



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

Region 32

(Iroquois & Kankakee Counties)





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Region 32 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.

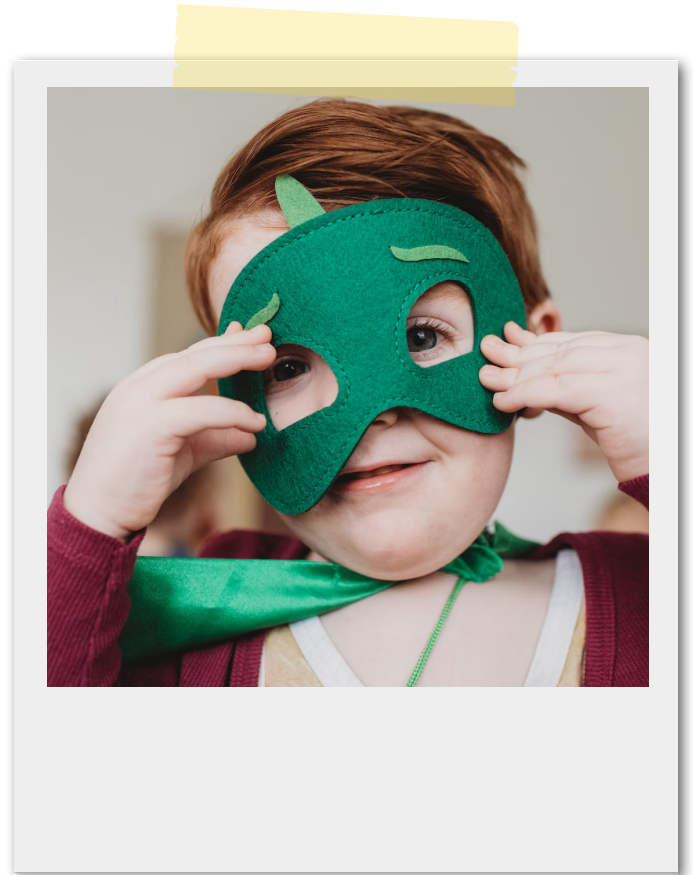
The experiences and knowledge families, caregivers, and early childhood professionals gain while navigating the complexities of the State's ECEC system is valuable, and understanding their lived experience in the local context is vital for decision-makers to ensure communities have access to the programs, 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 32 Needs Assessment, which includes recommendations developed by our Action and Family Councils. Additional findings, analysis, and recommendations can be found in the full report.

Key Findings

There are 9,644 children under the age of six in Kankakee and Iroquois Counties. Early Childhood Education and Care needs to be at the forefront of the decision-making processes. Although Region 32 has a mixed delivery system for ECEC programs, parents and community members have expressed that the area is a child care desert and families are making difficult decisions. These decisions come at the expense of the entire family and affect the community as a whole.

Workforce, Physical Infrastructure (Space)/Slots, and Transportation are the three key areas that Region 32 needs to focus upon. Funding needs to be allocated both privately and publicly and be sustained to support the foundation for these children and to support working families. Mental Health/Wrap Around Services and a Centralized Community Network are also needed for this area. Members of the Action Council and Family Council have indicated that intentional and preventative change needs to occur to support our ECEC systems. Without proper funding from the state level, problem solving at the local level, and ongoing support across the Region - sustainable change cannot occur.



Region 32 Needs

- Quality Workforce, Recruitment, and Retainment in ECEC
 - Centralized Community Network for Information, Referrals, and Resources
- Provide Mental Health Supports/Wrap-Around Services for ALL children ages birth to age eight, ALL families, and ALL educators in Region 32
- Provide ECEC slots and funding for infrastructure for Region 32 based on need
- Accessibility to Transportation for ALL children ages birth to age eight in ECEC programs, healthcare support, and family support

Region 32 Recommendations

Quality Workforce, Recruitment, and Retainment in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

- Continued funding for Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity Scholarship Programs (ECACE)
- Increased hourly wages for staff
- Increased Bilingual staffing
- Additional professional development and support

Centralized Community Network for Information, Referrals, and Resources

- Create a “System of Support” to streamline information, resources, and referrals for all entities serving prenatal to age eight

Provide Mental Health Supports/Wrap-Around Services for ALL children ages birth to eight, ALL families, and ALL educators in Region 32

- Support the psychosocial, emotional and developmental needs of our children and families within the community and also the professionals supporting them

ECEC slots and funding for infrastructure for Region 32 based on need

- Physical space is needed to support increased slots by building new structures, funding renovations, or partnering with local organizations

Accessibility to Transportation for ALL children ages birth to age eight in ECEC programs, healthcare support, and family support

- Additional public transportation
- Additional school district transportation
- Funding allocated for ECEC programs for transportation

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

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REGION 32 SNAPSHOT INFOGRAPHIC

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

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



9,644

Children Under
the Age of 6
in Region 32



2,345

Children 0-5
at 200% Federal
Poverty Level



2,690

Children 0-5
Without Publicly
Funded ECEC Slots

100%

Every single Action Council and Family Council member & focus group participant identified programming, availability, and workforce as the greatest local ECEC needs.

**"If this is the most important age, why is it last on the list?"
- Action 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 32 NEEDS

1. Early Childhood workforce, recruitment, and retainment
2. Centralized community network for referrals, and resources
3. Provide mental health supports and wrap-around services for children ages birth to five and their families
4. Accessibility to transportation and family support for all children ages birth to age five in ECEC programs

REGION 32 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continued funding for ECACE scholarships, increased hourly wages for staff, bilingual staffing, and additional professional development and support
2. System of support to streamline information, resources, and referrals for all entities serving prenatal to age eight
3. Decrease waitlists by creating new physical spaces - build new structures, fund renovations, partner with local organizations
4. Additional public transportation, school district transportation, and funding allocated to ECEC programs for transportation



"My youngest goes to the day care that has full-time availability. Honestly, it wasn't our first or second choice, but we have been on the waitlist for three other facilities since before she was born."

- Parent

Overview & Acknowledgements

Introduction

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

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

This report will be used in a variety of ways.

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

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

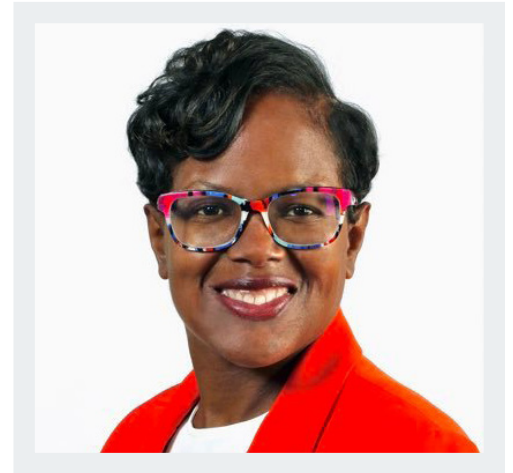
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand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

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



Letter from State Leadership

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



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

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

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

Most importantly, I would like to thank the hundreds of community members who signed up to serve on their Region's Action and Family Councils. It is their perspective and passion that have inspired us and made this report possible. Thank you to the countless parents who trusted their Council peers with vulnerable stories; providers who emanate passion for 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

On behalf of Birth to Five Illinois: Region 32 for Kankakee and Iroquois Counties, we would like to acknowledge and thank the collaborative investment made in supporting us as we advocate for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Without this active guidance, participation, wisdom, collaboration, and support, our work would be incomplete.

Our deepest gratitude extends to the members of our Action Council and Family Council. Thank you for your unwavering support and commitment. Your dedication and involvement have been instrumental in helping us review data, assess the needs of our community, and make recommendations for our Region. We recognize that your busy schedules and countless responsibilities make it challenging to devote time and resources to our organization; however, your efforts and contributions did not go unnoticed. Your voice, personal experiences, and vast knowledge are greatly appreciated.

Next, we would like to thank our community members for their participation in our focus groups, interviews, and town halls. Your personal insight, experiences, and suggestions were instrumental in helping us recognize the needs of our families and communities as we advance our work.

We would like to offer sincere thanks and appreciation to our community organizations, local businesses, and local stakeholders for their unwavering support. Our Regional Team is grateful for the trust you have placed in our organization, enabling us to carry out our mission. Thank you for providing donations, being willing to help answer any questions, and connecting us to new constituents in our community. Your support has been vital in our efforts to advocate and make a positive impact for children and families in our Region.

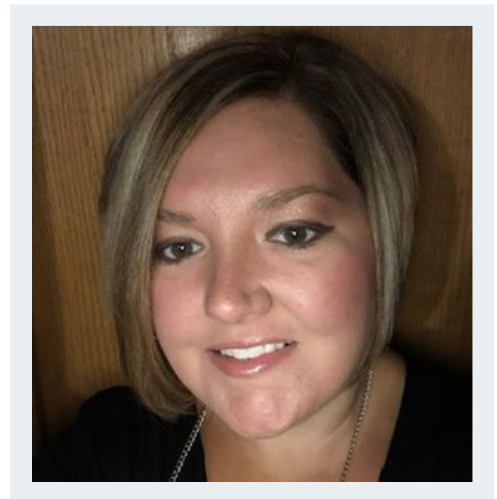
Overall, we are deeply grateful to the collaborators in and across Kankakee and Iroquois Counties for your insight, vulnerability, and transparency. Thank you for sharing your voice, lifting your experiences, highlighting your celebrations, and most importantly, providing the truth about the needs of our communities, all of which will be used to promote change in the lives of the children, youth, and families in our area.

Thank you,

Liz Gibson (she/her)

Regional Council Manager: Region 32

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.

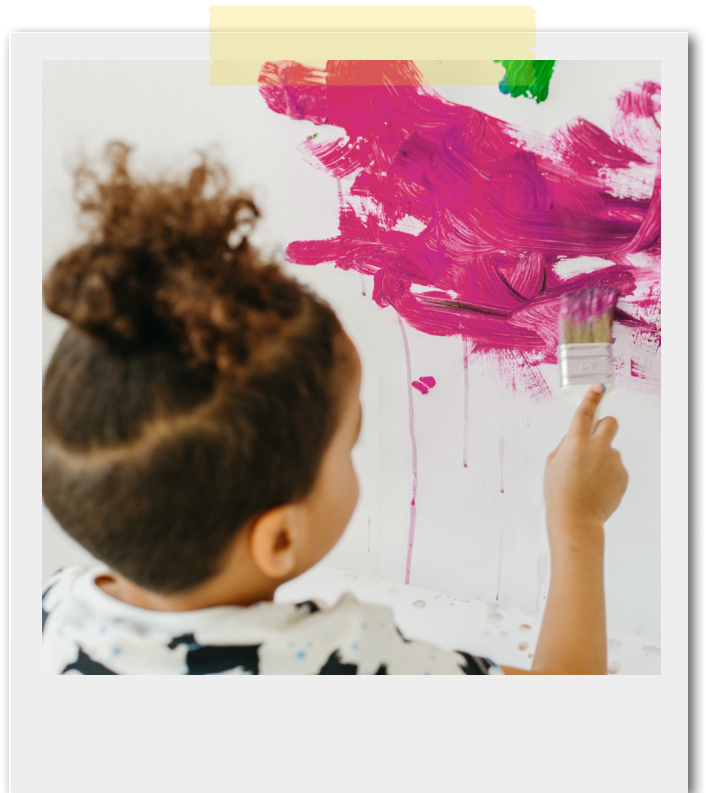
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early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

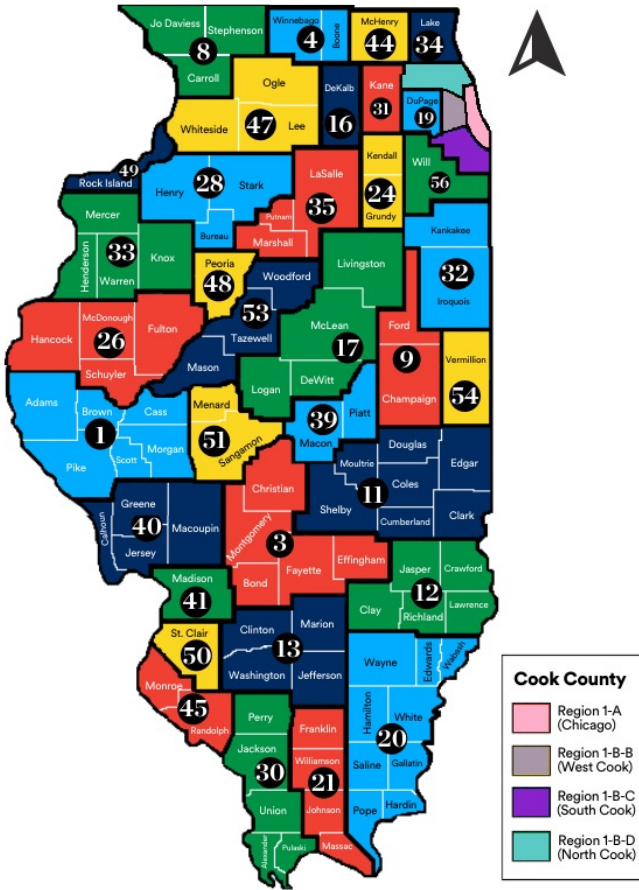


Timeline

- **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 (IACF), 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.

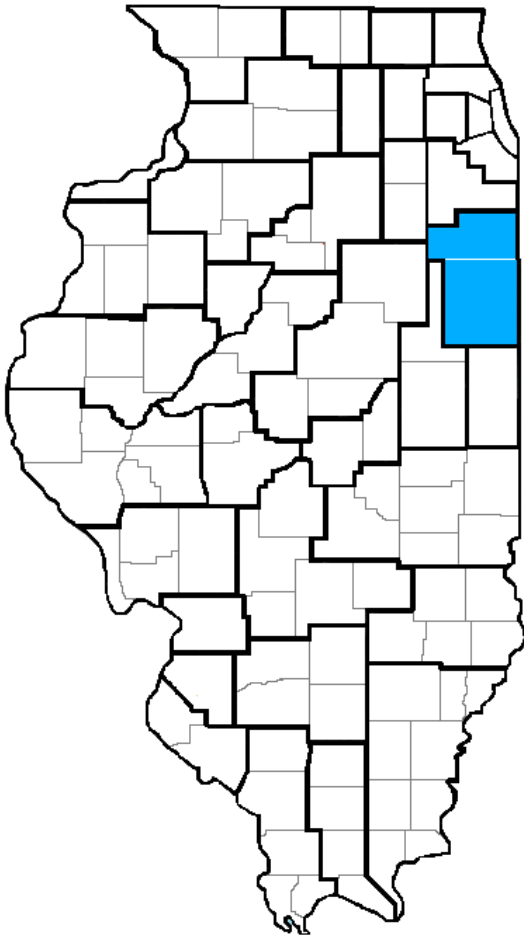
Regional Needs Assessment Methodology

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 32

Regional Community Landscape



Regional Boundaries

Region 32 consists of Kankakee and Iroquois Counties and is found along the eastern border of Illinois and Indiana. Although both counties make up this Region, they are vastly different.

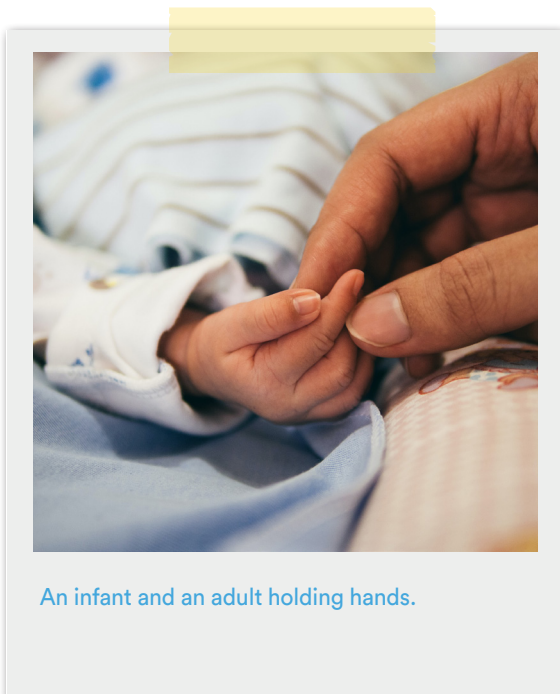
Kankakee County is in the northeastern part of Illinois, about 60 miles south of Chicago. The county has a total area of 681 square miles and a population of approximately 107,502 people as of the 2020 Census. The economy of Kankakee County is diverse, with major employers in industries such as manufacturing, healthcare, and education. The county is also known for its agricultural production, particularly in corn and soybeans. Kankakee County is home to several institutions of higher education, including Olivet Nazarene University and Kankakee Community College. Overall, Kankakee County offers a mix of urban and rural environments, with access to both cultural amenities and natural beauty.

Iroquois County is in the northeastern part of central Illinois adjacent to Kankakee County. It is approximately 90 miles south of Chicago and has a total area of 1,119 square miles, with a population of approximately 27,077 people as of the 2020 Census. Iroquois County is the third largest county in the State. The economy is largely based on agriculture, with corn and soybeans being the most important crops. The county is also home to several large hog and cattle farms. There are also a limited number of manufacturing companies in the area, including those producing plastics, machinery, and steel products.

While both counties offer the natural beauty of the Illinois Plains, they vary vastly in population size, median income, resources, and opportunities for families.

Land Acknowledgement¹

Region 32 acknowledges the Indigenous Peoples of the Bodwewadmi (Potawatomi), Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Sioux), Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo), Kaskaskia, Myaamia (Miami), and Peoria Tribes. We acknowledge the history and ongoing injustices experienced by Indigenous communities and honor the foundation created and cultivated by these Indigenous Tribes on these lands. As we move forward, we will continue to honor their contributions to build a more equitable and inclusive community for all.



An infant and an adult holding hands.

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

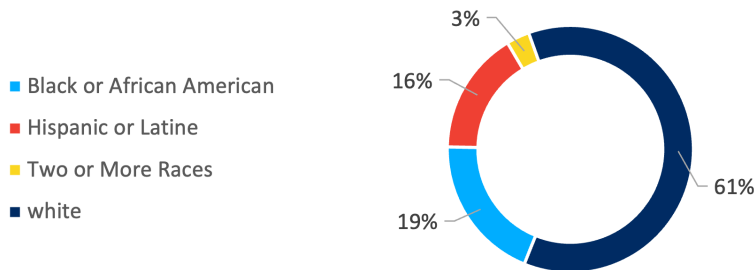
Regional Demographics

According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2020 population estimate, Kankakee County has approximately 107,502 people. The median age in Kankakee County is 39.3 years, with 23% of the population under the age of 18 and 17% ages 65 or older. Iroquois County has a population of approximately 27,077 people and the median age in Iroquois County is 44.2 years, with 22% of the population under the age of 18 and 22% ages 65 or older.

The largest racial/ethnic groups in Kankakee County self-identify as white (71%), Black or African American (15%), Hispanic or Latine (12%), and all other races (3%). The largest racial/ethnic groups in Iroquois County identify as white (89%), Black or African American (1%), Hispanic or Latine (8%), and all other races (2%). The Census identifies other races as American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, and Two or More Races.

In 2020, there were 9,184 children ages birth to five in the Region. While most children self-identified as white (non-Hispanic/Latine), 19% self-identified as Black or African American (Non-Hispanic/Latine), 16% self-identified as Hispanic or Latine, and 4% self-identified as Two or More Races (Figure 1). Areas in and around Hopkins Park and Kankakee have a large population of people who self-identify as Black or African American.

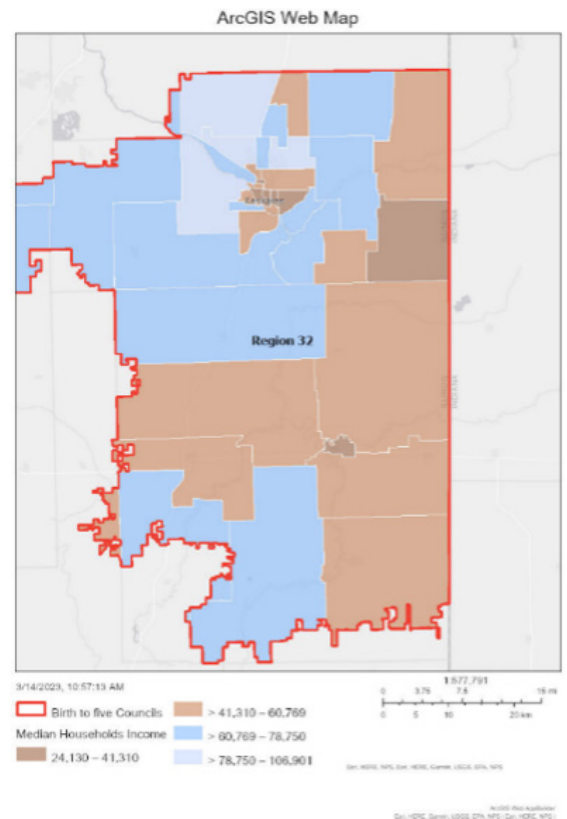
Figure 1: Children Ages Five and Under by Race and Ethnicity²



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

The median household income in Region 32 across both counties is \$60,769 per year (Figure 2). The brown areas on the map indicate areas that fall below the median household income. The blue areas on the map indicate areas that meet or exceed the median household income. The areas with the lowest household income include Wateska, Hopkins Park, and Kankakee.

Figure 2: Median Household Income



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children

² Some Census categories not included due to small number of respondents: American Indian or Alaska Native (34), Asian (32), Some Other Race (3), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (0).

Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) data for Kankakee and Iroquois Counties comprises households whose incomes are above the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), but struggle to access basic household essentials. FPL is a measure of income level created by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that calculates the minimum amount of money needed to cover basic household needs, such as food, housing, utilities, and other necessities, and is often used to determine eligibility for programs and services. Someone living at or below 50% FPL is considered to be living in “deep poverty”; someone living at or below 100% FPL is considered to be living at “the poverty line” (see Figure 3).

As of 2018, 44% of households in Kankakee were below the ALICE threshold and 36% of households in Iroquois County were below the threshold.³ Across the Region, 47% of all children ages birth through five live at or below 200% FPL (Figure 4).

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

	50% FPL	100% FPL	185% FPL	200% FPL
Family of 4	\$13,100	\$26,200	\$48,470	\$52,400

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

Figure 4: Children Under Age Six by Federal Poverty Level

	At or Below 50% FPL	51% to 100% FPL	101% to 200% FPL	200% FPL
Children Ages Birth to Two	13%	9%	26%	33%
Children Ages Three to Five	11%	9%	25%	34%

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Children and Families in Priority Populations

The Illinois Early Learning Council has identified criteria for determining a population to be a priority⁴, such as children with disabilities or children in families in poverty. This type of data is difficult to attain across the State, especially for our area. Children and families who could be categorized as priority populations do reside in Region 32; however, given the data challenges, it is hard to capture a true picture of our communities.

In 2020, Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) indicated that there were 27 students experiencing homelessness in the Region. Children lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime abode are eligible for McKinney-Vento services. Children or youth living in motels, transitional housing, shelter, on the street, in cars, or abandoned buildings may be considered for support services.

“It [FPL] also demonstrates the financial crisis mode that impedes a parent’s ability to plan, focus, and mold a well-adjusted child and family system.

– Community Member
(Kankakee County)

³ <https://www.unitedforalice.org/>

⁴ <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/earlylearningcouncil/access/documents/priority-populations-updated-2021.pdf>

Iroquois Community members and stakeholders have also indicated that the data and numbers for families experiencing homelessness have been historically underreported due to negative stigmas associated with being homeless/transient. Families who experience unstable housing do not often view themselves as homeless. Additionally, families may not be aware of the living situations that can qualify them for McKinney-Vento services. Numerous families in our Region, specifically in Iroquois County, do not apply for these services, and thus are underreported in the available data.

Other priority populations identified for the Region include children/families who face barriers based on culture, language, and religion. In Region 32, 113 Kindergarten students have Limited English Proficiency (LEPs) and 184 Kindergarten students are eligible to receive special education services and have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Council Members felt that these numbers were low because community and school districts have conveyed challenges in being able to provide workforce, qualified staff, and services to IEP and LEP students.

It is important for stakeholders to recognize the limitations in the current data and identify the need for collecting additional data that specifically addresses the most marginalized populations in our communities. 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 remove the systemic barriers causing the access issue within each Region.

Local Community Collaborations

Local Community Collaborations are a critical piece of the ECEC landscape. A Local Early Childhood Community Collaboration is a network of organizations, agencies, and individuals who want to improve access to ECEC resources, support Kindergarten readiness, and improve outcomes for children and families within the geographic area they serve. Currently, there are several local Early Childhood Community Collaborations serving children and families in Region 32.

“

For fifteen years, United Way of Kankakee and Iroquois Counties has been proud to serve as a convener of Success by 6, our community’s coalition of partners dedicated to providing support for families from birth to age six. We believe that the earliest years of life can set the stage for lifelong physical and mental health, as well as academic success. Together with a diverse community of advocates, parents, and leaders, we seek to create a future in which all children in Kankakee and Iroquois Counties enter school ready to succeed.

- Executive Director, Success by 6

”



Region 32 Action Council Meeting.

Success By 6 serves Kankakee and Iroquois Counties; their mission is to ensure children ages birth to six have the positive and enriching experiences and parent-child relationships necessary to be ready to succeed in school. They are dedicated to supporting the community through family engagement, early childhood mental health services, and raising awareness about available resources. Current efforts include expanding the Dolly Parton Imagination Library (there is limited access to books in the area) and their Bright By Text parent engagement text messaging system. The Dolly Parton Imagination Library delivers high-quality, age-appropriate books monthly to families with children birth to age five. Bright by Text sends evidence-based tips, activities, and events to registered families based on a child’s age and location to support caregivers in making the most of everyday interactions with their children.

Another Local Collaboration is one of the home visiting programs for Kankakee County, Healthy Families of Illinois, which is affiliated with Aunt Martha’s Health and Wellness. They serve 24 families in the Region. The program provides support to families with children from birth to age three. The Parent Advocate provides one-on-one visits and partners with caregivers to provide information, share ways to engage children in play, and link families to community resources. Housing assistance and the lack of supportive housing to meet family needs in Kankakee County is the biggest challenge the program faces. Many families move out of the County to obtain housing assistance or find more affordable housing. At this time, the program has been challenged with reaching the prenatal families for enrollment who might benefit from a supportive advocate who can support mental health and help prepare them for birth. Their next steps include providing more hands-on opportunities, hiring more staff (including staff who are Spanish speaking), and seeking funding for housing as parents and caregivers relocate but stay within Kankakee County.

Project SUN is dedicated to coordinating and strengthening children’s behavioral health services and supports. Project SUN is a grant recipient of the Illinois Children’s Healthcare Foundation and an initiative of the Community Foundation of Kankakee River Valley. They help families navigate available mental, emotional, and behavioral health services for parents, caregivers, and youth ages birth to 21, with a focus on children 18 and younger. Initiatives include mental health workforce development, countywide implementation of Group Theraplay© (also known as Sunshine Circles), Just for the Fun of It Campaign (encouraging families to do things that foster healthy relationships), Play To Connect (a program to build strong parent-child bonds), support of a local chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), and cultural competency and equity awareness. Project SUN is guided by a Community Planning Team, a Youth Advisory Council, in partnership with Pledge for Life, I-KAN ROE, and the Kankakee County Health Department, and are developing a Parent Advisory Council (PAC). The PAC will train caregivers to advocate as the experts for their child(ren) with individual providers, educators, and as members of executive boards of service providing organizations.

“ Investing in the future begins prenatally.
- Program Supervisor,
Kankakee Healthy Families ”

An additional priority need that has been identified by Project SUN and partnering children’s mental health providers is resuming the local SASS (Screening, Assessment, and Support Services) program for children and adolescents experiencing a mental health crisis and seeking hospital admission, as there is no provider currently providing this service. Educators also see an increased need for mental health services in schools and child care centers. Project SUN also manages and promotes the Kan-I-Help Information Network website, which is also an initiative of the Community Foundation of Kankakee River Valley. This online database connects community members in Kankakee and Iroquois counties with information about government agencies, human services, and non-profit organizations.

“ Making it easier for families to access mental health services and support is at the heart of all we do at Project SUN through our efforts to network with a broad array of community stakeholders.
- Project SUN Team ”

Child and Family Connections #15 (CFC15) is a program of Service Inc of Illinois providing Early Intervention services for children under the age of three. They serve Grundy, Kankakee, LaSalle, and Will Counties. It is a statewide program that provides support and services for families to help their children under age three meet developmental milestones. Families meet with a service coordinator to talk about concerns and the coordinator sets up evaluations with a multidisciplinary team to determine whether a child is eligible for Early Intervention. If eligible, families work with a team to develop a plan. The Local Interagency Council for Early Intervention (LIC) also has a Collaboration that meets every other month, from September through May. Local service providers, school districts, and agencies meet to collaborate, provide updates, and discuss barriers and challenges they are facing.

Each of these Local Community Collaborations and groups in Region 32 focuses on providing resources, services, or information that is vital to families, caregivers, and children. They understand the importance of regularly convening a diverse group of stakeholders as they work to improve future outcomes for children and families in our communities. It is important to understand the role they play in the ECEC landscape, as they bridge the gap between families and the services available to them.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

Region 32 offers several ECEC options for children and their families, which includes child care centers, home based options, and preschool programs.

Child Care & Family Child Care

Child care facilities and home-based programs are highly concentrated in the towns of Kankakee, Bradley, and Bourbonnais for Kankakee County and in the town of Watseka for Iroquois County. In the rest of the Region, options are limited and extremely spread out. Parents and stakeholders shared that Iroquois County is a child care desert. This creates hardships for families, including additional travel time, wait lists, and hours of operation not meeting the needs of parents and caregivers.

Figure 5: Child Care Center Sites and Capacity by County

	Iroquois County	Kankakee County
Number of Children Ages Birth to Five	1,884	7,500
Licensed Child Care Center		
Number of Sites	2	18
Slots (Total Capacity)	77	1,549
License-Exempt Child Care Center		
Number of Sites	2	4
Slots (Total Capacity)	105	348
Licensed Family Child Care Home		
Number of Sites	15	34
Slots (Total Capacity)	154	315

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)

CCAP is funded through the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) and is a program that provides child care access to families with limited to no access to economic or material resources and working families. Each family is required to cost share using a sliding scale based on their income and family size. It has been shared in focus groups and Council meetings that CCAP income guidelines hinder accessibility for families. For example, one parent shared she has turned down job promotions and overtime because she fears she will lose her CCAP benefits. According to the CCAP data, enrollment is 1,842 families in Kankakee County and 187 families in Iroquois County.

“As a middle-class parent, I do not qualify for CCAP and cannot afford a child care center due to the costs of commuting to the center openings.

– Community Member
(Iroquois County)

Figure 6: Publicly Funded Service Sites and Capacity by County

Program Name	Iroquois County	Kankakee County
Preschool For All		
Number of Sites	1	11
Slots (Total Capacity)	60	585
Preschool for All Expansion		
Number of Sites	0	3
Slots (Total Capacity)	0	77
Head Start		
Number of Sites	2	6
Slots (Total Capacity)	40	383
Early Head Start		
Number of Sites	1	7
Slots (Total Capacity)	11	96
Migrant and Seasonal Head Start		
Slots (Total Capacity)	62	96
Prevention Initiative		
Slots (Total Capacity)	4	230
Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting		
Slots (Total Capacity)	0	17

Source: IECAM
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Preschool for All (PFA) & Preschool for All Expansion (PFA-E)

PFA and PFA-E programs serve children ages three to Kindergarten-entry. Services focus on child development and education for children in communities with limited access to economic/material resources and can be provided at a center or school-based setting. PFA programs must operate for a minimum of two and a half hours per day. Additional services include developmental screenings, parent education, and family involvement. PFA and PFA-E are funded under the Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) and funds are distributed by ISBE.

Early Head Start (EHS), Head Start (HS), & Migrant Head Start (MHS)

EHS, HS, and MHS programs are free, federally funded programs designed to provide school readiness for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers ages three to five from families that meet income eligibility requirements. EHS programs support pregnant people with children younger than three years of age. MHS provides child care for preschool children of agricultural workers who earn lower wages. These programs can be offered as home visiting services with visits to each child/family home; center-based services; or family child care services in a child care provider’s home or family-like setting. Children with a delay or disability must also receive services indicated in their Individual Education Plan (IEP). At least 90% of enrollments must consist of families with an income at or below 100% FPL. Families experiencing homelessness, foster care, or receiving public assistance are categorically eligible (DHHS, n.d.).

Prevention Initiative (PI)

As part of the Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG), the PI Program provides early, continuous, intensive, and comprehensive child development and family support services to help families build a strong foundation for learning (Partner Plan Act, 2023). PI services are for pregnant people and children ages birth to three who are exposed to risk factors that may undermine optimal child development. These services can be provided as a center-based or home-visiting option. PI must also ensure that children with disabilities or delays receive services based on their Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). PI is funded under the ECBG, and funds are distributed by ISBE to eligible applicants including school districts, social service agencies, and other entities (ISBE, n.d.).

Home Visiting

Illinois Department of Human Services Division of Early Childhood (IDHS-DEC) Home Visiting programs support pregnant people and parents with young children, birth to age five, who live in communities that face greater risks and barriers to achieving positive child health outcomes (IECAM, 2023). The Maternal, Infant & Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program is funded through the Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA). Eligibility is determined through a screener or parent survey that determines a child's risk of experiencing abuse or neglect and being in at least one MIECHV Priority Population (Partner Plan Act, 2023).

Early Intervention (EI)

EI services are typically provided in the child's natural environment. "Early Intervention services include evaluation to determine if a child has a delay/disability, development of an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) for any child with a delay/disability, service coordination, and support so a child can meet IFSP goals" (IDHS, 2023). EI is funded through IDHS and families with an income above 185% FPL pay a fee based on a sliding scale for direct services. To be eligible, a child must be 36 months or younger and have a significant delay in at least one developmental area, have a condition known to cause a disability or delay, or be at "high risk" for a developmental delay (IDHS, 2023). EI challenges include a lack of providers, especially those providing face-to-face services, lack of mileage paid for providers, inconsistent state funded "payouts" to providers, inability to compete with salaries offered by school districts or clinics, and high caseloads for EI staff and providers.

Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)

ECSE services are provided through local school districts and special education cooperatives. ECSE serves children ages three to Kindergarten-entry, and services can be provided in multiple settings. School districts in Illinois receive local, state, and federal funds to support special education. To qualify, "a child must qualify in one of 14 categories defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as established by a multi-disciplinary team using age-appropriate assessments" (Partner Plan Act, 2023).

Barriers in Region 32

Region 32 offers a mixed delivery system with needs that exceed the current available openings. Across each of the programs offered, common barriers exist across the community, for families and providers. ECEC providers are experiencing challenges in daily operations, workforce, physical space, transportation, staff well-being, and funding. Local programs would like to increase their capacities but lack the physical space and personnel to staff new classrooms, as well as the necessary funding.

Parents/caregivers shared the need for extended hours, before and after school care, full-day care, and care on the weekends and holidays. Head Start and PFA half-day programs do not meet the full day needs these families require. Families said they are faced with difficult decisions when there are limited options, and often make personal sacrifices to provide their child with the best care and educational opportunities available. Additionally, families are experiencing barriers due to lack of awareness of available programming, lack of available programs, and challenges with hours of operation.

“It is our belief that to fully meet the needs of students and prepare all of our children for Kindergarten, we need a dedicated early childhood space with room for ten classrooms, a gross motor space, meeting and screening space, and a conference room. We currently do not have the funds or borrowing capacity to make this happen.

- Bourbonnais School District #53

”

“We have 57 in our pre-K program...although there are a few spots open in the early childhood classes, parents/guardians lack the means of transportation to get their child to school.

- Iroquois County CUSD #9

”

Central Communication Platform

Another major theme/barrier identified in focus groups and Council meetings was the lack of ECEC program and resource awareness. Caregivers shared their frustrations and desire for a “central communication hub” where all information, data, and resources are shared, easily understood, and readily available instead of having to search different Facebook pages and websites or asking other caregivers for information. Equitable access to ECEC requires awareness of program options available. Adequate instruction on how to navigate the complicated web is absent.

“My youngest goes to the child care that has full-time availability. Honestly, it wasn't our first or second choice, but we have been on the waitlists for 3 other facilities since before she was born.

- Parent

”

Transportation

There has been exhaustive commentary from Action and Family Council members and community members that transportation is one of the largest barriers to accessing ECEC services. In Iroquois County, transportation is not currently offered for preschool students due to a lack of funding and staff. Kankakee County offers transportation for many preschool students, but barriers include established boundaries for school bus routes, the length of time students are on the bus, lack of child care options that qualify for bussing, and a bus driver shortage. Families shared that one main reason they have had to decline preschool placement and/or services is lack of transportation offered by the program.

“ An Iroquois County parent shared that she drives 15 minutes in the opposite direction of her home to drop her son off at preschool (PFA classroom). Then she drives 30 minutes back to get to work. This has added 30-45 minutes each way to her day. She also has to rely on other parents to drop off her son at the home child care near the preschool center. If it were not for the parents in her child’s preschool classroom aiding in transportation, her son would not be able to attend preschool.

- Testimonial Shared with the Birth to Five Region 32 Team

COVID-19

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ECEC programs in Region 32 has been a topic of concern during Council meetings. Loss of funding, loss of staff, continued staff shortages, and the safety and health of our youngest learners were just a few of the issues at hand. These concerns were present before COVID; however, due to the global pandemic they have been exacerbated and heightened.

ECEC Summary

Across Region 32, barriers are present in each ECEC program. There is an increase in the mental health needs of children and adults. Other concerns include challenging student behaviors, struggles with self-regulation, speech/communication issues, lack of specialized training for providers, lack of services/wait lists, and delayed milestone achievement (i.e., lack of toilet training or self-help skills). These needs affect the workforce, caregivers, and children receiving services. Recent conversations have been focused on recovery, growth, sustainability, health effects on families, and how we can work together as a community to address these needs.

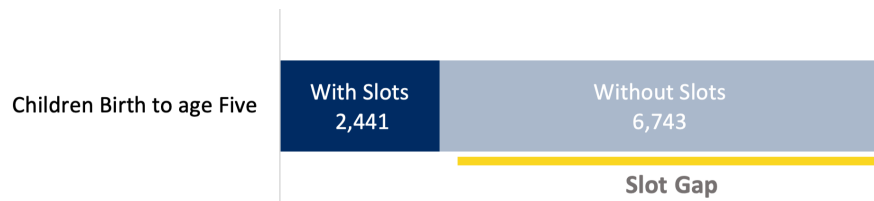


Liz Gibson (left), Jessica Johnson (middle), and Kennilyn Hickory (right) at Bradley Elementary School for their “Family Strong Night.”

Slot Gap

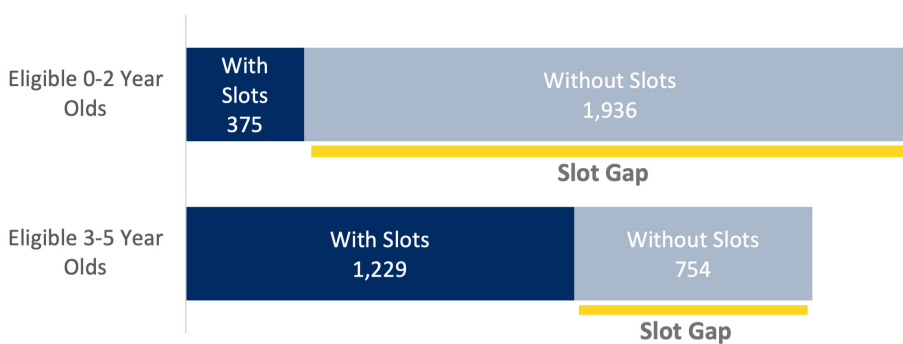
Slot gap is a term used to describe the difference between the number of children who want to participate in an ECEC program and the number of available “physical seats” within a community’s boundaries for children ages five and under. To provide slots for all age-eligible children, more funding per slot is needed to close this gap. Slot gap is a helpful measure to understand the need for expansion but does not account for children in families where the caregiver has decided not to engage with ECEC programs. It should be noted that this data only indicates capacity and not actual enrollment numbers.

Figure 7: Overall Child Care Slot Gap



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children

Figure 8: Publicly Funded ECEC Slot Gap



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children

Typically, ECEC classrooms have a capacity of 17-20 children. IDHS provides guidelines specifying the ages of children and the staff ratios required. While it might be easy to propose simply adding more children to existing classrooms, guidelines do not allow for this.

Allocations for preschool in Illinois are primarily provided through ISBE via the Preschool for All (PFA) and Preschool for All-Expansion (PFA-E) programs, and through Federal Head Start Funding. ISBE distributes PFA and PFA-E funding to school districts and community organizations based on a variety of factors, including the number of eligible children in the area and the availability of other preschool programs. School districts can also set aside district funds to support slots for preschool programming.

The slot gap numbers for our Region are concerning and Council members cited many concerns about the number of children without slots, more importantly, the reason why parents and caregivers choose whether to utilize the available services. Looking into the root causes, there were multiple reasons these barriers exist and why there is such a large slot gap for our Region. The Councils, focus groups, and communities all identified the following drivers in slot gap and prioritized the below indicators.

Reasons for Slot Gap in Region 32

- Lack of Physical Space for Classrooms (Private and Public)
- Lack of Staff, especially Bilingual Staff, to keep existing classrooms going
- Lack of Providers/Availability and Awareness of Services
- Hours of Operation, AM/PM vs. Full Day Sessions
- Transportation/Bussing/Cost Associated with Each
- Quality of Care/Staff
- Cost of Care (Private and Public)
- Professional Development/Training to Support the Needs of Children (i.e., Social Emotional Concerns)
- Eligibility for Programs
- Communication Barriers
- COVID-19 Fears

These indicators are some of the reasons but not an exhaustive list of why providers are not able to service eligible students whose families choose to enroll their children in an ECEC program.

Slot gap is a complex issue often interwoven into issues the Councils have identified throughout this Needs Assessment. To ensure appropriate care for students both in and without program seats, ECEC must be prioritized at the community and State level. Change involves increasing and sustaining funding, and centralizing intake and referral to support all families in navigating their options. A multi-faceted approach should involve caregivers with lived experience, community organizations, and policymakers.

“

We understand the needs of our unique Region. We have a child care desert. Even if we had options, we need affordable options for our community.

- Family Council Member

”

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

A community's workforce issues not only affect the staffing of an early childhood program but have an enormous impact on the quality of care and education children receive. The available workforce data from IECAM reflects active Gateways Registry memberships as of March 2021 and has been broken down by Birth to Five Illinois Regions by type position.

The majority of licensed Center Directors, teaching staff, and family child care staff self-identified as white, with those who self-identified as Black or African American as the next largest majority.⁵ Twenty-seven percent of all licensed Center Directors and staff reported being bilingual; 17% of those who identified as bilingual listed their primary language as Spanish.

Figure 9: Race and Ethnicity of Center Directors, Teaching Staff, and FCC Staff

	Asian	Black or African American	Hispanic or Latine	Native American/ Alaskan, Pacific Islander, or Other	Multi-Racial	White
Center Directors	0%	30%	2%	0%	0%	68%
Teaching Staff	0%	21%	12%	0%	2%	65%
FCC Staff	0%	35%	1%	0%	0%	62%

Source: INCCRRA

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Around 96% of licensed Center Directors, teaching staff, and child care staff self-identified as female. Both teaching staff and family child care staff mostly consist of those who have earned high school diplomas (Figure 10). About half of the teaching staff have earned, or are working toward, college coursework credit hours and degrees, and over half of the family child care staff have earned college credit hours and degrees. Overall, the workforce is representative of the children who have access to programs in our community. However, no matter the varying levels of education and degrees these staff have earned, workforce and community members have expressed a need for more support, professional development, pay, and college coursework to build their existing educator “toolboxes.”

Figure 10: Highest Level of Education of Center Directors, Teaching Staff, and FCC Staff⁶

	High School/ GED	Some College	Community College Certification	Associate Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Graduate Degree
Center Directors	*	*	*	17	15	10
Teaching Staff	202	32	15	84	45	10
FCC Staff	3	*	5	14	10	*

Source: INCCRRA

Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

⁶ Cells with an asterisk * have less than five but more than zero respondents



A child doing schoolwork.

Based on discussions with some of the Regions' ECEC workforce, there are not enough incentives for earning higher levels of education and ECEC credentials. The level of college education needed for ECEC when compared to the overall pay is the biggest reason there is no equity in the workforce. The ECEC workforce has expressed they are not seen as valued members of society. The COVID-19 pandemic depleted our existing workforce and some of those that remain do not feel valued or appreciated.

The Action Council and community stakeholders from Region 32 expressed a desire to address and support the needs of children as well as the workforce. These areas include mental health, student behaviors, developmental delays, and the overall level of care and support required for each child. Local child care workers and directors were asked, "Why is it so challenging to keep staff in the ECEC field?" Common answers included pay/benefits/incentives, limited opportunities for growth, need for training and difficulty covering training

expenses, increased challenging behaviors of children and lack of support in how to respond to those behaviors, limited opportunity for growth, high turnover and burnout, being seen as babysitters rather than as ECEC professionals, and being undervalued by the community.

A class session/focus group with ECEC students (some who are also child care staff/school district employees) indicated a need for training in the following areas, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic: mental health training, anger/social-emotional learning (SEL) training, training to support children with disabilities, as well as training for parents and caregivers, and more socialization opportunities.

Current Efforts

Through the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE), a statewide initiative created to address the shortage of qualified early childhood educators and the workforce, scholarships are awarded for higher education and coursework (ISAC, 2023). They can be used for undergraduate education at participating Illinois colleges and universities. There has been great success with the ECACE funding awarded to applicants, and Community Partners shared that as of March 2023, Kankakee Community College had 76 applicants and 42 have received funding. Olivet Nazarene University awarded 78 scholarships; 56 students are part-time incumbent workers and 22 are traditional students.

“More staff is needed, and the current staff is feeling overwhelmed.”
- Action Council Member

Region 32 Council Members and community stakeholders suggest addressing the workforce deficit by:

- Increasing the workforce.
- Providing training for staff.
- Increasing the number of multilingual staff.
- Increasing pay.
- Continuing ECACE funding and timetables.
- Changing the negative “stigma” of ECEC workers as “babysitters”.

The Office of Head Start (OHS) recognizes the workforce deficit in ECEC. OHS has determined that a well-compensated staff is integral to delivering high-quality services for children, families, and the workforce. As a part of a federal funding increase, grant recipients will receive a 6% cost of living adjustment (COLA) as well as additional funding to support the workforce, programs, children, and families (Hooban, 2023). Region 32’s Action Council, Family Council, and community stakeholders suggest intentional action steps including increasing compensation and career advancement, more support staff, and ongoing training/professional development. Funding needs to be protected to support and sustain these areas.

“ Without this scholarship, I would not have pursued more education... we need these scholarships.

- Kankakee Community College Student/Incumbent Child Care Worker ”

“ We have a ‘temporary band-aid’ happening right now where staff do not have the education, skill, or training in the mental health and needs of our children today.

- Action Council Member ”

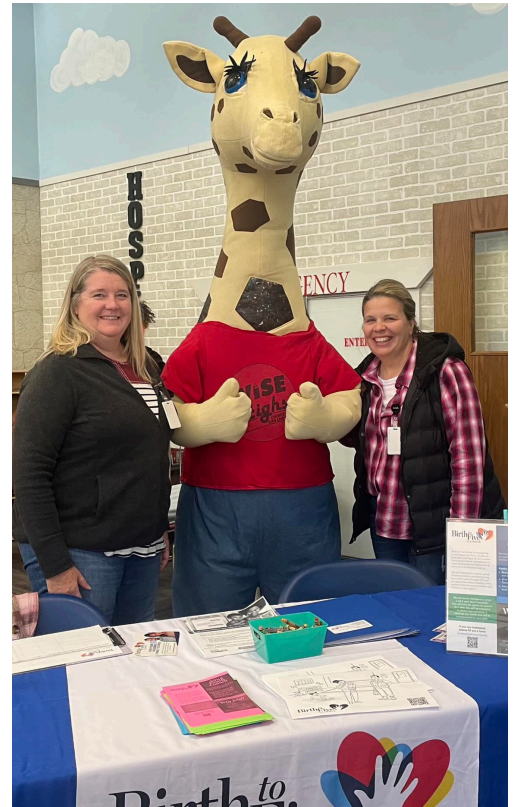
Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

High-quality ECEC programs are critical for children’s development during their early years. However, many families are faced with numerous barriers impacting the access and awareness of these programs. Education and care are not one dimensional; they are complex, challenging, and rewarding all at the same time. The current system unintentionally creates hardships and barriers for families and children, and many times it is easy to forget the “human elements” that go into daily decisions and actions.

The biggest theme that the families in Region 32 identified was a lack of awareness of resources and programming for Kankakee and Iroquois families. When families are seeking services they need, they often turn to social media or “ask around” to learn about locally available options. Local supports include a Child Care Resource & Referral Agency (CCR&R), EI services, services through the Health Department, mental health support, and ECEC programs, but families struggle to find this information. A system is needed to effectively disseminate information to the entire community about what is offered and how it can benefit the children.

Parents and caregivers are unsure about the specifics of each program and if it meets their needs, such as: availability of programming, location, hours of operation, required days per week, and before/after school care. Many facilities and programs have wait lists, causing parents to seek out alternative care. Transportation is a vital factor when considering ECEC programs; caregivers are declining services and programs because they cannot leave their work to transport their child to and from preschool/services.

Another major barrier that exists for families is the cost of child care, services, and programming. Families that do not qualify for assistance must consider other options such as self-pay. Self-pay includes home and centers, private preschools, and services not covered by insurance. When families are required to self-pay, it can create financial hardships. Parents and caregivers are even turning down promotions because they could lose their benefits, such as CCAP. They are weighing out their options and making the best decision for their child, but at an “expense” to themselves and/or their families.



Kennilyn Hickory (left), Harold the Giraffe (middle), and Jessica Johnson (right) at Project Sun’s new Social Emotional Learning exhibit at Exploration Station.

“

There aren’t many teachers that speak Spanish for the bilingual programs and not many therapists speak Spanish either. I would like to have my child to have a bilingual speech pathologist because he is doing great with speech, but he is only communicating in English and my English is very limited.

- Parent

”

“ It is not easy to find information...the topics are too broad and the options too few.
- Parent ”

In Region 32, parents expressed a need for evening/overnight child care, transportation services, better awareness of available programs, as well as more child care centers and EI services with more staff and smaller class sizes, and bilingual options. They advocated for science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) activities for children and quality summer programs with scholarships for youth. Additionally, postnatal therapies and support, a center for special needs and trauma, crisis nursery, and free and affordable mental health services were noted. Finally, parents and caregivers expressed a desire for supports like parenting and life skills classes, including more education on milestones, and socialization opportunities for parents; they also suggested babysitting classes for teenagers.

“ ...I couldn't do overtime because I'd lose my help.
- Parent ”

“ We have to do better for children and parents in our county. If we receive funding and assistance, we can create more safe spaces for infants and children. These years are crucial to our children's current and future learning, behavior, and health. We must create a strong foundation to help our children develop the skills they need to become well-functioning and capable adults.
- Parent ”

Regional Strengths & Needs

Through Action and Council meetings, community listening sessions, focus groups, interviews, and surveys, qualitative data was collected on the ECEC landscape, and strengths and needs were identified.

Strengths

- ECEC resources are available for eligible families with young children in the areas of health, mental health, county-level, and community-level in Kankakee County.
- Bright By Text Messaging System through United Way servicing Kankakee and Iroquois Counties.
- The success of the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity Scholarship Program (ECACE) through Kankakee Community College (KCC) and Olivet Nazarene University (ONU) and the efforts to educate the workforce (ISAC, 2023).
- The Language ENvironment Analysis (LENA) Program is expanding in our local school districts. This language recording tool is being used in Preschool for All (PFA) and Head Start classrooms in our two largest districts. Devices are being utilized in our parent education programs and as additional family support for PFA families. This research-based tool is a key piece in our school readiness initiatives (LENA, 2021).
- Support from community and state-level partners.
- A variety of programs across both counties that support ECEC access (e.g., PI, EHS, HS, Migrant HS, MIECHV, PFA, PFA-E)
- Many community entities and organizations convene to better support our Region.
- Many Local Community Collaborations meet regularly to strengthen the Region's ECEC systems.
- Kankakee County is the most trained community in the world in Theraplay, an evidence-based dyadic child and family therapy.

Needs

Quality Workforce, Recruitment, and Retainment in ECEC

- More ECEC workforce.
- More training and professional development for staff.
- Higher pay/increased wages.
- More multilingual staff.

Centralized Community Network for Information, Referrals, and Resources

- Connecting parents/caregivers to services.
- Increasing awareness.
- Bringing parents/caregivers together outside of their homes.
- Iroquois County lacks awareness of resources in the community and surrounding areas.
- Better access to public data.
- IRIS System to coordinate intact and referrals.

- Trust to improve relationships.
- Creating a “community” for parents.
- Increased communication.
- Ways to market and share information.

Provide Mental Health Supports/Wrap-Around Services for ALL Children Ages Birth to Eight, ALL Families, and ALL Educators in Region 32

- Follow up with parents/caregivers to address family needs (e.g., parent cafes, conferences,)
- Continuation of LENA programs in both counties as an accepted norm.
- Doulas, pregnancy support, lactation group, infant massage, etc.
- Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Consultants (including supporting staff).
- Theraplay-trained therapists.
- Mental health providers for family units.
- Mental health services for children, parents/caregivers, and ECEC educators.
- More support, professional development, socialization opportunities, and parent/child interaction for families with children from birth to five years old.
- Weekly programs with an emphasis on social-emotional learning.
- Weekly programs focused on Kindergarten preparation.

Provide ECEC Slots and Funding for Infrastructure in Region 32 Based on Need

- Solutions for families just over the income eligibility for CCAP, FPL, etc.
- Birth to age three supports.
- Physical space/infrastructure.
- A licensed child care facility in each town, especially in rural areas.
- Better before/after care for children with challenging behavioral issues/needing smaller group settings.
- Child care programs with longer hours.
- More full-day options for preschool.
- Mandated Kindergarten.
- Extension of home visiting to age five.

Accessibility to Transportation for All Children Birth to Age Eight in ECEC Programs, Healthcare Support, and Family Support

- Better transportation for children ages three to five enrolled in ECEC preschool programs (i.e., Preschool for All, Preschool for All Expansion, Head Start)
- Increased public transportation (i.e., Show Bus, Metra) access for families in Iroquois and Kankakee Counties.

Recommendations

After reviewing quantitative and qualitative data, as well as identifying strengths and needs for the Region, recommendations were developed in five main areas, programming, workforce, and support programs, and priority areas were identified.

Quality Workforce, Recruitment, and Retainment in ECEC

- Continued funding for ECACE programs.
- Increased hourly wages for staff.
- Increased multilingual staffing.
- Additional professional development and support.

Centralized Community Network for Information, Referrals, and Resources

- Create a “System of Support” to streamline information, resources, and referrals for all entities serving children prenatal to age eight.

Provide Mental Health Supports/Wrap-Around Services for ALL Children Ages Birth to Eight, ALL Families, and ALL Educators in Region 32

- Support the psychosocial, emotional, and developmental needs of our children and families within the community and the professionals supporting them.

Provide ECEC Slots and Funding for Infrastructure in Region 32 Based on Need

- Physical space is needed to support increased slots by building new structures, funding renovations, or partnering with local organizations.

Accessibility to Transportation for All Children Birth to Age Eight in ECEC Programs, Healthcare Support, and Family Support

- Additional public transportation.
- Additional school district transportation.
- Funding allocated to ECEC programs for transportation.

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

Appendices

Appendix A: References

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Appendix B: Additional Figures

Figure 1: List of ECEC Publicly Funded Programs Available

Program	Ages Served	Program Description	Eligibility	Counties Offered
Early Head Start (EHS): Federally Funded	Infants and toddlers under the age of five, and pregnant people	Intensive high-quality, research-based, comprehensive services to foster in very young children the development of the foundations for school readiness and promote a healthy pregnancy for expectant individuals.	-Age -Income at or below 100% FPL for family size -Categorically eligibility such as homeless, foster, diagnosed disability	Kankakee, Iroquois
Head Start (HS): Federally Funded	Children age three to Kindergarten entry	Intensive high-quality research-based, comprehensive services to preschool age children to foster school readiness.	-Age -Income at or below 100% FPL for family size Categorically eligibility such as homeless, foster, diagnosed disability	Kankakee, Iroquois
Prevention Initiative (PI): Funded by Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)	Expectant individuals and families with children from birth to age three	Intensive, research-based, and comprehensive child development and family support and engagement services for expectant individuals and families with children from birth to age three to help them build a strong foundation for learning to prepare children for later school success.	-Children must be identified as being at risk of academic failure as indicated on the weighted eligibility criteria form developed and implemented by the program	Kankakee, Iroquois
Preschool for All (PFA): Funded by Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)	Children aged three to Kindergarten entry age	High-quality early education center-based services for preschoolers, to provide children with a foundation of knowledge and skills that allows them to be successful throughout their school experience.	-Age -Programs must collect and review proof of family income and priority points	Kankakee, Iroquois
Preschool for All Expansion (PFAE): Funded by Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)	Children aged three to Kindergarten entry age	Expands access to a full school day of high-quality early education services to children in high-need communities.	-Age -Programs must collect and review proof of family income at or below 200% of FPL for family size and priority points	Kankakee
Early Intervention (EI): Funded by Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS)	Children birth to three years old.	Provides support and services for families to help children younger than three years old meet developmental milestones.	-Physical or Mental Conditions resulting in a developmental delay	Kankakee, Iroquois

Early Childhood Special Education: Funded by Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)	Children age three to Kindergarten entry age.	Provided through local school districts and special education cooperatives. Professionals with training and expertise in special education services implement the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part B, by supporting the educational needs of young children and families.	-Physical or Mental Conditions resulting in a developmental delay	Kankakee, Iroquois
Home Visiting IDHS: Funded by IDHS-Division of Early Childhood (DEC)	Families with children birth to age five.	Supports pregnant individuals and parents with young children birth to age five who live in communities that face greater risks and barriers to achieving positive maternal and child health outcomes.	Priority is given to -Priority populations -Below 100% FPL -Teen pregnancy (under21) -History of child abuse/neglect -History of substance abuse -Household has had: children with developmental delays or disabilities	Iroquois
Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV): Funded by U.S. Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA)	Pregnant people and families with children up to Kindergarten entry.	Voluntary, evidence-based home visiting program to improve the outcomes for pregnant women and families. Families choose to participate in home visiting programs, and partner with health, social service, and child development professionals to set and achieve goals that improve health and well-being.	Priority is given to -Priority populations -Below 100% FPL -Teen pregnancy (under21) -History of child abuse/neglect -History of substance abuse -Household has had: children with developmental delays or disabilities	Kankakee
Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP): Funded by Illinois Department of Human Services using a mix of State and Federal funding. Parents pay a copayment	Families with children younger than age 13.	Assists low-income parents with child care payments.	-Families whose monthly non-exempt income does not exceed 225% FPL for family size	Kankakee, Iroquois

Appendix C: Focus Group and Interview Questions

Parents, Families, and Caregivers

1. There are many Early Childhood services available in our Region. What Early Childhood services does your family use/has your family used?
2. How have you found out about Early Childhood programs or services, or found care for your child(ren)?
3. Do the child care services you're using now meet your family's needs? If not, please describe what would better fit your family's needs.
4. What, if anything, has been particularly helpful in making Early 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 parents/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 serves children birth through age five and their families?
3. What services don't currently exist in your community and/or this Region for young children and/or their families that you would like to see?
4. What data do you think would be helpful in better understanding how priority populations access Early Childhood care and services, or the barriers/challenges they have accessing care and services?
5. Is child care readily available and close to employers in your community?
6. What accommodations has your business or company made for professionals with young children? How have these accommodations impacted your business or company?
7. Have you connected with child care providers in the community to build relationships and build relationships with partners to provide the care you need for employees?

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