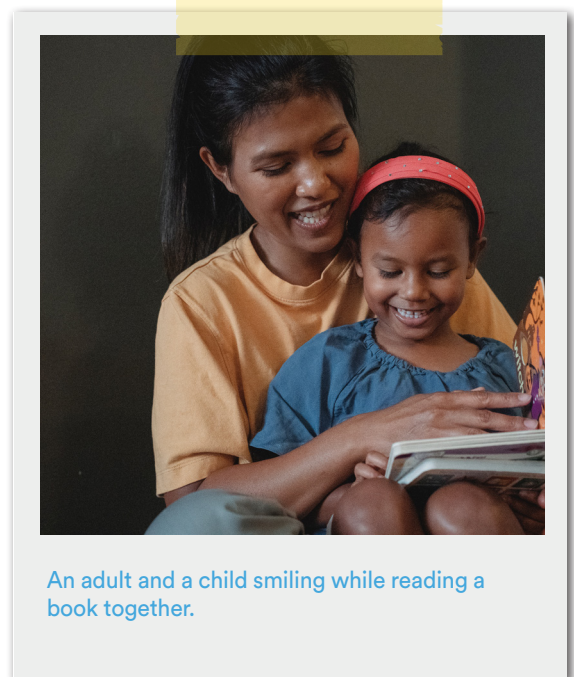
Other considerations are parents' schedules and the need for part-time and after-hours care. Some families in the Region split shifts with one parent or caregiver staying home with children during the day while the other works, and then trading places with the first shift parent caring for children in the evening or overnight while the other parent works. These arrangements may be a personal choice, so one caregiver is always with the children, or could be due to the lack of child care options or cost.

“
My partner and I are working opposite shifts from each other because child care is too expensive.
- Family Member
”

“
After seeing the waitlist, we just waited until after our child turned three to enroll him in child care because the wait wasn't as long.
- Parent (Schuyler County)
”

Additionally, the slot gap does not reflect the number of families that choose not to enroll their children due to the cost of child care. On average, families can expect to pay \$7,000 to \$10,000 a year for one child under five years old. Considering that the median income in Region 26 is \$54,589, the cost of child care is 12-18% of their salary. The complexity of paying for care increases if they have more children in need of care. Many centers or homes do not provide any scholarship or subsidy other than what the state offers. The Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) pays part of the cost of child care for eligible families. Reports show that about 10% of children in the Region are being served by CCAP. Considering around half of the children in the Region are at or below 200% FPL, CCAP would be utilized by more families if the child care spots were available.

Contributing to the challenges of those who need care is the staff ratio to the number of children needed to operate a home or center. One local director commented that the shortage of staff is so low that many workers are unable to take breaks and some centers have sought other accommodating needs to help their employees reach their qualifications. This problem is only exacerbated by the time it can take to complete the required onboarding documents and procedures. The Region has too few workers available to meet the demands of hours of operation that families need. Ratios directly impact children and the available spots for them as it requires more staff for younger children.



An adult and a child smiling while reading a book together.

“

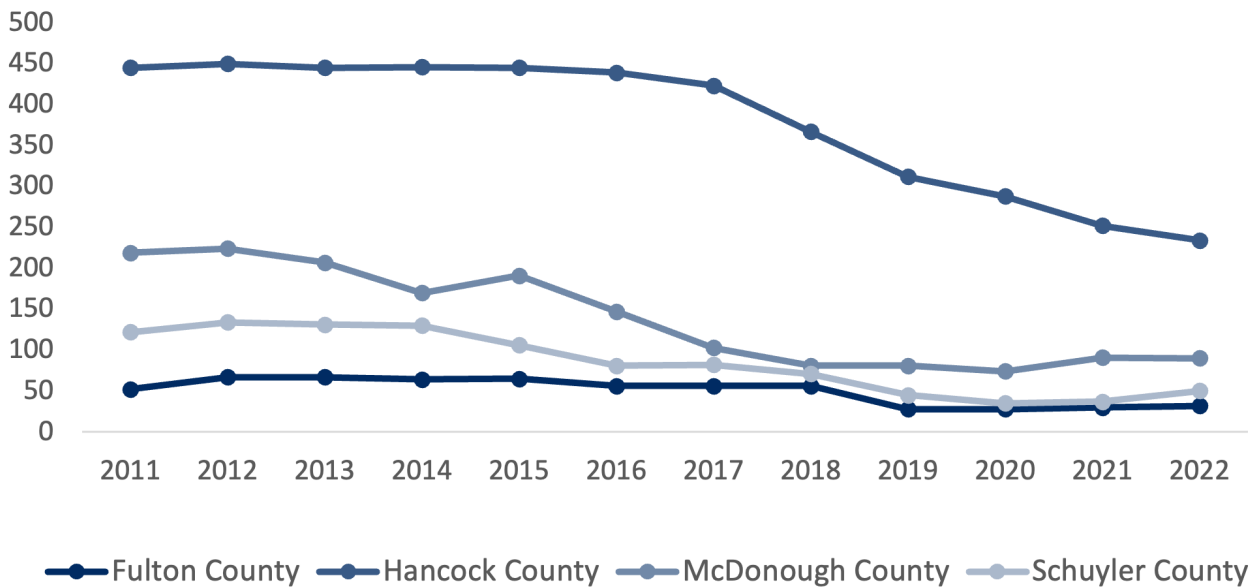
The pay does not meet the demands of the job. Teaching in a child care setting can be stressful and because of the number of staff needed to meet child-to-teacher ratios, it is difficult to pay teachers what they are worth. It is also difficult to find good quality staff. Quality does not always mean highly educated.

- Illinois Salary and Staffing Survey of Licensed Child Care

”

Another matter that affects the slot gap is the provider revenue stream. Providers must have high enough enrollment to operate, pay for enough staff, and have adequate space to house the children. Since occupancy and staffing can be barriers, many providers are looking for additional revenue streams to supplement funding needed for their operations. In some cases, providers are forced to close their doors. This affects the number of facilities operating. According to the Illinois Child Care COVID Impact Report, across the state 956 licensed child care facilities have closed, leaving many communities without sufficient capacity to meet the need for care. While closings were happening before the COVID-19 pandemic, some were a direct result of the pandemic. Loss of capacity has occurred in Region 26, following the state trend. Child care capacity has fallen dramatically in the last five-ten years (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Licensed Family Child Care Home Capacity by County, 2011 to 2022



Source: IECAM
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Head Start (HS) in Region 26 reports a loss of capacity for the 2021-2022 enrollment year due to staff vacancies. From 2018 to 2022, the number of licensed family child care home providers in Hancock County went from 36 to 22, a decline of nearly 40%.

ECEC service accessibility has a greater impact on children with special needs. The cost of care and traveling outside the Region for services especially impacts families with economic barriers who have children under five. Therapy and special education services are often well provided by the schools once children reach Kindergarten age. However, services for younger children are not accessible, leaving some families to travel 100 miles one way for specialized services, therapy, medical, and dental services. This issue is only compounded when you add limited staffing and service costs. Families report experiencing long wait times to have their children assessed and additional wait times to see specialized providers, such as speech or occupational therapists.

While it may be difficult to consider all aspects and calculate the exact number of child care slots needed, the data points to a great need for quality, accessible care, especially for infants, in Region 26. More information is needed to determine what the real demand for child care is. Not every family may be seeking formal child care but there is currently greater demand than there is supply. This is evidenced by anecdotal data regarding wait lists, cost, and availability of child care. With awareness, communities can focus on areas of greatest need.

While it may be difficult to consider all aspects and calculate the exact number of child care slots needed, the data points to a great need for quality, accessible care, especially for infants, in Region 26.

“ Special services are limited in the area, and not easily accessible
- Community Member ”



A baby smiling while enjoying nature.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

ECEC depends on a robust workforce to make quality care accessible. Without people to fill the position of nurturing caretaker there are no options for families. Recruiting, educating, and properly compensating workers is integral to a quality ECEC system.

Region 26 is large, covering 2,728 square miles (about twice the area of Rhode Island). The distance between work or school/child care and home could be ten to fifty miles. The most populated towns in the region have a population of less than 30,000 and many people commute. It takes two hours (97 miles) to cross east to west and one hour (60 miles) north to south. It is important to consider this challenge that parents and caregivers are faced with when seeking care as some families must extend their driving time just to receive child care services. This also applies to the workforce and their commute times.

Demographic data collected through the Gateways to Opportunity Registry and provided by the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) show that most licensed providers in the Region self-identify as white and female (Figure 12).⁵ Additionally, only around 3% of respondents identified as being bilingual. This presents a challenge for families who may want to enroll their children in a program that is led or taught by staff who are more racially, ethnically, linguistically, or gender diverse.

Figure 12: Number of Licensed Center Directors, Teaching Staff, Family Child Care Staff by Race, Ethnicity⁶

	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	31
Teaching Staff	*	28	6	*	*	293
FCC Staff	0	0	0	55	0	0

Source: INCCRRA
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

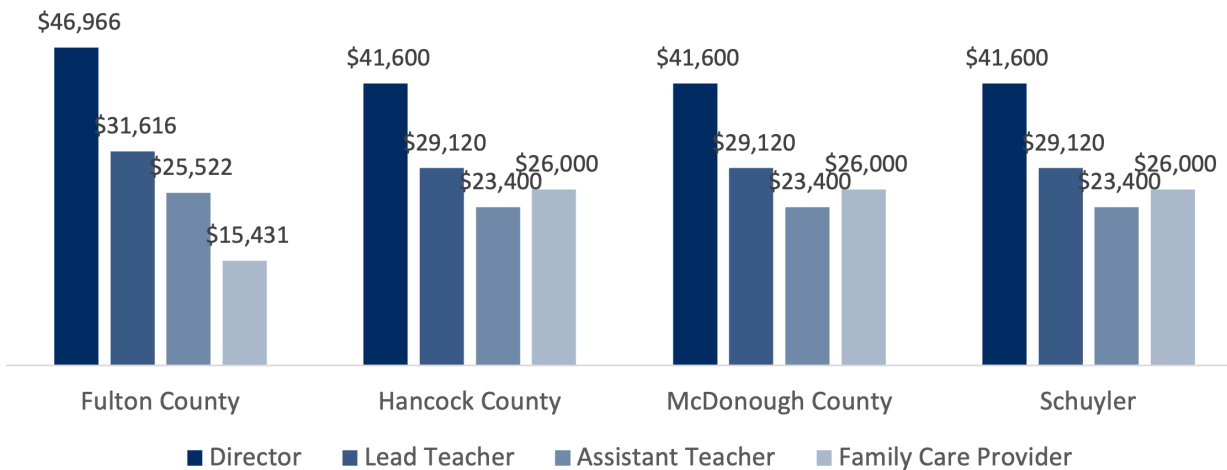
Region 26 has seen a loss of qualified staff over the last five years. Both Hancock and Schuyler Counties have seen a loss of home providers. Community members reported that many employers are having a hard time retaining employees and the need for workers is heavy. For some, the COVID-19 pandemic opened their eyes to the fundamental need the Region has for child care providers for work, school, and family life to flow smoothly. Families value their caregivers and want to see them compensated for the important job they are doing.

⁵ Data reflects those who were registered in the Gateways to Opportunities Registry as of March 2021

⁶ Cells with an asterisk * indicate fewer than five but more than zero respondents.

The consensus from community interviews and focus groups is, salaries for ECEC providers are abysmally low. The median salary in Region 26 for ECEC teachers with an associate degree is between \$23,400 to \$25,317 in 2021 according to the Survey of Child Care Providers (Figure 13).⁷ For reference, the median income level of the Region is around \$54,000, making child care providers among the lowest paid professions. Less than half are receiving health or life insurance through their employer and about 25% do not receive any paid sick leave. One former provider stated that she never paid herself while operating a licensed family child care home. She had an alternate source of income at the time, the business was barely able to sustain its operating expenses but did not turn a profit.

Figure 13: Average Pay Per Position



Source: INCCRRA
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

“You really have to love your job to work in child care because the pay isn’t there.”
- Community Member

Initiatives are already in place to help bridge the pay gap and grow the workforce. Some licensed child care centers will allow entry-level positions, such as front desk clerks, to gain supervised experience in Early Childhood to help further their careers and contribute to a quality workforce. Others offer child care at no cost to their employees to help retain their staff.

Great START (Strategy to Attract and Retain Teachers) is a wage supplement program, through Illinois Gateways to Opportunity, which acknowledges child care practitioners who have completed college coursework and stay at their current place of employment. Great START recipients are sent a check every six months (based on continued eligibility) to supplement their income.

Providers do love their jobs. They describe it as fun and rewarding. They talk about the tremendous positive impact they see on the lives of children and the fascination of watching children discover something for the first time. Families in the area are happy with the quality of care their children are receiving. They have had good experiences with providers. They see the love and patience providers have for their children. They also see the sacrifices and fatigue of caring for young children each day.

“The teachers and staff at our child’s child care are great. She is already treated with love and respect.”
- Parent

⁷ <https://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=143721>

With higher education often comes debt, which can be a barrier to those seeking education and employment in the early childhood field. The salary does not match the money spent on education needed to offer high-quality care. Knowing the high turnover rate in some child care centers, administrators sometimes lack the initiative to further staff education, assuming staff will not be retained once they are trained. There is little continuity in education levels in ECEC (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Educational Attainment by Provider Type⁸

	High School/ GED	Some College	Community College Certificate	Associate Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Graduate Degree
Center Directors	0	*	*	11	15	5
Teaching Staff	144	37	10	62	57	8
FCC Staff	26	0	*	9	8	*

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

The Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) Scholarship Program was created to address the shortage of qualified early childhood educators by encouraging the pursuit of credentials and advancement of already-held degrees in early childhood education, with an aim toward building a strong, well-prepared workforce. Individuals who work or have worked in ECEC seeking additional credentials and/or a degree in early childhood education may be eligible for scholarship opportunities. ECACE Higher Education Navigators are available to offer one-on-one support to potential students in applying for the ECACE Scholarship and figuring out next steps in their education journey. Navigators are a valuable resource as community colleges in the Region offer varying programs for early childhood care and education, however, there is little uniformity to the programs and no clear pathway for new students.

In McDonough and Fulton Counties, ECEC programs are offered by Spoon River College. They have one 24-credit hour Early Childhood Education certificate. Spoon River College's program averages 90 students over the six years but has declined 19% from 2017. Canton High School in Fulton County offers Child Development as a dual credit course for high school students. Several other high schools in Fulton County offer high school credit only for Child Development and Child Care and Guidance courses. Western Illinois University (the only university in the region) located in McDonough County offers a Bachelor of Science in Education with options in Elementary Education, Early Childhood Education, English as a Second Language Education, and Multilingual Education.

Hancock County is in the Carl Sandburg College (CSC) district. CSC offers one Intro to Early Childhood class. John Wood Community College (JWCC) and Lincoln Land College (LLC), both located outside of the Region, will allow Hancock and Schuyler County residents as in-district students. Both JWCC and LLC offer degree and certificate programs. JWCC also offers a Child Development Associate which qualifies students to teach in a center. It is taught as a community class by the local child care resource and referral agency West Central Child Care Connection.

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

Some students living in Hancock County attend Iowa's Southeastern Community College. They offer several certificate and diploma programs, including parent educators and child development. They also offer associate degrees in Early Childhood Education and Child Care Management, and transfer degrees for Management or Early Childhood providers to become licensed educators. While these options are a great benefit to the student, it shows an example of what course work could be offered within the Region and provides a concrete example of what next steps the Region could take in growing the ECEC workforce.

“
Caregivers are not given enough credit for the work they do as ‘brain builders’
- Community Member.
”

Some in the Region question the lack of value that society has placed on caregiving. Less value seems to be given to those parents/caregivers who choose to stay at home with their children instead of seeking care. That lack of value in caregiving translates to a lack of pay for those tasked with the care and education of societies' youngest members.

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

Caregivers throughout the world and history have sought to relate to others, to share their experiences, and to learn. The phrase “It takes a village to raise a child” has become cliché, but underlying the caregiver’s daily lives there is often a need for help and support. What that support looks like has as many variations as there are families. Throughout Region 26 interviews, focus groups, and Council meetings the themes of support, family structure and arrangements, income levels, special education/inclusion services, and mental health were prevalent.



A group of people posing for a picture outdoors.

“ No one says anything to the fathers about what to expect, and no one tells you of all the changes, challenges, setbacks, and complications you will be faced with. It’s a lot to take on and you feel like you have to do it all and hold it all together.

- Father

Some families reported a need for education about their child’s development, other parents to talk to, or specific services such as occupational therapy. Other families needed more economic support or creative ways to parent the challenging behaviors of their children. Many expressed their need for mental health support and services, needing care for themselves to care for their children properly.

“ You can’t help others if you can’t help yourself first.

- Community Caregiver

“ We have to make compromises based on what resources are available.

- Parent (Hancock County)

Families in Region 26 use a wide variety of child care arrangements. Some families have found a beloved home provider, others are drawn to the range of experiences their child receives at a child care center, and some families prefer to leave their children in the care of grandparents or other family members. Some parents would prefer a family arrangement but do not have family support available to them. Some do not wish to place their child in a faith community care setting. Other caregivers have been uneasy about home providers and opted for creating an alternative work arrangement to accommodate the lack of options. Caregivers expressed the need for quality child care options, part-time care, after-hours care, drop-in, and emergency care. They spoke of the valuable role their child care providers and educators play in their circle of support. For those families seeking child care in Region 26, several barriers to access are evident.

Access refers to equal and equitable opportunities for children and families to obtain the care and services they need. Economic ability, availability of transportation, parent level of education, special education status, and English language proficiency, among many other factors, are potential barriers to equitable access.

Family structure and arrangements play a part in the demand for child care. In Fulton County and other areas of the Region, families have shared that grandparents are a critical asset in helping families with child care. Notably, some children are being raised exclusively by their grandparents. In one community, an attempt was made to provide after-school care but so many grandparents were fulfilling the role that there was not enough interest in after-school care, limiting the options of families without grandparents in the area. Fulton County has the highest percentage of children living with single fathers, single mothers, and grandparents compared to the other four counties.

Difficulty accessing special needs services, therapies, and assessments were repeated throughout Regional Council meetings and interviews. Families report experiencing long wait times to have their children assessed and additional wait times to see specialized providers such as speech or occupational therapists. Those services are not provided in most towns in the Region and families travel out of county and sometimes out of state to access what their children need. There are few specialists/therapies to refer children to, and children with diagnosed special needs are often the hardest to find care for. Therapy and special education services are often well provided by the school's once children reach Kindergarten age. However, services for younger children are not accessible. Some families travel 100 miles one way for specialized services, therapy, medical, and dental services. Providers expressed the need for support and more staff to provide quality care for children who may need extra attention. One provider noted that children with delays or challenging behaviors may get one-on-one help once they are in a school setting, but at the licensed center that resource is not available.

“ We create programs then wonder why no one is showing up. Is it an unwillingness to participate or is it not the right answer for the situation?
- Community Member ”

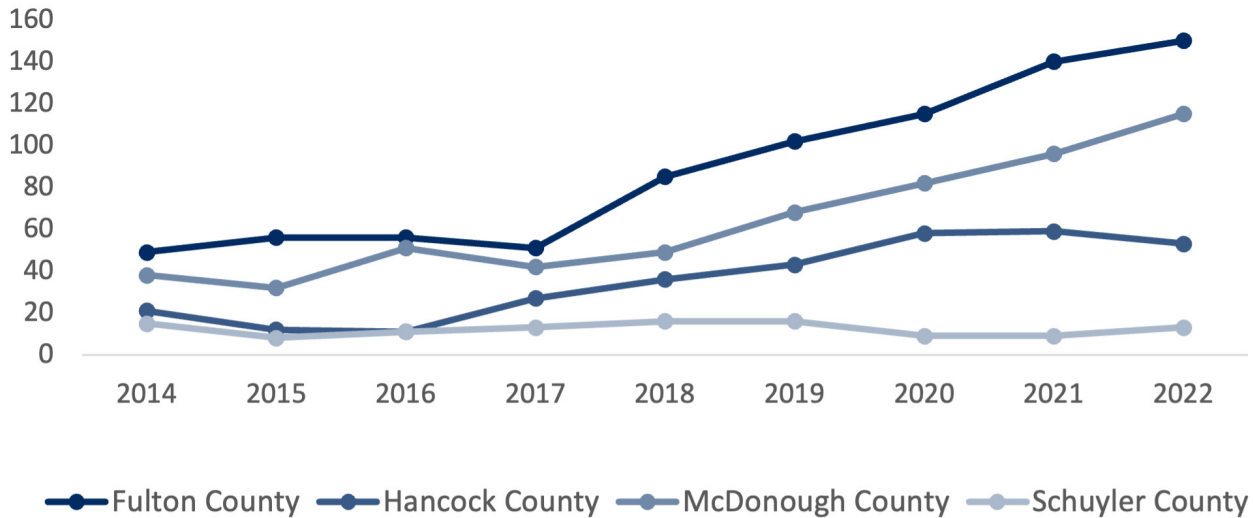
“ Parents leave their child with family members that are older and not as engaged with the child. Allowing the child to “babysit” themselves with tablets and other online devices.
- Parent (Hancock County) ”

“ Special services are limited in the area, and not easily accessible.
- Community Member (Hancock County) ”

“ Children that have trauma or special needs providers aren't equipped to handle them.
- Community Member ”

Children in foster care are a priority needing support and access because Illinois has a higher rate of children under the age of 5 in foster care than the national average. Fulton County is the county with the highest number of children living in substitute care. In the four-county Region, 331 students are living in substitute care. Since 2017 the amounts have risen in both Fulton and McDonough Counties (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Number of Children in Substitute Care by County, 2014 to 2021



Source: KidsCount
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Foster families in the area expressed the need for respite care, parent support programs, and education about what to expect. They expressed finding care for foster children on short notice to be a challenge with the lack of available slots. Foster parents want loving, nurturing support, and involvement from the agencies with whom they work. Families working on reunification expect the same.

“It’s not all cut and dry about recovery and courts. DCFS want you to be perfect and do everything by the book when not everything is by the book in real life.”
- Community Member (McDonough County)

Parents and caregivers in recovery with children in foster care expressed the need for support for themselves and recognition of them as people without the stigma of substance abuse. They told of feeling defeated and discrepancies working with the system to obtain reunification with their children.

The Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) serves about 10% of eligible children at or below 225% FPL. CCAP can help fund already existing spots for families who need access to affordable care, however, a family must find an available spot first. Caregivers are expected to obtain employment and child care before applying for assistance. Parents and caregivers report they cannot find a job without child care and cannot find child care without a job. Families are forced to make temporary arrangements while they await help. As noted in the demographic’s sections, some areas of the Region are more affected by lack of access to economic resources. In these areas it can be harder to find housing, jobs, and child care. These districts also have longer drive time to services, making it especially difficult for families to get the care and services they need. Some find the cost of child care does not fit their family budget or puts a strain on the budget they did not expect.

Families and Council members have continually stated the location of services impacts their ability to access them. Transportation and travel play a key part in accessing early childhood care and education. The cost of care and traveling outside the Region for services negatively impacts families with limited access to financial resources and children under five

the most. Some families work in the town they live in, but many others commute to larger areas or other towns for their job. Families choose whether to seek child care close to work or home, or someplace in between. For some, this means traveling in two different directions each day when they are not able to find conveniently located child care. Historically, grandparents and home providers filled the need in small towns and rural areas. Home providers are less available now. While child care centers provide quality child care for many families, the location of centers is not always convenient or accessible. Region 26 has limited public transportation. Some communities, such as Macomb, have a free bus system that operates within city limits. Smaller communities have no public transportation and living in those areas requires a vehicle for daily life. School districts provide transportation for most of their students, including preschoolers. Families express the need for child care options closer to home.

“ It’s cheaper for me not to work and stay at home with my kids because my whole paycheck will go to child care.
- Community Leader ”

“ Transportation is a big issue when scheduling playgroups for families.
- Local Program Director ”

Access to information can complicate the process of locating child care and services. Community members expressed confusion about where to look and lacked awareness of existing programs. They must call each child care provider they can find a listing for to determine if there are any openings, whether they can be put on a waitlist, how long that waitlist may be, and what the cost is of placing their child in care. Parents will call around unsuccessfully, and then must adjust their plan accordingly.

“ My husband drives 100 miles round trip to work each day and picking up our child adds 20 minutes to his drive.
- Parent (Hancock County) ”

“ Growing up in Fulton County, being raised by grandparents, homeless and pregnant, living in temporary living situations, and involved in the foster system, I have seen the entirety of the barriers and strengths of Fulton County. I have two beautiful children that I had to raise alone while my spouse was away from the military. Being looked down upon because I needed to provide for my children didn’t help. I didn’t want to go and use LINK because of the horrible looks that you receive.
- Parent (Fulton County) ”

“ Families often don’t know what is available, where and when to get help.
- Community Member ”

Families reported that social media and word of mouth were commonly used to find child care. They also reported some hesitancy to seek public assistance, publicly funded programs, and home visiting services. Reasons given included embarrassment and stigma around accepting help, prior negative experiences, extensive paperwork, fear of doing something “wrong,” and a desire for their families not to be involved in a regulatory system.

“Trusting the resources, care, and services is an additional layer. People do not trust. The only way is relational. You can have someone come in and be one of the most eloquent speakers but if people have no concept of why I should trust this person they won’t care...they will not care and if they know they are recommended by someone they trust then they will pay attention.

- Community Leader

”

Families acknowledge their need to connect with the community, establish support, and find belonging. It is normal for young families to seek out support and find other parents to “do life” with but it has gotten more difficult to find a place to connect and establish rapport with other families. This new challenge impacts how families find care, simply finding a place for one’s child to go while they work becomes a job in itself.

“We are at a point now where you have to find a child care spot for your child before they are even born.

- Community Member

”

Waitlists for quality child care spots are long in the area. According to the local Child Care Resource Referral Agency, inquiries for care are most frequent for ages three to four, followed by one and two-year-olds, and then infants. A parent in the Region expressed that she had sought child care as soon as she found out she was pregnant. The waitlists at the time were two years long. She enlisted the help of her elderly grandmother as a caregiver once she returned to work part-time. She and her husband worked out a schedule amongst themselves and family members to care for their son during work hours. Eventually, after her son’s first birthday, she was able to find a home provider with an open spot for his age range. She expressed that her child care situation still is not ideal due to travel times, but she is happy with the care her son is receiving.

“Wait lists are six-plus months long for children five and under and you really just stop looking until they hit school age because we don’t have the spots. Children are not getting the help that they need because the child care centers are understaffed and wait lists are so long.

- Community Member

”

“We are thankful for this group because it gives us a voice that we might not have had otherwise, empowering us to be heard and understood.

- Family Council Member

”

Regional Strengths & Needs

Families face obstacles that are systemic and not solvable by any one thing. Income level, access to information and prevalence of resource deserts, and community culture all affect a family's access to the support they need. Repeated throughout interviews and discussion was a term those outside the Region may not be familiar with, *Forgottonia*. Most referred to the term to describe aspects of Region 26 including rural isolation, lack of infrastructure and funding, and stagnant economies, along with independence and deep connections to the Region.

Strengths

- Agencies and businesses work together to help the community. New Collaborations have been created, such as the ROE26 IRIS Collaboration. Libraries are an asset to families in Region 26.
- Rushville in Schuyler County has a strong community commitment to the arts and family-friendly recreation with its pool, fitness center, and performing arts center.
- Hancock County has a strong group of dedicated home providers even with the decline over the last several years.
- McDonough County enthusiastically supports small businesses and higher education and has an engaged network of agencies involved in supporting the community.
- Fulton County has made great strides in making outdoor recreation and tourism a priority along with Canton Park District and YMCA programs that give children of the community something to do to keep them active.

Needs

There is room for these supports to be expanded and further publicized for families to access them better, but as one community member stated, "One entity can't do it alone."

1. Greater access to child care and special needs services.
 - a. Many families need services closer to home and more timely appointments.
 - b. Providers need support and resources to collaborate in providing screening and referrals for children with special needs to offer a continuum of quality care and education.
 - c. There is a need for child care that accommodates children with special needs, as well as more trained staff.
2. More available child care slots for children aged birth to age two.
 - a. Families need flexible hours of operation, part-time care, and after 6:00p.m. child care.
 - b. There is a need for affordable child care spots for children under age three, possibly provided by conveniently located home providers. Staffing ratios are lower for this age group, creating a need for more providers.
 - c. The workforce needs better pay, a clear education pathway, and available course work.
3. Improved Community Support.
 - a. Parents and caregivers need a more central location to obtain information and better publicity of opportunities for them.
 - b. There is a need to build on existing support for parents and caregivers, including networking opportunities to reduce rural isolation.
 - c. Increase entrepreneurial opportunities to stimulate economic growth.

4. Improved efficiency and clearer regulations for providers and staff.
 - a. Reduced wait time for home providers awaiting licensing and reimbursement to avoid an interruption in income.
 - b. Families need simple paperwork and clear information to apply for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP).
 - c. Providers need the staff hiring process to be faster and qualifications to be aligned between child care and school districts.
5. Transportation: Closer access to services.
 - a. Families need affordable child care options closer to home.
 - b. There is a need for support for home providers to increase the number of spots in small towns.

Recommendations

The Region 26 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.

1. The Region should increase its adaptive and therapeutic services by forming a local group of health providers, school districts, and private companies to ensure needs are being met.
 - a. Provide services in small towns on a regular, rotating basis for appointments closer to home.
 - b. Provide screenings and referrals at child care locations.
 - c. Incorporate case management and referrals into children's doctor appointments.
2. The Region should offer more child care slots for children birth to age two. The lack of workforce is the major challenge in adding more child care slots. Helping providers know about funding opportunities and helping local colleges develop and implement a pathway to improve the workforce for providers in the area is critical.
 - a. Help local colleges develop and implement a pathway to increase the workforce in the area.
 - b. Offer high school courses on child development with the possibility of certification.
 - c. Provide information and assistance regarding funding opportunities and wage supplements for current and potential providers.
 - d. Improve hours of operation and acceptance of part-time care.
 - e. Increase the pay for child care workers.
3. The Region should provide a concerted information and educational campaign for parents and caregivers around developmental milestones for the first three years and publicize existing programs, streamline information between families and providers, and increase community connections.
 - a. Provide and publicize resources for parents/caregivers.
 - b. Support and publicize the launch of an Integrated Intake and Referral System (IRIS).
4. The Region can improve efficiency and provide clearer regulations to parents, providers, and staff, ensuring qualifications between ECEC and intersecting agencies align and are transferable.
 - a. Simplify and align DCFS requirements for early childhood educators with school districts.
 - b. Expedite licensing process for home providers and hiring process for child care workers.
 - c. Streamline paperwork and information regarding CCAP for families.
5. The Region could decrease driving times and reduce wait lists by advocating for more licensed family child care homes. Licensed providers closer to home reduce travel time.
 - a. Increase the number of family child care providers in rural areas.
 - b. Provide local courses and support for getting started as a new provider.
 - c. Investigate funding solutions to keep costs for parents and caregivers low.

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

Appendices

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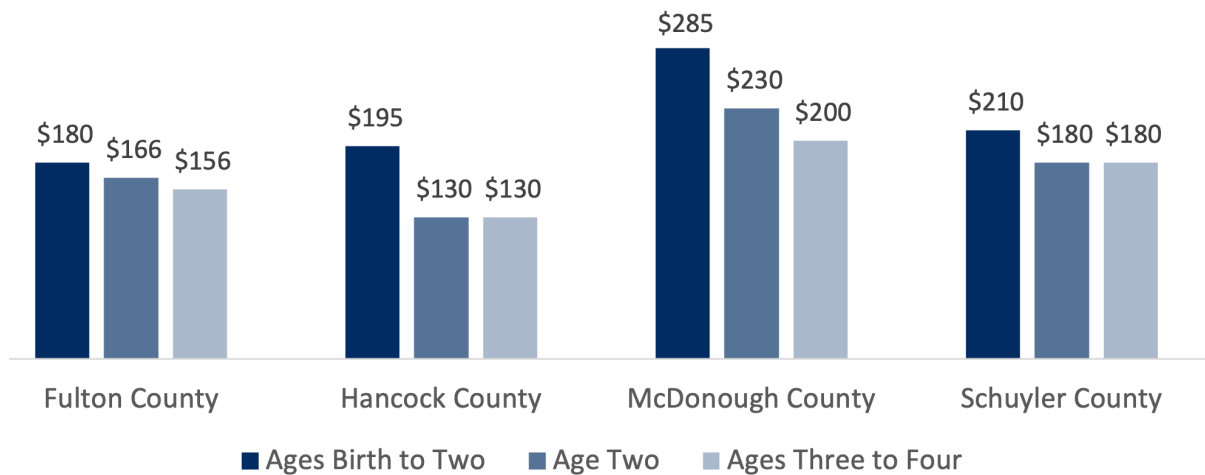
Appendix B: Additional Figures

Figure 1: Number of Child Care Sites, Capacity

Child Care	Total
Number of Preschool For All/PFA Expansion Sites	20
Total Capacity (slots) of Preschool for All/PFA Expansion	951
Number of Licensed Centers	15
Total Capacity (slots) of Licensed Centers	1011
Number of Licensed Family Child Care (FCC) Programs	41
Total Capacity (slots) of FCC	406
Total Capacity (slots) for Ages Birth to Two	560
Total Capacity (slots) for Preschoolers	678
Total Population of Children ages 5 and under	4,589
Total number of Children Ages Birth to Two	2,095
Total Number of Children Ages Three to Five	2,494

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 2: Weekly Child Care Cost by Age, County



Source: INCCRRA
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Appendix C: Focus Group and Interview Questions

Throughout the Regional Needs Assessment development, focus groups and interviews were conducted with caregivers, providers, elected officials, and other community stakeholders. Below are questions developed for caregivers and others.

Families, Parents, Caregivers

1. There are many Early Childhood services available in our Region. What Early Childhood services does your family use/has your family used?
2. What, if anything, has been particularly helpful in making Early Childhood Education and Care work for your family?
3. What barriers or challenges has your family had with using Early Childhood services in your community?
4. What services don't currently exist in your community that you think would help families, in general? What services would help parent/caregivers, specifically?
5. 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 do not 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?

Appendix D: Additional Resources

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

1. Graham Health System Community Health Needs Assessment:
<https://www.grahamhealthsystem.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2022-graham-health-system-chna.pdf>

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