



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

Region 31
(Kane County)





Region 31 Staff

Regional Council Manager: Kimely Stewart (she/her/ella)
Family & Community Engagement Specialist: Alicia Hann (she/her/ella)
Administrative Support: Liliana Guzman (she/her/ella)

Office Address: 1 E. Benton Street, Suite 101, Aurora, IL 60505

Phone Number: (309) 270-5547

Email: kstewart@birthtofiveil.com

Web: www.birthtofiveil.com/region31

Region 31 Action Council Members

Danette Connors
Wendy Mendoza
Marialuz Munoz
Darion Page
Kim Peterson
Trish Rooney
Liz Schaffer
Veronica Tellez

Region 31 Family Council Members

Adriana Benitez
Courtney Costello
Abigail Duor
LuAnna Handley
Lizbeth Martinez
Cynthia McClose
Nelly Paredes
Marlene Ruiz
Autumn Susberry

Table of Contents

Region 31 Executive Summary	3
Region 31 Snapshot Infographic.....	5
Overview & Acknowledgements	7
Introduction.....	8
Letter from State Leadership	9
Letter from Regional Leadership.....	10
Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) in Illinois	11
Timeline.....	13
Birth to Five Illinois Regions	14
Spotlight on Region 31	15
Regional Community Landscape.....	16
Local Community Collaborations.....	23
Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs	25
Slot Gap.....	30
Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce.....	33
Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice	37
Regional Strengths & Needs.....	40
Recommendations.....	41
Appendices	43



Region 31 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 31 Needs Assessment, which includes recommendations developed by our Action and Family Councils. Additional findings, analysis, and recommendations can be found in the full report.

“

I make too much money to qualify for anything, but I still need help. I'm working two jobs. I understand the importance of my child's early education. I would like to put him in a center. I see him falling behind in some areas, probably because he needs to be around other kids, but I still have to put food on the table and pay the bills. So, he will have to stay with grandma. He may not be getting everything he needs to learn, but he is safe, loved, and cared for.

- Single Mom

”



Key Findings

The affordability of ECEC programs is a resounding and reoccurring theme in Kane County. When affordability is a deciding factor, budgeting for child care ignites and detonates a landmine of experiences and pitfalls among families, leaving some families with challenging decisions and others in disparaging financial positions. Shockingly, some families are forced to sacrifice necessities such as quality of care, risk health and safety, eliminate a second household income and remain home, or temporarily reduce work schedules to meet income eligibility requirements during re-determination periods for child care assistance until they can afford a better arrangement or fit for their children.

There is an overwhelmingly disproportionate slot gap between the total number of children ages zero to six and the total number of reported spots across licensed and license exempt programs in the Region. There are approximately 40,700 children under the age of six in Kane County and about 12,314 reported slots. Simply put, Kane County has more children than it has child care settings. However, Kane County cannot be presumptuous in quantifying this number. These findings only offer a starting point to close the slot gap because it is important to consider qualitative data such as parent choices and preferences. Not only does this qualitative need to be examined, but quantitative data is incomplete. Providers such as stay home mothers/homeschoolers, nannies, neighbors, family, and friends are not included in quantitative data. This data impacts expansion and cultural responsiveness to the communities of Kane County.

Region 31 Needs

1. Affordability – Calculating income for eligibility determination needs to be adjusted. Current formulas and factors, such as living expenses and sources of income, are not true determinants of need, and maximum household incomes are set too low for eligibility.
2. More support for caregivers – Limiting documentation to apply for services, support to navigate care system available throughout to Region to ALL caregivers.
3. Universal public awareness meaning clear, comprehensive information and awareness of the importance of early childhood development is needed to publicize the availability of existing early childhood programs, help families navigate and connect to resources, and educate families.

Region 31 Recommendations

1. Formulas for calculating income should begin with net/take home pay not gross pay. Increase maximum household incomes to qualify more families for child care assistance.
2. Expansion and Start-ups are needed. It is critical for any expansion or new service to be mindful of families' preference and population profile to be both successful and culturally responsive to families.
3. Fund systems such as Integrated Referral and Information System (IRIS) and mandate participation from trust community partners and organizations. Through this network residents can be connected to organizations, inform referrals of eligibility requirements, build awareness, navigate systems, and reduce the amount of paperwork or red tape to access resources, programs, and services.

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

Kimely Stewart (she/her)

Phone Number: (309) 270-5547

Email: kstewart@birthtofiveil.com

Web: www.birthtofiveil.com/region31



REGION 31 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.



40,700

Children Under
the Age of 6
in Region 31



17,375

Children 0-5
at 200% Federal
Poverty Level



11,991

Children 0-5
Without Publicly
Funded ECEC Slots

68%

Percentage of focus group participants who indicated that they have or have had difficulty affording child care.

“We are not a community of people having children we cannot afford! We are a hard-working community. Some of us with two decent incomes, and we still can't afford child care.” - Family Council Member

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

REGION 31 NEEDS

1. Expansion of CCAP eligibility
2. More affordable options for child care, especially for families that live at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Line (FPL)
3. Information about the availability of existing Early Childhood programs to help families navigate and connect to resources

REGION 31 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increase maximum household incomes to qualify more families for child care assistance
2. Increase the number of child care facilities
3. Fund coordinated referral systems such as Integrated Referral and Information System (IRIS) and invite participation from trusted community partners and organizations



**“We need more opportunities, alternatives, and programs to supplement early child care education when families cannot or do not choose child care for our young children.”
- Family Council Member**

Overview & Acknowledgements

Introduction

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

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

This report will be used in a variety of ways.

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

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

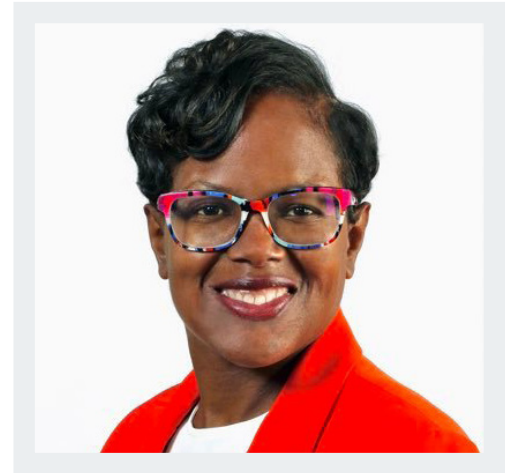
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand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

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



Letter from State Leadership

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Letter from Regional Leadership

Birth to Five Illinois is a statewide infrastructure built to harness knowledge directly from families, early childhood providers, and community members. This system will provide decision-makers with the community level information they need to ensure new and/or expanded Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services meet local needs, particularly for families who have historically been marginalized. As part of this statewide infrastructure, Region 31 (Kane County) has a unique opportunity to dynamically evolve its systems for ECEC. Individuals and communities in Kane County have demonstrated fervent enthusiasm to develop an Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment in which our community has identified our own needs and made recommendations to address them. Region 31 can provide leaders with the qualitative data needed to help make informed, culturally responsive policy and funding decisions and enable local stakeholders to address ECEC needs within our own communities.

Through our direct interactions and conversations with parents/family members, community members from underrepresented populations, local collaboration members, family child care staff, child care center staff, higher education employees, business representatives/Chamber of Commerce members, and members of the faith community, we found that communities in Region 31 (Kane County) are profoundly concerned for children and families, and we are particularly grateful for their dedication and unwavering spirit of collaboration. Our Action Council and Family Council members, along with Kane County residents, relied upon existing community relationships, partnerships, and local collaborations' connections and deep roots in Kane County. We also want to thank parents and caregivers, local service providers, and members of the public who expressed their opinions and shared their experiences and stories, as well as all the organizations working to transform our aspirations into tangible programs and services for children and families in Region 31.

It has been both a privilege and an honor to listen to the genuine and sincere voices of Kane County. Hope resides in Region 31, and we are hopeful. We hope this work provides a clear and distinct understanding of the landscape of Early Childhood needs in Kane County. We hope that the forthcoming plan will be used to influence and build upon the vigor and passion which grew from every person who engaged in this process. We are convinced the process mattered. We hope the plan does, too.

Thank you,

Kimely Stewart (she/her)

Regional Council Manager: Region 31

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.

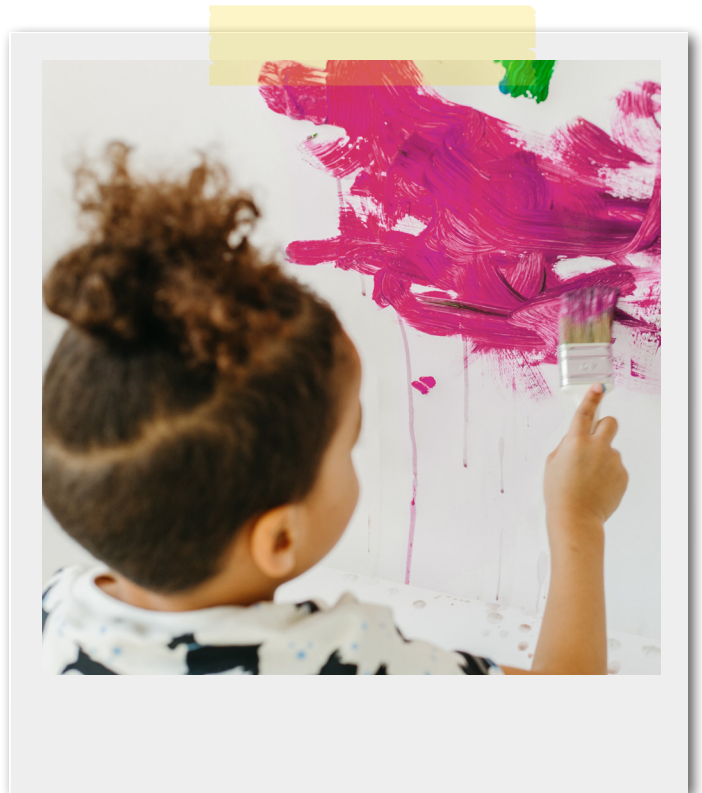
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early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

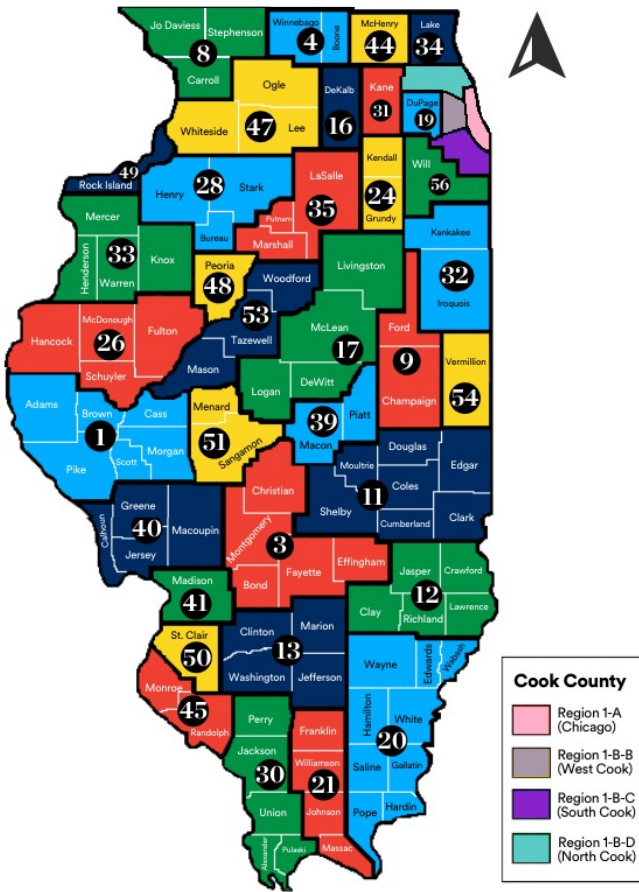


Timeline

- **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.

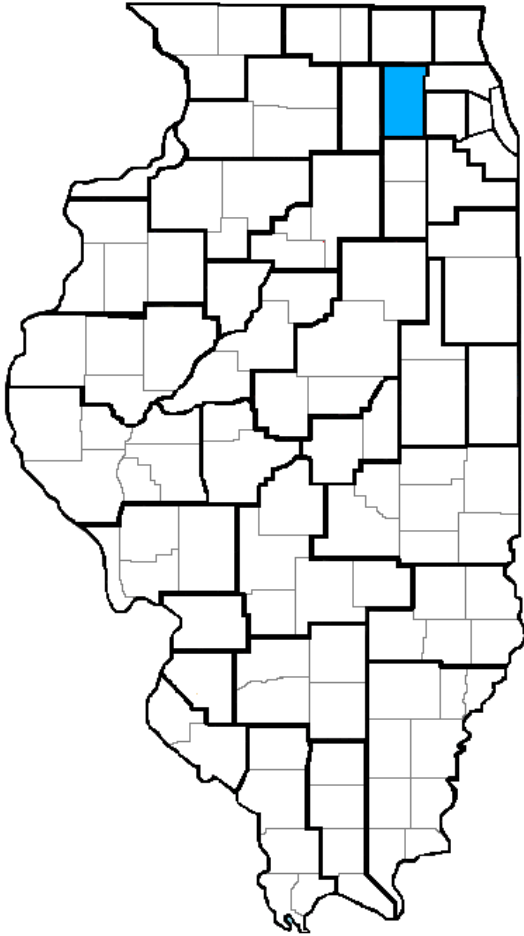
Regional Needs Assessment Methodology

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 31

Regional Community Landscape



Regional Boundaries

There are 102 counties in this great state of Illinois, but there is only one Kane County! Named for a U.S. Senator and the first Illinois Secretary of State, Elias Kane, Kane County is in the northeast corner and is one of the collar counties of the metropolitan statistical area designated “Chicago-Naperville-Elgin, IL-IN-WI” by the U.S. Census. Kane County is the fifth most populous county in Illinois (515,588) and is home to Aurora, the County’s most populated city (183,447) and the second largest city in the State. The county seat is in Geneva.

Region 31 consists of 520 square miles of land and 4.1 square miles of water. Our largest cities are located along our most notable natural feature, the Fox River. Each neighborhood has its own personality with a diverse array of cultures living in urban (94%) and rural (6%) settings. Children and families of Kane County reside in single family and townhome subdivisions, public housing, gated communities, shelters, apartment buildings, trailer parks, and farmhouses among five cities, 25 villages, one census-designated place, 16 unincorporated communities, and 16 townships. Major employment sectors include manufacturing (42,666 people), retail trade (30,847 people), and health care and social assistance (27, 809 people).

Within the borders of Kane County is an extensive forest preserve program with numerous nature preserves, historic sites, trails, a quarry, and a sunken garden. There is something for everyone here: 21 libraries, nine local school districts, Aurora and Judson University, Elgin and Waubensee Community College, park districts, equestrian centers, churches and temples, local farms, zoos, museums, art galleries, and an American Association of Professional Baseball team – the Kane County Cougars.

Land Acknowledgement¹

Region 31 acknowledges the contributions of all local Nations and homelands of the Peoria, Bodwewadmi (Potawatomi), Myaamia (Miami), Očhéthi Šakówinj (Sioux), Hoocak (Ho-Chunk), Kaskaskia, and Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo) in cultivating the community that is now Kane County. We acknowledge the historic and ongoing injustices experienced by Indigenous communities and honor all the Native Peoples who came before us and continue to contribute to our community.

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

Regional Demographics

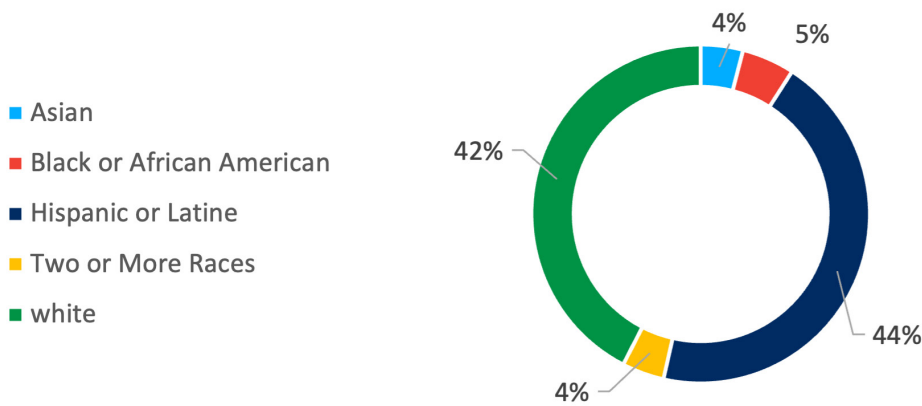
Information about the characteristics of families in Region 31, such as the number of children and families, composition of households, and racial and ethnic identities is critical for ensuring policy and decision makers, as well as program providers, are informed about the types of services needed in communities, including where services should be located and how to tailor culturally responsive programming.

“ Our system is made up of thousands of human interactions and decisions each day. Considering this, it’s clear the most important need to meet in Kane County is growing an Early Childhood Education system that is intentionally connected. A system that reflects both equitable and universal concepts that defy race, class, gender, and socioeconomic status. An ideal ECE system for us clearly defines, communicates, and models a system-wide culture of respect, acceptance, flexibility, excellence, transparency, and collaborative problem solving.

- Community Member

”

Figure 1: Children Under Age of Six by Race, Ethnicity²

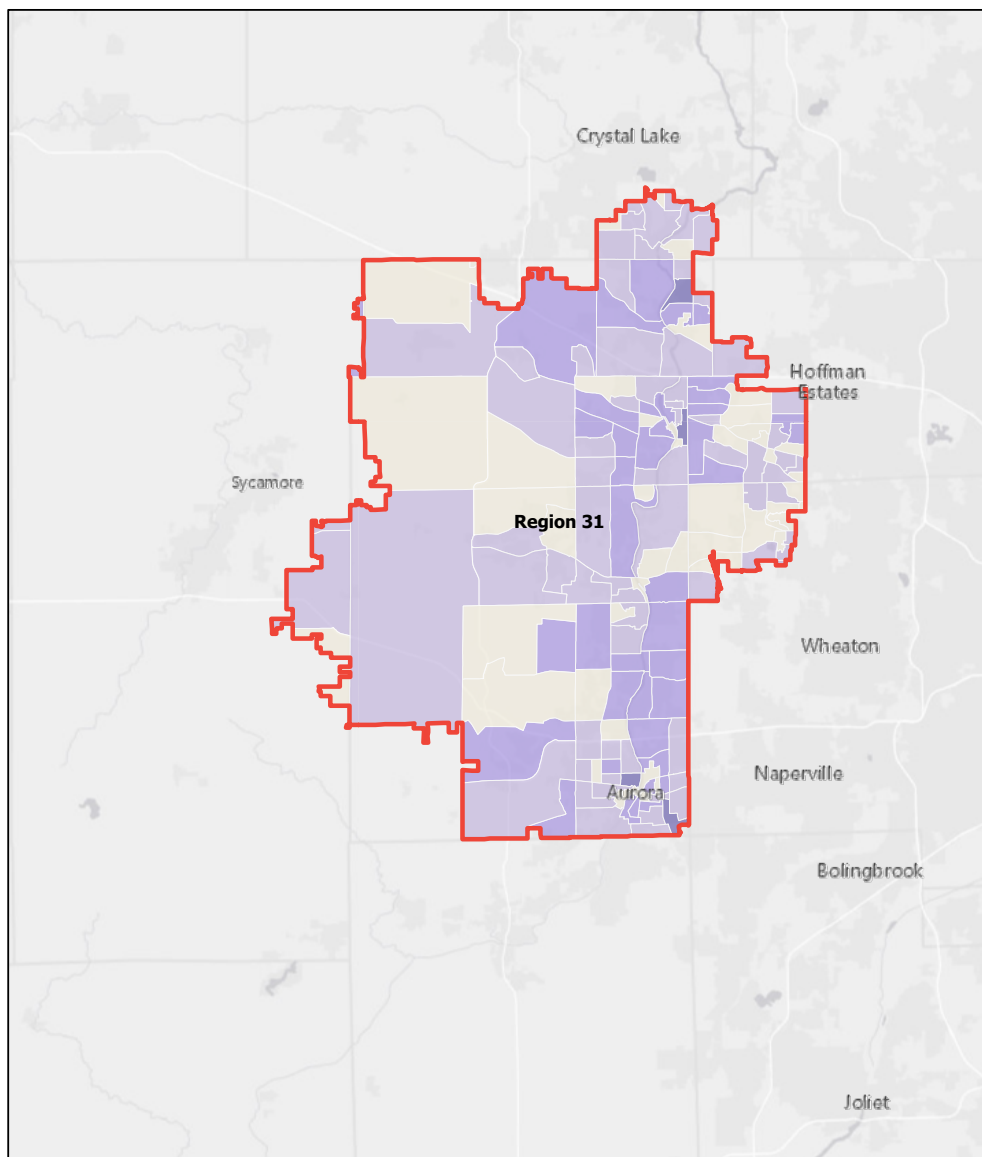


Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

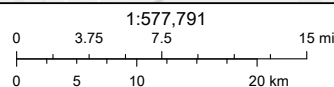
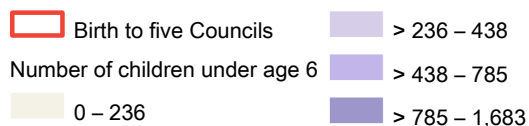
A large percentage of people in Region 31 identify as white or Hispanic; Kane County also has populations of people that identify as Black, Asian, Pacific Islander, or some other non-Hispanic race. Kane County is the fifth most populated county in the State with a population of 531,756, which includes 40,321 children aged five and under, 8% of the County’s population. While most households are comprised of married couples living together, 11% of households are led by a single female caregiver.

²Some Census reported categories not included in chart due to small number of respondents: American Indian or Alaska Native (23), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (52), Some other Race (137)

Figure 2: Location of Children Under Age Six



6/7/2023, 9:13:20 AM



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

Source: IECAM

Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Kane County employs 271,000 people in its most common employment sectors with median earnings ranging from \$50,819 for men and \$32,850 for women upwards to an average of \$83,374 median household income. The unemployment rate is 6% in Kane County. For the underemployed, income thresholds and guidelines that vary by family size and composition are used to determine who is experiencing poverty or living below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL).

Poverty thresholds and poverty guidelines are dollar amounts set by the U.S. government to indicate the least amount of income a person or family needs to meet their basic needs. Poverty thresholds are widely used to gauge the rise or fall in poverty over time and to compare poverty statistics across geographic areas and demographic groups. Poverty guidelines are simplified poverty thresholds used to determine financial eligibility for many programs and benefits.

The FPL is the minimum amount of annual income needed for individuals and families to pay for essentials, such as room and board, clothes, and transportation. The FPL considers the number of people in a household, their income, and the state in which they live. If a family’s income is less than a particular threshold, then that family and everyone in it is, by definition, experiencing poverty.

Figure 3: 2023 Federal Poverty Guidelines Based on Family Size³

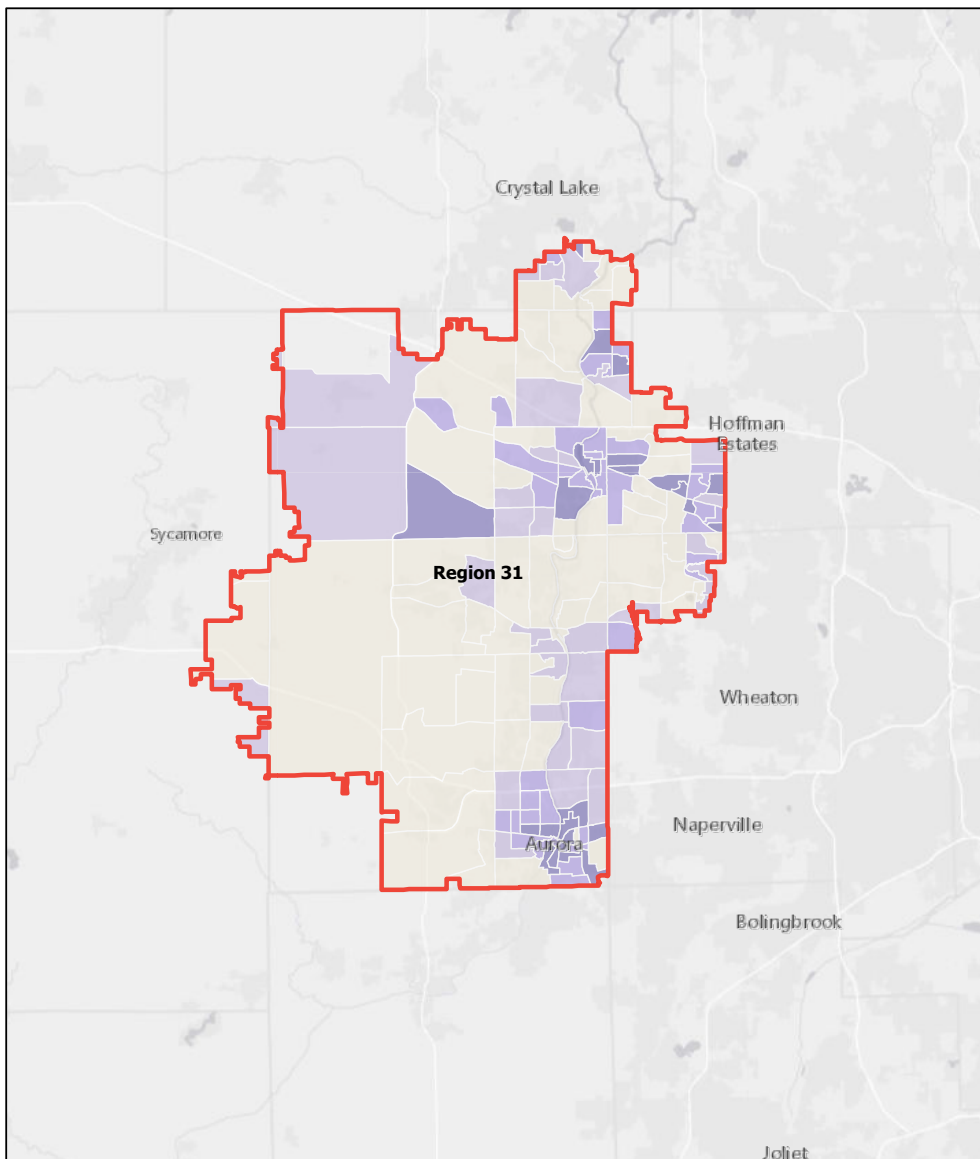
Household Size	100% FPL Guidelines	200% FPL Guidelines ⁴
1	\$14,580	\$29,160
2	\$19,720	\$39,440
3	\$24,860	\$49,720
4	\$30,000	\$60,000
5	\$35,140	\$70,280
6	\$40,280	\$80,560
7	\$45,420	\$90,840
8	\$50,560	\$101,120

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

³ Add \$5,140 to 100% FPL and \$10,280 to 200% FPL for each additional person in household

⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Poverty Guidelines for 2023 for the 48 contiguous states and the District of Columbia.

Figure 4: Location of Children Under Age Six Living at or Below 200% FPL



6/7/2023, 9:21:00 AM

Birth to five Councils

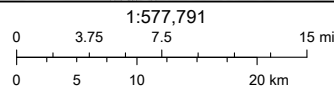
Percent of Children Under 6 Under 200% FPL

0% – 12%

> 12% – 31%

> 31% – 57%

> 57% – 100%



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

ArcGIS Web AppBuilder

Source: IECAM

Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

The Northeast and Southeast side of Kane County are heavily populated with children under the age of six and has the largest population of children living 100-200% below the FPL. Although the East side of Kane County has a plethora of child care facilities and programs, the families in these communities often cannot afford child care. The issues of affordability are not inherent in the community, or a problem caused by the actions of its residents. These are systems issues that impact children and families.

Children and Families in Priority Populations⁵

Priority populations are a group of people that ECEC programs are encouraged to increase services, enrollment, and engage as they conduct their work. Why? Often, many of the children who could benefit most from their services and programs are unable to access them because of barriers that persist in the system, such as distinctive challenges relevant to landscape and conditions in their communities. To be responsive to the removal of such barriers, an attempt to drive resources and awareness to improve access is implemented by ultimately developing a *universal* list of priority populations to be embraced by communities and ECEC programs. The following twelve priority populations meet the State’s criteria, as defined by the Illinois Early Learning Council:

“ We are not a community of people having children we cannot afford! We are a hard-working community. Some of us with two decent incomes, and we still can’t afford child care. ”
- Family Council Member

- Children of underage parents.
- Children experiencing homelessness.
- Children in families living on poverty or deep poverty incomes.
- Children/families with Department of Children and Family Services involvement.
- Children with disabilities.
- Children of migrant or seasonal workers.
- Children in families with low caregiver education attainment.
- Children in families that face barriers based on culture, language, and religion.
- Children of a parent or legal guardian with a disability.
- Children/families with refugee or asylum status.
- Children in families who face barriers due to immigration status.
- Children who are impacted by parental involvement with the criminal justice system.

Those who are unhoused and undocumented are two priority populations in Kane County who experience many challenges (due to pitfalls in the system) that make it difficult to remove barriers around public awareness, data collection, and program delivery and design. These challenges not only amplify enrollment issues for families in these priority populations, but also intensify a need for a shared language and understanding across programs. After conducting focus groups and interviews, some reoccurring themes emerged that offer qualitative insight into the needs of community members, including program awareness, an easier navigation process that is also culturally responsive, and affordability.

The purpose of the priority populations list is to drive resources and attention toward improving access to high-quality, responsive services for children and families with limited to no access to economic or material resources. While the priority populations list addresses the access issue, Birth to Five Illinois strives to focus the attention of policymakers and early childhood stakeholders on identifying ways to engage these impacted communities to remove the systemic barriers causing the access issue within each Region.

⁵ <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/earlylearningcouncil/access/documents/priority-populations-updated-2021.pdf>

“

Nobody explained to me the terms of child care. I didn't know the system to enroll. You just don't go to school and tell them you want to enroll your kid. They get evaluated. There are other rules and protocols. I took my youngest, and they said I couldn't enroll him yet. We waited a year, and they finally took him in, but not full time, and he started in December. They didn't explain the system, how it goes. For my oldest, it was a big shock to start school. This is why when I meet someone that just got here, I try to share information with them. That way they don't go through the same I went through.

- Undocumented Focus Group Participant

”



A family photo with two infants.

Local Community Collaborations

Local Community Collaborations are critically important to the community of Kane County because they work to connect families to resources. They ensure efforts reflect the voice, perspectives, and desires of people in the communities they serve by coordinating funding from a variety of sources to expand ECEC programs. Additionally, Community Collaborations educate families and caregivers, connect families with resources, and build awareness of the importance of early childhood development and health. Kane County has several Community Collaborations working together to serve children and families across the Region.

Kane County: All Our Kids (AOK) Early Childhood Network

The Kane County AOK is a community-based Collaboration that was established in 1999; AOK networks are the only state-funded Local Community Collaborations in Illinois. Their mission is to promote healthy pregnancies, positive growth and development of all children birth to age five, and support parents or caregivers by assuring access to a high-quality, well-coordinated, easily accessible system of services and support. Through this county-wide network, partners collaborate to ensure all children enter Kindergarten safe, healthy, ready to succeed, and eager to learn.

The Kane County AOK has implemented IRIS, a cross-sector, countywide community referral system, to improve families' access services. This system improvement initiative was launched in March of 2021 and has continued to grow, now including over 100 participating organizations and 1,000 referrals. They also distributed 10,000 comprehensive AOK Family Resource Guides throughout Kane County to be utilized by community members, providers, and staff, and played a critical role in forming the Kane County Hunger Relief Network (collaboration of food pantries), securing participation in IRIS as a central hub for food and nutrition connections throughout the County.

Strong, Prepared and Ready for Kindergarten Early Childhood Collaboration (SPARK)

Established in 2012, SPARK advocates for all of Aurora's young children to have equal access to exemplary ECEC. Stakeholders work jointly to improve and strengthen the ECEC system in Aurora by ensuring parents and the community are informed about the importance of an early childhood education; supporting professional development for teachers; and coordinating relationships between school districts, community agencies, and early childhood programs. SPARK is actively increasing enrollment in early learning programs, serves priority populations, and is coordinating intake for families in the Region.

Elgin Partnership for Early Learning (EPEL)

EPEL launched in 2012 with a mission to build a connected community dedicated to helping young children thrive, and a vision that children in the area are happy, healthy, and ready for Kindergarten. EPEL facilitates program awareness for families; promotes access to high-quality child development and early learning experiences; supports quality improvement and capacity building of birth to five professionals and organizations; responds to community data about strengths, needs, and gaps; and supports community partner collaboration to improve Kindergarten success. EPEL serves priority populations and works to increase the quality of early learning programs; the Collaboration is also finding non-traditional locations, such as laundromats, to offer early learning opportunities.

St. Charles Early Learning Partnership

Founded in 2019, the St. Charles Early Learning Partnership brings together people, resources, and services to create a community-wide system of support so every child from birth to age eight in the St. Charles' area is healthy, safe, eager to learn, and ready to succeed. Recently, they collected over 800 parent surveys from across the service area (St Charles Community Unit School District 303 geographical area) as part of a comprehensive listening campaign plan.

Each Collaboration in Region 31 is working to connect families to resources, support awareness and quality improvement, and coordinate family outreach and engagement. However, Council and community members raised concerns about a disconnect between the Local Collaborations and families in the Region due to a lack of clear communication between the different Collaborations. Some caregivers said they did not have a clear understanding about who the Local Collaborations were, who was staffing them, what resources were available through them, and what programs they offered to communities. Other families were simply unaware that local collaborations existed in the community. Difficulties navigating the systems of support offered by these becomes even more complicated for caregivers whose primary language is not English.

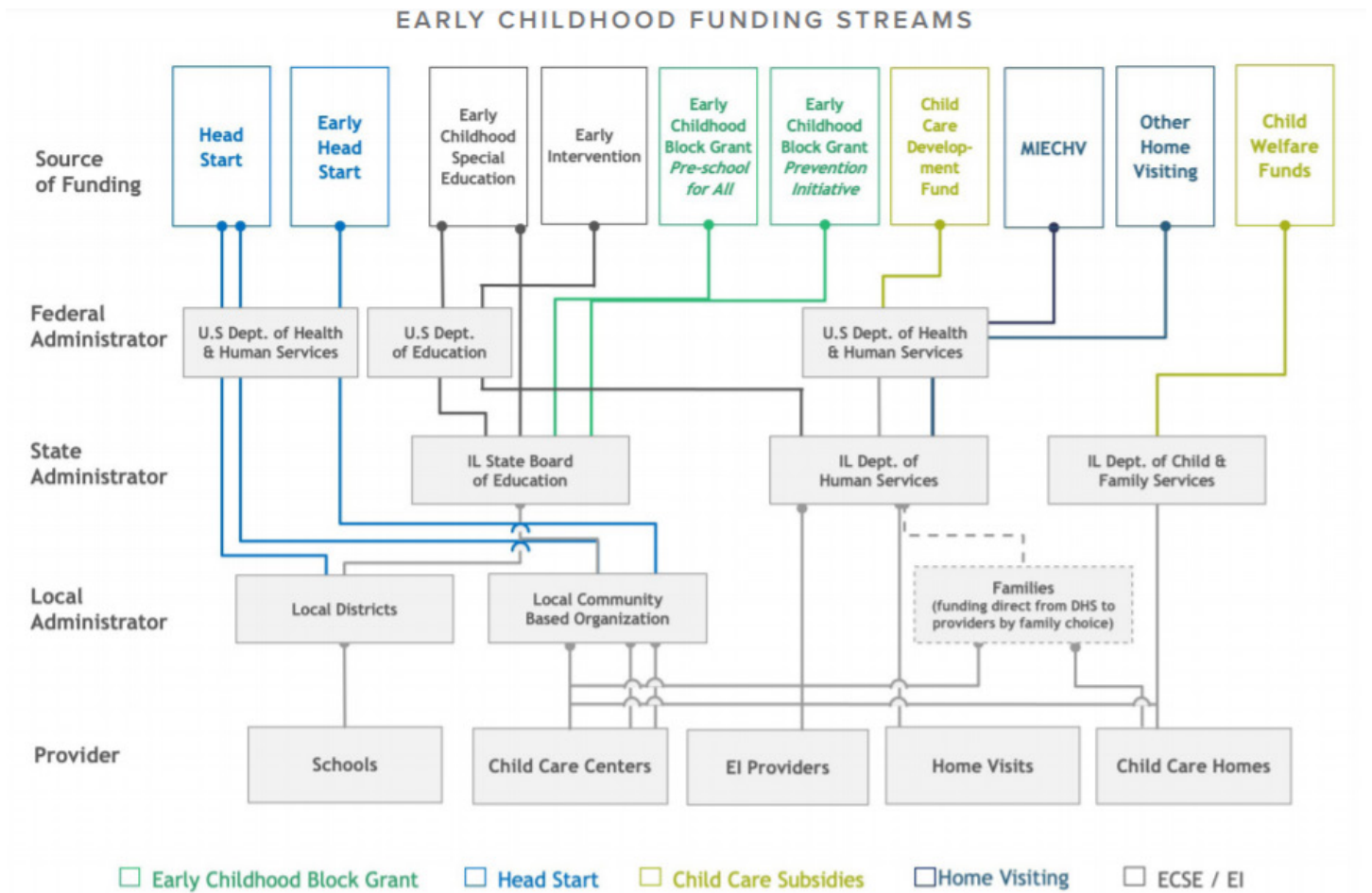
Though Community Collaborations play an integral role in the larger ECEC landscape, and serve as a bridge between caregivers and services, more work needs to be done to raise awareness and simplify the current system so it is accessible to all families in Region 31.



Two adults kissing, smiling, and holding an infant baby.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

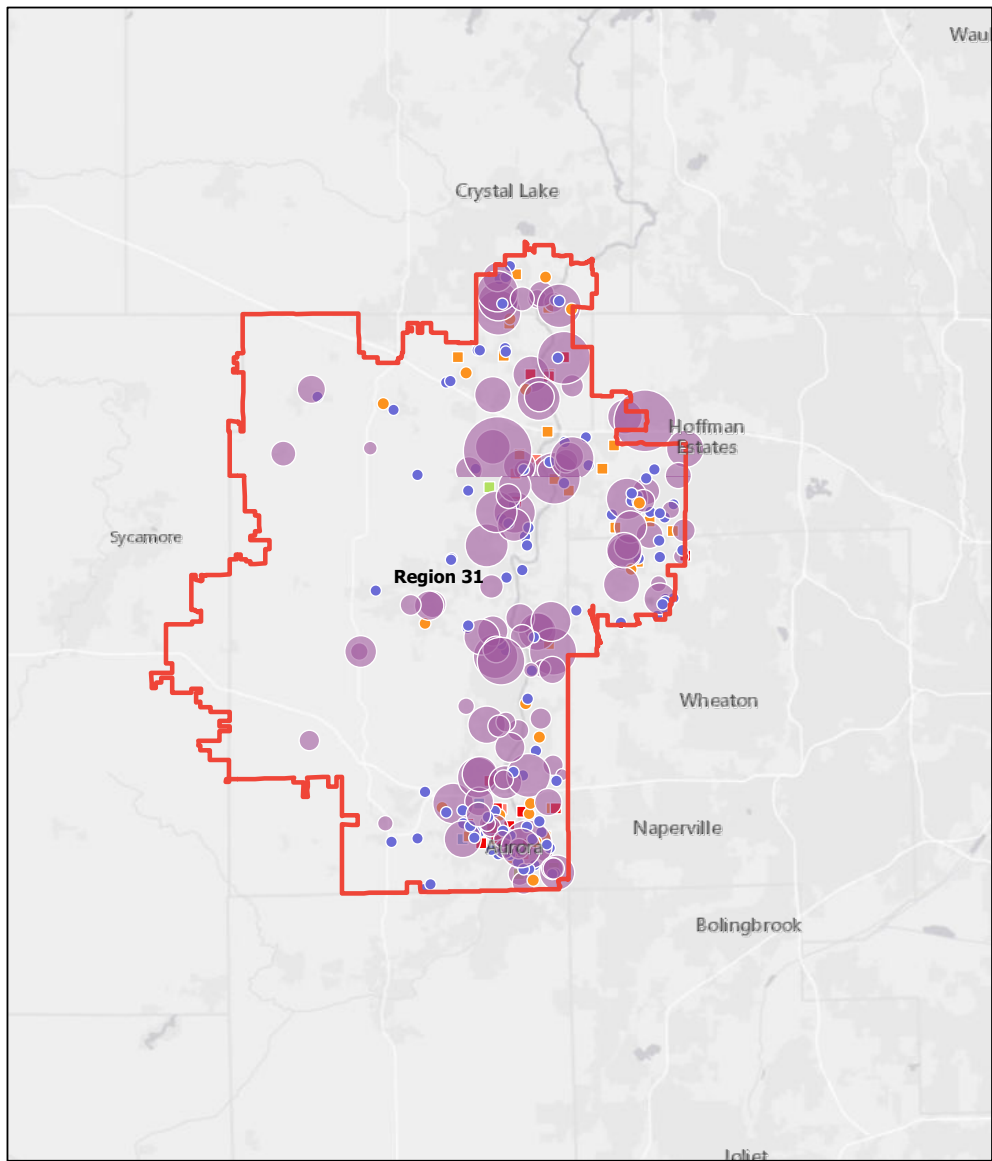
Figure 5: Early Childhood Funding Streams in Illinois



Source: Office of Early Childhood Development
 Created by: Office of Early Childhood Development

The landscape of ECEC programs in Region 31 is rich with licensed, license-exempt, and publicly funded programs, which is both a benefit and a barrier because multiple early childhood systems come with an array of eligibility requirements, an assortment of options, and numerous doorways that often leave families confused. Lack of awareness and complicated pathways to navigate ECEC systems contribute to unequal levels of access. While Region 31 has many of the early childhood streams, the need to increase access (entrance), capacity (number of children allowed to care for), and enrollment (children attending) for the many programs and services Kane County offers is critical.

Figure 6: Location of Publicly Funded Child Care and ECEC Program Sites



6/7/2023, 9:31:17 AM

1:577,791

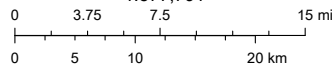
Licensed ECEC Providers

- Day Care Home 209.667
- Day Care Center 312
- Group Day Care Home 5
- 107.333

Publicly Funded ECEC Sites

- Preschool for All
- Preschool for All Expansion
- Head Start
- Prevention Initiative
- Early Head Start

Birth to five Councils



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

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

Source: IECAM

Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Licensed & License-Exempt Child Care

Licensed child care programs include three types of providers. Child care homes typically care for 6-8 children in a private home, group child care homes typically care for 10-12 children in a private home, and child care centers typically serve a large number of children from a commercial establishment. Child care providers can become licensed by meeting specified criteria, following state guidelines for facilities, nutrition/health, safety, and submitting to annual inspections. Licensing assures families that a provider satisfies the minimum standards of quality and safety according to the Child Care Act of 1969 and Illinois State Licensing Standards.

Currently, Kane County has approximately 74 licensed child care centers, 62 child care homes, and 15 group child care homes facilities and a reported total of 9,200 child care centers, and 965 combined child care homes and group child care slots. However, not all licensed programs are full and with waitlists. There are quality improvements needed that may increase demand for the options available, such as convenience. Distance from facilities is an issue for families who want to access and enroll in ECEC programs, and transportation is a challenge. Some families reported that they do not believe Kane County offers high-quality services and programs equivalent to its neighboring counties; they viewed the options in Kane County to be of lesser quality. In addition, Spanish speaking delivery options and/or options consistent with cultural or family values are sparse.

“ My grandson, who is autistic, has to get on the bus and go all the way to Bolingbrook. If something happens to him, he gets sick or something, that’s far. I don’t like that it’s so far away. He’s receiving services elsewhere because it’s not available somewhere closer.

- Family Council Member ”

License-exempt child care programs must have specific conditions that must meet or qualify as exempt from licensure under Illinois rule. Although these programs are exempt from licensure, families can find assurance that they are monitored and regulated by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) via a health and safety checklist conducted by Health and Safety Inspectors. These types of programs are typically but not limited to: a) part-day child care facilities conducted by a church, religious organization, or social service agency in which individual children are provided care, on an intermittent basis, for up to 10 hours per 7-day week, b) social services protecting and promoting the welfare of children, c) programs operated by public or private elementary school systems, secondary school units, or institutions of higher learning, and d) before and after school programs for school age children. Presently, Kane County has approximately 45 license-exempt facilities and a reported 1,020 slots.

“ I don’t believe Kane County has programs just as good as DuPage County. A lot of my friends don’t think the quality of education in general here is as good as Naperville or Kendall County. I have toured child care facilities in those counties, and they are amazing. So, if I can put my child in a child care in one of those counties. I will pay, and I will drive to do so. I want the best.

- Interview Father of Son Aged Two ”

“ We would use a facility in our county, but we only have one car. Some people don’t have a car at all. It is very expensive, and some programs only provide transportation one way. Others don’t even provide transportation for infants and toddlers, and if you have a child or children in other schools, you travel all over the place for pick up and drop offs. Also, hours don’t match so it is hard to get everyone picked up and dropped off at the same time.

- Family Council Member ”

Home visiting programs are for pregnant parents and families with young children from birth to age three. Kane County has approximately 1,280 participants across 11 programs which include Prevention Initiative (PI), Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV), and other home visiting programs, such as Healthy Families Illinois (HFI) and Parents Too Soon (PTS). These programs provide families with information about the growth and development of children starting from pregnancy. They connect families with community resources like child care options, doctors and dentists, and money management.

There is also some consensus among Family and Action Council members that efforts should be made to drive family interest, awareness of, and demand for home visiting, since not all families who would benefit from the program are aware of it or initially comfortable with the idea of state-funded programs in their homes. Additionally, more clarity is needed regarding the goals of infant and toddler care. While many believe that the goal is to support the economic stability of families, others see it to ensure safety, improve well-being, and promote positive educational outcomes for young children. Increased engagement directly with families could shed light on the ways that access to quality child care impacts the lives of families.

Publicly Funded Programs

Head Start providers receive federal funding to create an experience that is responsive and unique to the community it serves. Head Start services are for children birth to age six by September 1, and includes pregnant people and expectant families. Participants are children with families that meet federal income guidelines and are at or below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). Children who are in the foster care system or experiencing homelessness are also eligible. Programs may also accept a limited number of children who do not meet these criteria.

The landscape for publicly funded programs in Kane County is Preschool for All (15 sites – 3,832 slots), Head Start (11 sites – 332 slots), Prevention Initiative (11 sites – 996 slots), and Early Head Start (6 sites – 224 slots). The demand for ECEC programs is not universal, but demand could be increased with improvements to the current options, especially when affordability is a deciding factor. Families who do not qualify for assistance receive little or no help to cover the cost. Families in Kane County living above the eligibility criteria often still need financial support but are denied. Other families may worry that they will lose child care if their income increases.



Two young children embracing while sitting on a couch.

“ I wanted to further my education to further my career, but I had to wait for my children to get older because I couldn’t afford tuition and child care expenses.

- Family Council Member ”

“ Child care is in the process. Yesterday they approved me. I’m at the next step. I have to find a place for her. I have to call a number. They gave me a list, but they’re full. It’s not as easy as I thought it would be. I was trying to find something close by, so I need another list because that first list wasn’t a hit for me.

- Unhoused Focus Group Participant ”

The IDHS Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) and local Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (CCR&R) work to support families find, select, and pay for the best child care option for their child. Families that qualify for the program must:

- Live in Illinois,
- Be employed and/or going to an eligible educational activity (i.e., high school, trade school, undergraduate college),
- Have children younger than 13 that need care while the caregiver is working or going to school (children with documented special needs may be eligible up to the age of 19), and
- Have family income below allowable limits by family size.

Caregivers who are approved for CCAP must make a monthly payment directly to the provider. The Department then pays the provider directly for the remaining charges up to a maximum rate. ECEC providers and parents/caregivers who participated in a focus group agreed that child care subsidy reimbursement rates are currently not enough to cover the cost of extended hours/days of available care for the convenience of families with non-traditional work hours or small infants and toddlers. Caregivers shared that providers need an incentive to accept child care subsidies because some providers will not accept it for payment or will ask parents/caregivers to pay the difference in cost out of pocket. Overall, income thresholds and guidelines are not inclusive for all working families. The criteria disqualify many families who need support and assistance, and the cost of child care in Kane County is high, which causes hardship for families both below and above allowable income levels.

The following reoccurring themes and insights relating to barriers, customized responses, and how to eliminate desert areas without programming emerged from direct conversations and interactions with focus groups and qualitative data collection from our Action and Family Council members:

Although the east side of the Region contains many facilities and services, a large percentage of eligible children live 100-200% below Federal Poverty Level in that area, and families cannot afford to access care. Expansion or start-ups on the east side of Kane County must consider affordability because it is a deciding factor for most families in that area. It is critical for any expansion or start-up in central and west Kane County to be mindful of families' preference, market analysis, and population profile to be both successful and culturally responsive to families.

“ I would like to expand my capacity to a group child care home, but the fire marshal inspections take a long time to come out, and they can require home improvements that I can't afford to make, like adding a sprinkler system in the basement or another bathroom.

- ECEC Providers' Focus Group participant ”

“ What I charge parents needs to be able to match the community I am serving. I can't provide the quality of program I would like to provide and charge them the real price for it. So, I do a lot out of the kindness of my heart because I love this job. People say charge more, but why? Nobody would come because they can't pay it.

- ECEC Provider Focus Group Participant ”

“ When you don't qualify for help, there isn't anything out there for you. You have to be able to pay for it on your own. That is hard to do with rent/ mortgage, car notes, insurance, utilities, gas, and food. You are forced to decide.

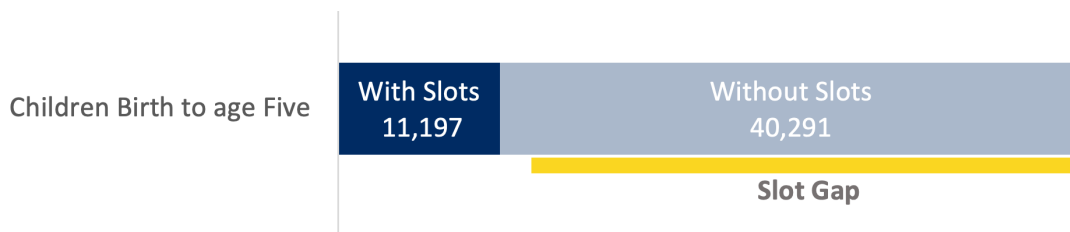
- Father's Focus Group Participant ”

Slot Gap

Equitable access to early childhood programs and services means all families who want child care in their preferred program from all communities and socio-economic backgrounds have access to high-quality learning opportunities. In addition, service offerings are tailored so families and children receive information in culturally responsive ways. The northeast side of Kane County has a plethora of ECEC facilities and programs; however, there are not enough programs to support the number of children in these heavily populated communities.

Slot gap is the term used to describe the difference between the number of children eligible for child care and the number of available slots across all child care options that are publicly funded, licensed, and license-exempt. Succinctly, there is an overwhelmingly disproportionate slot gap between the total number of children ages birth to six and the total number of reported spots across licensed and license-exempt programs in the Region. There were 40,700 children under the age of six in Kane County reported in the 2020 Census and 16,755 slots reported to IECAM (11,371 licensed and license-exempt and 5,384 publicly funded). Simply put, Kane County has more children than it has child care enrollment spots, if all families wanted to enroll their child in a program.

Figure 7: Child Care Capacity Slot Gap



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3



A young toddler smiling for a picture outside.

Qualitatively speaking, the term slot gap is equivalent to child care gap. A child care gap is the difference between potential need (including caregiver choice and preference) and the number of child care spaces available by legally operated and publicly funded providers. These findings offer a starting point to close the slot gap; however, it is important to consider parent choices and preferences. Several care options are missing from the map, including stay home mothers/homeschoolers, nannies, neighbors, and friends. Overall, the lack of data impacts both drivers of the gaps and families in the community.

Family Council members report that an increase in the number of caregivers working in hybrid or remote positions has enabled working caregivers to stay home and provide their own child care, reducing potential need. Council members also share that COVID led to numerous closures in the County; providers could not survive the financial strains of low enrollment, quarantine, stay home orders, and reduced capacities for reopening due to the pandemic. Additionally, data is too incomplete to accurately determine if assumed desert areas in Kane County are true deserts or since programs have not expanded to those areas.

“

It is scary to think of leaving my 6-week-old child in the care of a licensed center or child care home provider. I couldn't trust anyone, and the expense was overwhelming anyway. I am so thankful that my mother was able to watch my child so I could return to work quickly and know that my child was safe while working non-traditional hours. Grandma offered both affordable and quality care.

- Family Council Member

”

This slot gap can force those parents and caregivers interested in ECEC services to “figure it out” or “make it work,” especially parents of young infants. Publicly funded ECEC programs, such as Prevention Initiative and Early Head Start, for young infants provide a reported 1,155 slots at approximately 17 sites on the northeast side of the County. However, there are about 10,500 children, birth to age two, eligible for care in the County. The availability of infant and toddler care is important for the economic stability of working families. There is a need for non-traditional hours and other options, especially for non-traditional shift workers. Members of our Family Council report that some families living in Kane County without family or friends in the area would prefer to utilize community center-based care and dream of employer sponsored on-site center-based care.

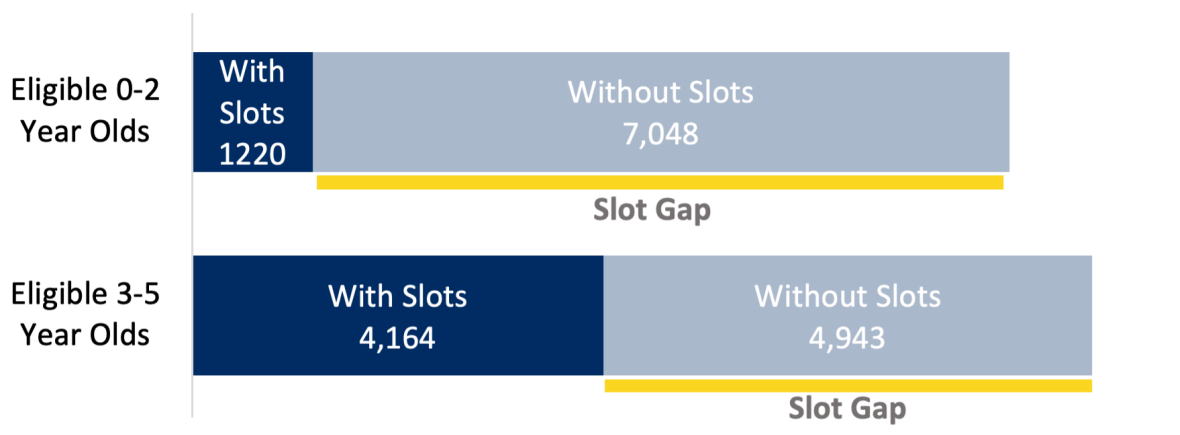
“

There are a lot of things for me to consider when looking for child care. Is it close to home or work? Is there a waitlist? Do they take subsidies, or can I afford it? What is the quality of environment and care? I can't work just to pay for child care. I have other bills to pay and obligations. It pains me to see my child falling behind when I know development is important, but I am forced to choose between paying the rent and putting food on the table or paying for child care.

- Family Council Member

”

Figure 8: Publicly Funded ECEC Program Slot Gap



Source: IECAM

Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

There are a few additional factors that may be influencing the slot gap in Kane County for publicly funded programs. First, awareness: many families are not aware of the available programs and do not have access to information on eligibility requirements and how to decrease time spent on waitlists, especially families for whom English is not the first language. Second, inclusion: though stakeholders reported progress in this area, children with disabilities still face barriers when accessing programs. Lastly, address stigma and perception, some families feel they are judged for participating in publicly funded programs. In addition, qualifying income levels for publicly funded programs and assistance are too low and hinder families, especially two-income households, from securing or seeking high paying jobs and careers. Families are forced to remain in low paying jobs or decline work to meet income requirements of child care assistance or income-contingent enrollment.

There are a few factors that could decrease the slot gap in Kane County for publicly funded programs. First, increase awareness of programs and available supports so families (especially those for whom English is not their first language) are aware of eligibility requirements and how to decrease time spent on waitlists. Second, make settings more inclusive: though stakeholders reported progress in this area, children with disabilities still face barriers when accessing services. Lastly, address stigma and perception: some families feel judged for participating in publicly funded programs and choose not to enroll their children in available slots.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

It is important for a child’s growth and development in their early years to have stimulating environments with a variety of different ways to play and learn. A workforce made up of qualified providers and caregivers who are knowledgeable of how young children learn through experiences is necessary for high-quality ECEC programs and services. It is important to understand the characteristics and size of the workforce in Kane County’s communities.

Race/ethnicity is a characteristic of workforce that needs attention in the Region. If Region 31 hopes to grow a culturally responsive workforce for its Early Childhood system, then it will require an increase in providers and caregivers, preferably representative of the communities they serve.

A close look at demographics in the Region and race/ethnicity of teachers, providers, and operators reveals Hispanics/Latine (which make up 44% of the population in Region 31) are grossly underrepresented in licensed child care centers and homes (Figure 9).⁶ Hispanics/Latinos account for only 11% of licensed center directors, 26% of teaching staff, and 27% of family child care providers in the field. A Hispanic child is less likely to see themselves reflected in staff while in care; however, a white child in care will most likely see themselves reflected in the workforce because there is a disproportionate number of white teachers, providers, and operators in the licensed sector. On the other hand, Black children are reasonably represented among this sector with an overall population of 5% and a representation of staff reflecting 8% for licensed center directors, 6% teaching staff, and 14% family child care providers.

Figure 9: Percentage of Early Childhood Professionals by Race, Ethnicity

	Asian	Black or African American	Hispanic or Latine	Native American/ Alaskan, Pacific Islander, or Other	Multi-Racial	white
Center Directors	6%	8%	11%	3%	< 1%	72%
Teaching Staff	4%	6%	26%	< 1%	2%	60%
FCC Staff ⁷	3%	14%	27%	< 1%	< 1%	54%

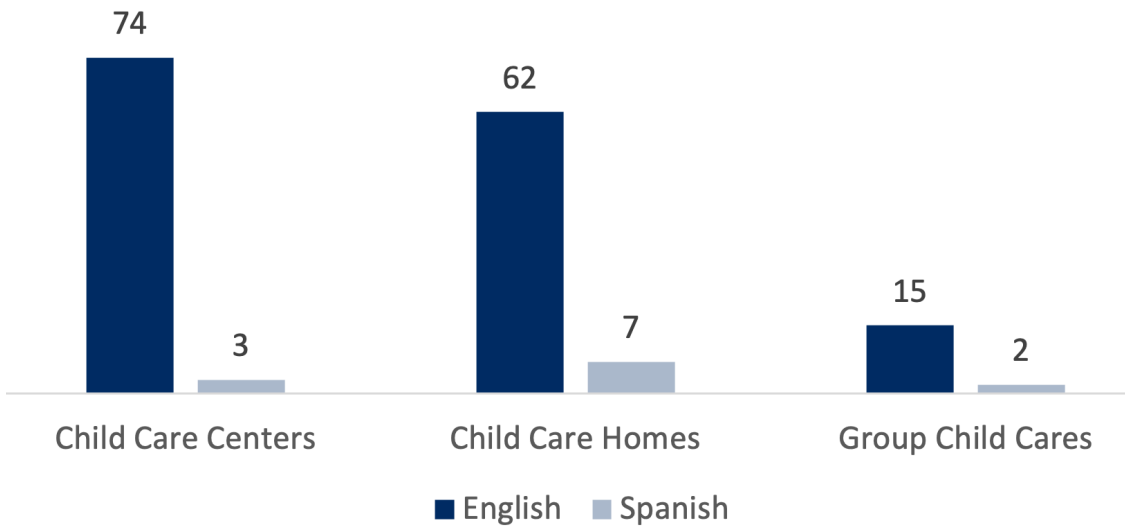
Source: INCCRRA
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

As Early Childhood programs increase staff and providers to be culturally responsive and reflective of the children and families they serve, an increase in multilingualism needs improvement to include higher proportions of English Language Learners (ELLs). In the Region, there are 7,973 limited-English speaking households speaking Spanish and 2,731 limited-English speaking households speaking other languages. However, there are few licensed Early Childhood professionals who identified as bilingual (Figure 10).

⁶ Workforce data comes from licensed providers who were registered in the Gateways to Opportunities Registry as of March 2021

⁷ FCC includes family child care providers and assistants, substitute/floaters, and other direct and indirect service providers

Figure 10: Number of Child Providers who Speak English, Spanish



Source: IECAM
 Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Bilingualism is defined as being fluent in or use of two languages. When referring to Region 31’s ECEC landscape, the two languages referenced are English and Spanish. There is a growing number of ELLs or children with limited English. As ECEC programs include ELL students, it is critical that providers in those programs can meet their needs. A disproportionately large number of professionals in Kane County reported English as their primary language, and very small numbers reported Spanish as their primary language. Yet, the number of households speaking another language, specifically Spanish, as their primary language are substantial. Programs and services need to tailor a workforce to the specific needs of those who are likely to use them in culturally responsive ways to improve quality of care.

Figure 11: Education Attainment of Licensed Center Directors, Teaching Staff, FCC Staff⁸

	High School/ GED	Some College	Community College Certificate	Associate Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Graduate Degree
Center Directors	19	13	6	56	131	36
Teaching Staff	826	103	94	382	528	96
FCC Staff	71	*	8	18	34	6

Source: INCCRRA
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

“ It must be frustrating when you’re dealing with your child’s education and not be able to understand what people are saying, especially if it’s an area of concern.
 - Action Council Member ”

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

Despite the increased emphasis on quality and educational attainment in child care programs, providers and teachers' highest levels of education remain predominantly in the "non-degree" space in Kane County. Supported pathways, with flexibility to accommodate life circumstances, are needed for these professionals to gain credentials and enhance their skills. Providers are reporting a degreed educator shortage across the County, the highest reoccurring issue for focus group participants. It was frequently stated, as it is across Illinois, that communities in Region 31 are facing severe challenges recruiting and retaining highly qualified early childhood professionals. Low wages, hindrances to obtaining necessary credentials for educators, and limited training opportunities for professionals were all referenced as problems that need to be addressed to grow the high-quality workforce needed to expand access to early childhood programs to more families. Strikingly, participants believe the labor of educating young children is worth little, monetarily, to the communities they serve.

Estimating workforce size or the number of staff needed to operate an ECEC program is complex and depends in part on recruiting highly qualified caregivers and retaining them. Participants in focus groups and members of both Councils report wages are the driving factor for recruitment and retention of highly qualified staff for their programs and services. The following reoccurring themes and insights relating to wages and their impact on recruitment and retention of qualified staff and expanding capacity and enrollment emerged from direct conversations, interactions, and qualitative data collected with focus groups participants and Action and Family Council members:

- **Inability to Recruit Qualified Staff** – Wages and benefits for recruitment and pipelines at the high school levels are not competitive. For some, staff who do obtain higher credentials are easily recruited to school districts or other higher earning organizations or positions. For others, compensation is not only noncompetitive, but it is not a livable wage that forces some members of the ECEC workforce to rely on public benefits.
- **Retention** – It is challenging to encourage high-quality professionals to take on more responsibilities, tasks, and workloads for low wages. Job longevity is uncommon, high turnover is the norm, and continuity and high-quality care suffers, making ECEC programs and services less appealing to caregivers.
- **Capacity and Enrollment** – Many providers have the capacity, meaning the spaces or slots, to care for children but cannot enroll children to fill the slots because of staffing shortages. In addition, expansion to increase capacity or the number of slots to help reduce waitlists, caseloads, or workloads is halted for some providers that would like to expand or hire.

“ We need a retirement plan or system. Some of us have been in this business a long time for many, many years, and we would like to retire but must keep working because we don't have a pension or plan we could afford to buy into.

- ECEC Providers' Focus Group Participant ”

“ It is worse now [after the pandemic] with finding qualified people. The qualified ones don't stay. We need 4 bachelors' degreed teachers to keep our certifications. So, we started to help pay for classes, but then when they complete it, they leave.

- Action Family Council Member ”

The workforce in Kane County utilizes many trainings, certifications, and career development opportunities provided by Gateways to Opportunity, a data system established in 2009 to collect and report on the characteristics of Illinois's ECEC workforce. In 2012, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) required all individuals working in a licensed child care center or licensed family child care home to join and maintain current membership in the Gateways Registry. While the Gateways Registry is open to all individuals working with or on behalf of children and families in Illinois, Gateways Registry-approved trainings and conferences are frequently used by the workforce in Kane County for high-quality professional development; more than 180 professional organizations and agencies now offer training that has been quality-assured through the Gateways Registry. In addition, Kane County individuals working in child care, obtain credentials through Gateways for both Child Development Associate (CDA) or Gateways to Opportunity credentials.

There is a need for increased awareness of local resources specific to individuals working in ECEC in Kane County. However, predominant local resources for community members, such as the CCR&R and YWCA provide or refer quality training opportunities regularly referenced and utilized by focus group participants and Council members. Also, more local higher education institutions such as St. Augustine College have dual programs coming for bilingual providers/students and offer bilingual courses. Other local higher education institutions, such as Elgin Community College, Aurora University, and Waubensee Community College offer online courses to accommodate needs for flexible schedules and softer deadlines for busy lifestyles.

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

Equitable access to early childhood programs and services means all families that want ECEC from all communities and socio-economic backgrounds have access to high-quality learning opportunities for their children. Inequitable access disproportionately affects parents, families, and caregivers throughout the County. Often, many of the children who would benefit most from services and programs are unable to access education and care because of barriers that persist in the system. These challenges intensify a need for a shared language and understanding across programs for all parents, families, and caregivers. It benefits everyone, and if Kane County desires a culturally responsive ECEC system, then delivery of high-quality child care must be reflective in practice, which begins with listening to understand the experiences of parents, families, and caregivers impacted by the system.

Although Region 31 is rich with trusted partners and a plethora of resources and services within its ECEC system, access is lacking. There are too many complicated pathways to gain entrance into the system, leaving parents and caregivers confused and guessing. Whether local or relocating to the area, families are often unclear about protocols and processes when accessing ECEC services, especially for immigrants or those who are undocumented.

Universal public awareness, meaning clear and consistent information and awareness of the importance of early childhood development, is needed to publicize the availability of existing ECEC programs and help families navigate and connect to resources. In addition, eligibility, documentation, and other requirements are unclear, unknown, or ineffectively communicated, limiting access and heightening frustration.

“ We need more opportunities, alternatives, and programs to supplement early child care education when families cannot or do not choose child care for our young children.

- Family Council Member ”



Two adults looking down and holding an infant baby.

“ No one explained to me the terms for child care. I didn't know the system to enroll. You just don't go to a school and tell them you want to enroll your kid. Children get evaluated. There are other rules and protocols. I took my youngest and they said I couldn't enroll him yet. We waited a year, and they finally took him in but not full time. He started in December. It was a big shock to start school. This is why when I meet someone that just got here, I try to share information with them. That way they don't go through the same I went through.

- Undocumented Focus Group Participant ”

Systems are heavily front-loaded with paperwork, applications, and documents and little support or assistance for completion. Documents such as proof of residency are needed to participate in some programs. Caregivers report being met with substantially long waitlists, sometimes for months or years. Ineffective communication about waitlist re-openings or lotteries (at discretion and/or word-of-mouth advertisement) are plaguing caregivers in need of services. Waitlists are a daunting and often disheartening undertaking with considerably difficult passage. Parents and caregivers unnervingly wait on waitlists, often having to advocate for themselves while waiting to gain access.

Stigma and perception are worsening the likelihood of successful navigation or access to ECEC programs and resources in the County. To dispel beliefs inciting false perceptions and negatively impacting public trust, Kane County needs to address stigma and perception. These beliefs not only reduce hope, but also rouse skepticism and questions pertaining to confidentiality. Some are afraid applications will have adverse influence on their families and livelihood. Others fear utilization of programs will have unknown impact on their family status if sequestered information is released.

“ Many people don't have papers. We don't know if the information is confidential or not, or how far we can get. I've heard a lot of people they don't ask for help anywhere because they will give out information to the government letting them know we are here.

- Undocumented Focus Group Participant

“ Once I see social security number on the form, I know that this program is not for me.

- Undocumented Focus Group Participant

“ I tell people all the time. If you qualify use it! If you don't, they may take the programs away. Don't be ashamed to use the resource if you need it. You are doing things the right way. There is no shame in it.

- Family Council Member

“ We went to the doctor because he wasn't even babbling. Then, I wasn't sure if we were too early or too late. Then they throw everything at you. A bunch of papers and secure messages. It was too much at once.

- Early Intervention Focus Group Participant

“ Two things I wanted to make sure I said in this meeting. One was waitlist and having to be the squeaky wheel, and the other was the three-year-old cut-off. I listened to the therapist say, 'Ok, she's three. She ages out', and I was like, 'Well we're not done. What do you mean she ages out?' We go to this meeting with people she's never met, and they're like, 'Well, you don't want her to have an IEP [Individualized Education Plan]? You don't want her to be in Special Ed. You want her to be normal. You don't want her to be held back.' I was like, 'No, but I want her to get the help she needs.' Because I noticed. To this day, I still notice a couple of things, and I know if she would have kept going it would have helped. I don't understand that three-year-old cut-off. If you see it, keep fighting! I wish I would have.

- Early Intervention Focus Group Participant

The affordability of ECEC programs is a resounding and reoccurring theme in Kane County. When affordability is a deciding factor, budgeting for child care detonates a mine of experiences and resolves among families with projectile-like results, leaving some families with difficult decisions and others in disparaging financial positions. Council members and focus group participants reported that calculating income for eligibility determination needs to be adjusted, and current formulas for calculating gross and maximum household incomes, living expenses, and sources of income are not true determinants of need.

Some families shared that they would sacrifice quality care, risk health and safety, eliminate a second household income and remain home, or reduce work schedules to remain eligible during re-determination periods until they can afford a better arrangement or fit for their children.

“ They need to go by how much money you actually bring home, your take home pay, not the gross income. That will make a big difference.
- Family Council Member ”

“ Child care is expensive. So, my wife and I are at the point where my mother takes care of our son. We had a child care we liked, but my wife was working just to pay for the child care service. We’re leaving him with my mom where he doesn’t get everything he needs, but that’s all we could do. We don’t qualify for any financial help.
- Father’s Focus Group Participant ”

“ I’m working, two jobs, but the cost of child care takes a huge bite out of my checks. I work one job just to pay for child care. I don’t qualify for assistance, but I still need help. I make the sacrifice because I know the importance of growth and development and my child socializing with other children.
- Family Council Member ”

“ My family has made sacrifices of things we really want like family trips or traveling even homeownership so that we can afford child care.
- Family Council Member ”

“ I found a really good center for my son that I was very happy with. However, the owner had to close for financial reasons. I called everybody I could think of to see if something could be done. She ended up closing. I now have a fear when placing my child in another facility. I don’t want to have to move him again.
- Family Council Member ”

Regional Strengths & Needs

From their own experiences, Region 31 Council members identified strengths in the current ECEC system. While praising the existing programs, they also acknowledged that there were areas in which ECEC may be more accessible and equitable to families and where it may better support providers.

Strengths

- Strong belief that all families should have access to high-quality learning opportunities for their children.
- Local Collaborations providing support to families.
- Lots of community supports and activities for families.

Needs

- More affordable programs.
- Universal awareness of programs and available family supports.
- Support with access and navigation of available ECEC programs.
- Fewer waitlists, paperwork, and documentation required to enroll in ECEC services.
- Address stigma and perception around utilizing publicly funded programs.
- Address disproportionate slot gap:
 - Data to quantify slot gap.
 - Expansion and start-up
 - Capacity and enrollment
- Recruitment of qualified staff.
- Retention of qualified staff.

Recommendations

As a result of this information gathering and listening process, early childhood communities countywide are ready to move forward. The following recommendations articulate guiding principles, strategic actions, and goals to serve as a road map to carry out the work ahead in Kane County.

- **Affordability**
 - Adjust income guidelines and eligibility requirements for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) and other publicly funded programs.
 - Increase maximum household income to qualify.
 - Use net or take-home pay as the base for expected family contribution calculations.
 - Fund or reimburse rates for smaller class sizes or ratios at maximum group licensing sizes for providers receiving state or federal funding to keep costs down for infant, toddler, and two-year-old programs.
- **Universal Awareness of Programs and Available Support**
 - Mandate trusted partners to provide resource guides for child care and information regarding the importance of ECEC.
 - Clear verbal and written communications with explanations and precise, unthreatening verbiage for user-friendly instructions and directions regarding access, navigation, and eligibility.
- **Access and Navigation**
 - Fund Kane County: All Our Kids Early Childhood Networks' (AOK) Integrated Referral and Information System (IRIS).
 - Mandate trusted community partners to register in the system.
- **Waitlists, Paperwork, and Documentation**
 - Mandate school districts to partner with ECEC providers to identify children that should receive or need to be directed into services through the elementary schools.
- **Address Stigma and Perception**
 - Fund local community agencies and Local Collaborations to engage or reengage caregivers to perform for boots on the ground networking and engagement to reduce concerns.
- **Disproportionate Slot Gap**
 - **Incomplete Data to Quantify Slot Gap**
 - » Fund agencies to collect data pertaining to community preferences and preferred choices for child care.
 - **Expansion and Start-up**
 - » Fund and support local resources to provide start-up seminars and training for licensed child care facilities.
 - » Fund publicly funded programs to remain open to service families that need non-traditional hours.
 - » Fund a higher rate of reimbursement for providers accepting CCAP or non-traditional days and hours.

- » Fund providers that accept CCAP for necessary facility repairs, additions, or improvements to increase capacity.
- » Offer more grants for start-up facilities that cover the costs of salaries and benefits for the first six months of opening or expansion of existing programs.
- Capacity and Enrollment
 - Consider compensation for grandparents and family members to certify in infant toddler care.
 - Fund incentives for family members to receive benefits, such as healthcare and paid prescriptions.
 - Offer tax breaks to employers that offer on-site child care facilities.
- Recruitment of Qualified Staff
 - Make temporary Restore Illinois Licensed Day Care Guidance permanent.
 - Provide funding for community colleges to pay tuition for Early Childhood Development and Child Development (accelerated program) degrees.
 - Facilitate workshops through local business development centers on staff recruitment for ECEC providers.
- Retention of Qualified Staff
 - In addition to Head Start bonuses, add an additional bonus for longevity. Provide higher bonuses for employees that remain in the same facility for more than one year.
 - Develop an increasing step system for years of service over two years.
 - Consider continuing a capped bonus after retirement for individuals and providers in the same child care setting for 25 years.
 - Create a pension and healthcare network and insurance like school districts but exclusively for individuals working in ECEC settings.

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

Appendices

Appendix A: References

1. Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding (2021). *Commission Report Of Findings And Recommendations: Spring 2021*. Site name: <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/documents/early-childhood-funding-commission-full-report.pdf>
2. Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (2023). *Report Creation Page*. Site name: <https://iecamregionalreports.education.illinois.edu/dash-snapshot-report/landing>
3. Native Land Digital (2023). *Report creation page*. Site Name: <http://native-land.ca>
4. United States Census Data (2023). *Explore Census Data*. Site name: <https://data.census.gov>
5. United States Department of Health and Human Services. (2020). *Poverty Guidelines*. Site name: https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/migrated_legacy_files//194391/2020-percentage-poverty-tool.pdf
6. Whitehead, J. (2021). *Illinois' Early Childhood Workforce 2020 Report*. Bloomington, IL: INCCRRA. Site Name: https://www.inccrra.org/images/datareports/Illinois_Early_Childhood_Education_Workforce_2020_Report.pdf

Appendix B: Focus Group and Interview Questions

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

Families, Parents, and Caregivers

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

Early Childhood Professionals and Others

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

Photo Credits

Photo Credits: cover, Kha Ruxury on Pexels; cover, Nathan Dumlao on Unsplash; cover, Lawrence Crayton on Unsplash; cover, Emma Bauso on Pexels; cover, Cottonbro on Pexels; cover, Hasan Albari on Pexels; cover, Efigie Lima Marcos on Pexels; cover, Aaron Burden on Unsplash; cover, Gautam Arora on Unsplash; page 1, Terricks Noah on Unsplash; page 2, Patty Brito on Unsplash; page 3, Jessica Rockowitz on Unsplash; page 7, Markus Spiske on Unsplash; page 8, Gift Habeshaw on Unsplash; page 11, photo from iStock; page 12, Anastasia Shuraeva on Pexels; page 13, Josh Willink on Pexels; page 13, Anna Shvets on Pexels; page 15, Tina Floersch; page 22, Becerra Govea Photo on Pexels; page 24, Anna Shvets on Pexels; page 28, Anna Shvets on Pexels; page 30, Angeliz Pty on Pexels; page 37, Anna Shvets on Pexels.



Illinois
State Board of
Education

