



# Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

## Region 35

(Marshall, LaSalle & Putnam Counties)





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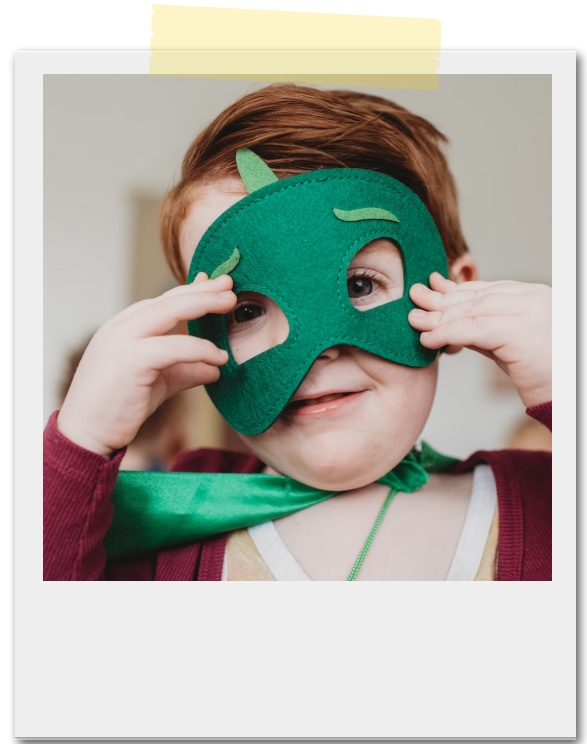
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# Region 35 Executive Summary

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 35 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

Region 35 cannot have equitable access to Early Childhood Education and Care if they don’t have access at all. Addressing the complex workforce predicament and the absence of programs, services, and care must be mutually exclusive. This exclusivity is required in order to prevent the perpetuating cycle that affects Region 35. Child care affordability for families is a highlighted barrier, as they find themselves no longer able to determine what is best for their family based on parenting aspirations, but forced to choose unemployment due to the financial constraints of paying for child care.

“ A lot of people do not want to work just to pay for day care. They would rather have that time with their child and save the extra cost. ”

- Parent (LaSalle County)

Prioritizing equitable access to Early Childhood Education and Care is the most important step in providing for the whole child within Region 35.

## Region 35 Needs

- Support for children and families including; language accessibility, expanded special education supports, and a local ECEC network to help share information.
- Support for staff retention
- A Coordinated Intake system & support for families to obtain referrals.
- Outreach & Education on support services and child development
- Expanded ECEC programing including affordability, location, transportation, and hours.
- ECEC support for families experiencing challenges due to their immigration/refugee status

## Region 35 Recommendations

- Increase access to ECEC including; transportation options, creation of a sliding scale model, expanding care hours to cove third shift staff & on-site care.
- Build a Coordinated Intake program for communities to easily access resources.
- Develop a structured screening system.
- Recruit and retain the ECEC workforce.
- Leverage the Regional Birth to Five Illinois Action and Family Councils to support creating a local Collaboration.

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

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# REGION 35 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.



**7,973**

Children Under  
the Age of 6  
in Region 35



**3,682**

Children 0-5  
at 200% Federal  
Poverty Level



**2,276**

Children 0-5  
Without Publicly  
Funded ECEC Slots

**88%**

Percentage of children ages birth to five who do not have access to Early Childhood Education and Care in LaSalle, Marshall, and Putnam Counties

“We are a two-income household, working in education and it is still a struggle. There are not a lot of options for child care centers and most home child care providers are filled.” - Parent, LaSalle County

**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 35 NEEDS**

1. Expanded ECEC programming to includes more locations, transportation options, and non-traditional work hours.
2. Increase outreach/education for support services and child development.
3. Support for staff retention.
4. ECEC support for families who are immigrants and refugees.

## **REGION 35 RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Create a well-marketed, easy-to-navigate, attainable coordinated intake that allows families to find all services and resources within their community.
2. A regularly planned community-based event that provides standardized screeners for Prevention Initiative and Early Intervention to all children.
3. Increase interest in the field, re-evaluate wages and benefits, and provide quality professional development for administration and staff.
4. Establish a local collaboration within Region 35 to address the needs of familes and the Early Childhood Education and Care system.



**“I have an Early Childhood Education background. I started looking for care one year in advance only to find long waiting lists.”**  
**- Community Member,  
LaSalle County**

# 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.

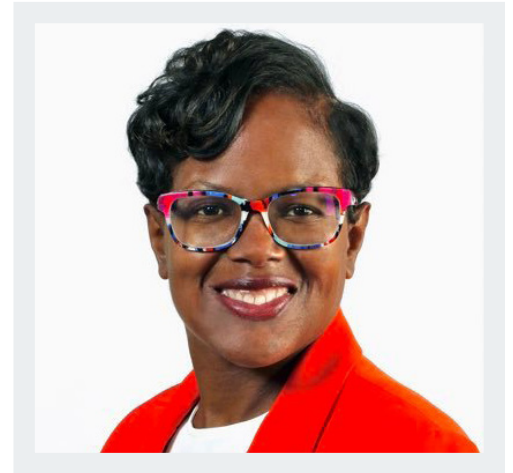
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand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

To create an Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment that represents and includes the needs of Region 35, a deep dive into data was necessary, but the richness comes from the experiences and the stories of the families in which we share this space. Thank you to the many community members within the Region who were willing to share personal accounts, their experiences, and their resources to help shape this report into what it is today. Without their commitment to the youngest learners in our Region, we could not have accomplished this essential work that adds to the ongoing efforts to provide access to high-quality education and care for all. Thank you to each one of you for your thoughtful efforts and compassion while we worked together to advocate for the families of our Region.

Family Council and Action Council members were the heartbeat of our meetings. We appreciate our Family Council members' bravery in sharing their personal experiences and knowledge about our Region to enrich this needs assessment. Family Council members were transparent in conversations regarding all barriers that exist in Region 35, which was critical to the assessment of the ECEC needs. Our Action Council members were bold in responding to data and content in each meeting with honesty. Advocacy for all populations was the driver behind the difficult topics presented. The Council Members contributed with respect and dignity for all of Region 35. These raw experiences led to recommendations in pursuit of sustainable solutions.

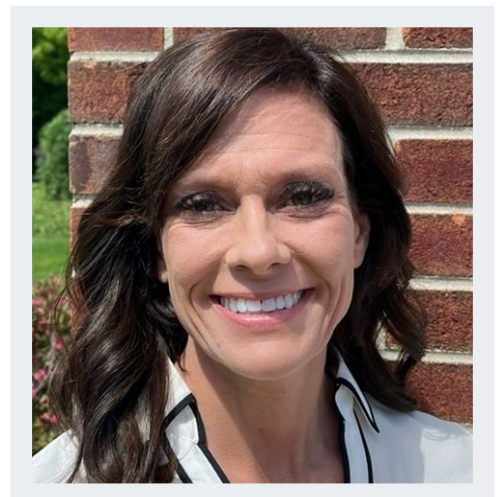
We are additionally grateful for community members who have taken the time to share their personal experiences, without hesitation, in focus groups and interviews. We offer additional thanks to our Birth to Five Illinois State Team, who effortlessly gave us guidance and support throughout the entire process.

Thank you,

**Becky Eager (she/her)**

Regional Council Manager: Region 35

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.

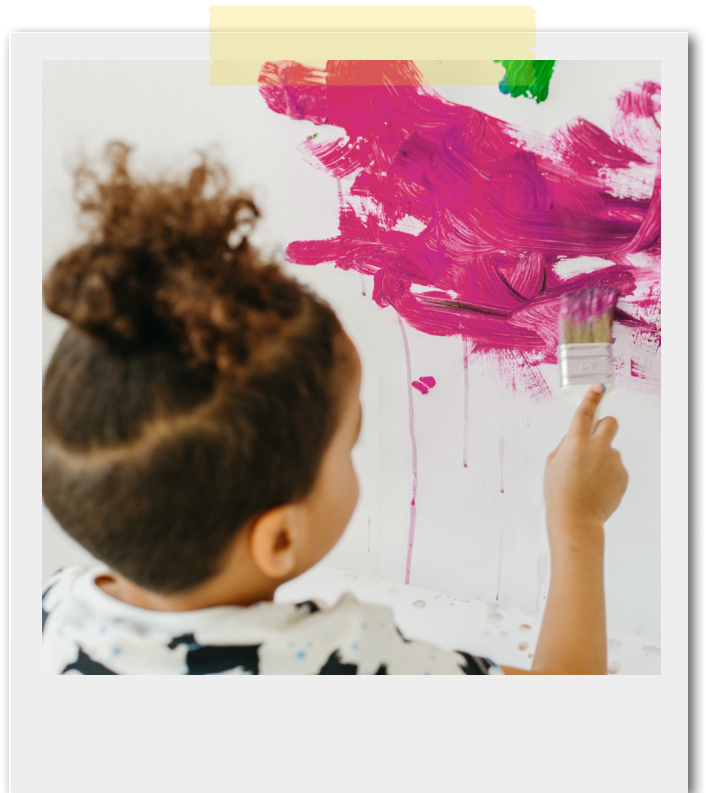
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early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

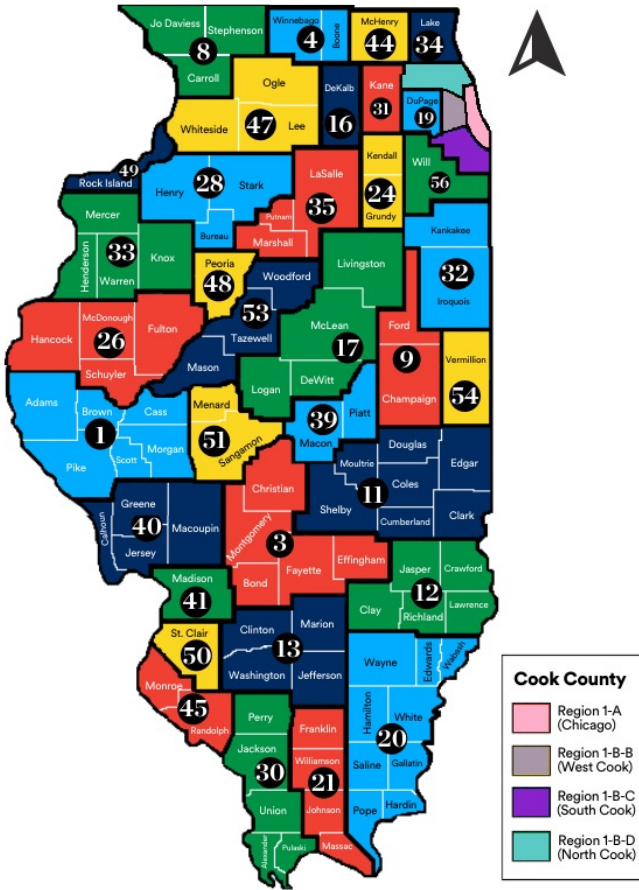


# Timeline

- **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

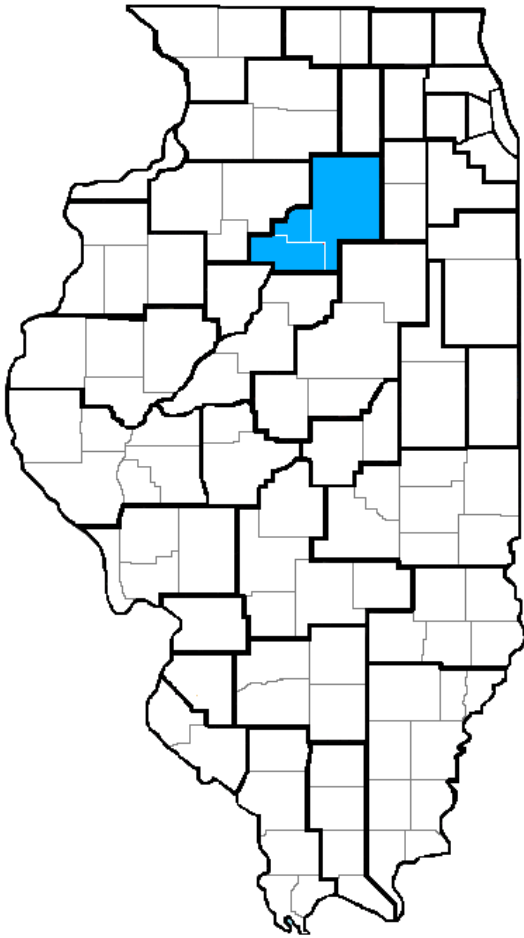
Regionally based demographic, programmatic, and service provider data from IECAM and workforce data from INCCRRA were presented to Action and Family Council members during meetings and is included in the following section. The data comes from both IECAM (2020-2021) and INCCRRA (2021), unless otherwise 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 35



# Regional Community Landscape



## Regional Boundaries

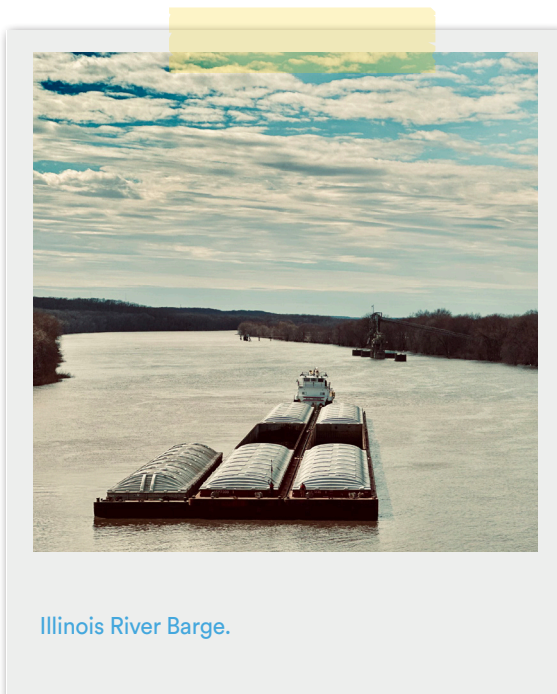
Region 35 is around 60 miles southwest of Chicago and consists of LaSalle, Marshall, and Putnam Counties. The entire Region encompasses 2,002.31 square miles of land. According to the 2020 Census, LaSalle County is the second largest county in Illinois, with 37 townships and a total area of 1,135 square miles. The vast expanses of farmland within LaSalle County border Woodford, Marshall, Putnam, Bureau, Livingston, Lee, DeKalb, Kendall, and Grundy counties. Marshall County is less than half the square mileage of LaSalle County, covering 386.8 square miles of Illinois. Lastly, Putnam County, the smallest county in Illinois, has 60 square miles of land.

The Region is home to extensive acreage dedicated to the farming industry. The bulk of farming is done in corn and soybean crops. Although most of the natural real estate is secured for crops due to Region 35's rich and abundant soil, livestock farming finds itself to be another leading industry within the three counties.

This area includes many small businesses run by local support. Other businesses include transportation of goods, with the Illinois River as a gateway for barges to transport goods in and out of the Region and trucks to drive them throughout and beyond the Region to their final destinations. Sand and gravel production also lead the way for the industry in Region 35. Silica sand, specific to this Region, is one of the purest forms of sand in the entire world and is used in many everyday products. The production companies employ hundreds of union workers and create a large amount of local revenue, while simultaneously utilizing the trucking, railway, and barge systems.

## Land Acknowledgement<sup>1</sup>

Region 35 acknowledges that our Region is the traditional homelands of Kaskaskia, Ojāaakiiwaki (Sauk), Meshkwahkihaki, Očhéthi Šakówinj (Sioux), Kiiikaapoi (Kickapoo), Myaamia (Miami), Peoria, and Niúachi. We acknowledge the historic and ongoing injustices experienced by Indigenous communities and honor all Native Peoples who came before us and who continue to contribute to our Counties (Marshall, LaSalle, and Putnam).



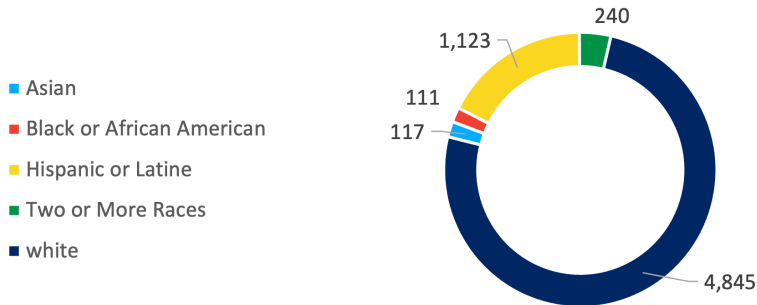
Illinois River Barge.

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

## Regional Demographics

The overall population in Region 35 is 126,761, with 3,864 children aged birth to two and 4,109 children aged three to five. The total number of children under the age of five, as well as the racial and ethnic diversity of the Region, has remained steady over the years. While the Region is predominantly white, there are some in the Region that self-identify as Hispanic or Latine, Black or African American, or have two or more races (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> There are small pockets of Hispanic/Latine communities throughout the Region, particularly in Mendota Township, Troy Grove Township, and the City of LaSalle.

**Figure 1: Children Ages Five and Under by Race and Ethnicity**



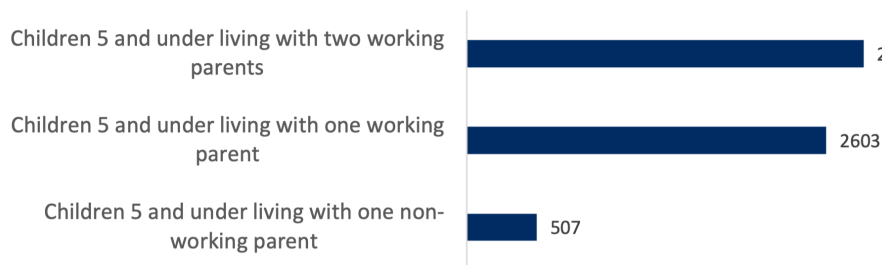
Source: IECAM  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Region 35 has seen an increase in children age five and under living in a one-working parent household and a decrease in two-working parent households over the years (Figure 2). Many families said they have been forced to make the decision to have one parent stay at home due to the lack of quality, affordable child care in the Region.

“ I had to choose to stay home as a teen mom because we couldn’t afford child care and put my son’s dad through school in order to build a better future for us. We assumed when he graduated and started his career it would be my time, but two more sons later and a divorce...it never was quite my time. Now I find myself choosing part-time jobs to bring in some sort of income and rely on family to help when they can. If I didn’t have my family to take care of my sons’ basic needs, I’m not sure where we would be. We never envisioned divorce when creating our family. Child care isn’t even an option financially...not that we have many options around anyway!

– Parent (LaSalle County)

**Figure 2: Working Families**



Source: IECAM  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

<sup>2</sup>Two Census categories were not included in the chart due to small numbers: American Indian or Alaska Native (7) and Some other Race (2)

The Early Learning Council (ELC) identified certain groups across the State as being members of priority populations.<sup>3</sup> Community members from defined priority populations often face economic disadvantage and a lack of a support system, do not receive equitable resources compared to other students in the academic pipeline, and do not have adequate access to ECEC programs due to the programs’ location, cost, enrollment requirements, or capacity to serve the comprehensive needs of families. The purpose of defining priority population is to drive resources and attention toward efforts to improve access to high-quality, responsive services for children and families with the highest needs, and to promote coordination and alignment across the various parts of the ECEC landscape, prenatal to age five, in service of this goal. 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.

Of the 12 priority populations defined by the ELC, there were nine priority populations identified by the Region 35 Action and Family Councils: children in families living on incomes at poverty or deep poverty levels; children experiencing homelessness; children in families that face barriers based on culture, language, and religion; children of migrant or seasonal workers; children/families with refugee or asylum status; children in families who face barriers due to immigration status; children of teen parent; children/families with child welfare involvement; and children with disabilities. Quantitative data on priority populations is limited on priority populations, especially for children of migrant or seasonal workers, children or families with refugee or asylee status, and children in families who face barriers due to their immigration status. However, qualitative data gathered from Action and Family Council members, as well as focus groups, interviews, and community meetings with members of priority populations and the organizations that serve them is included in other sections of this report.

The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) is a measure of income created by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that calculates the minimum amount of money needed by a family to cover their basic household needs, such as food, housing, utilities, and other necessities. In many cases, FPL is used to determine eligibility for programs and services. Someone living at or below 100% FPL is living at “the poverty line” (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Federal Poverty Level 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

Many ECEC programs use different FPL guidelines as one measure of determining whether a child or family is eligible for services, which is why understanding FPL is important. While each program has their own income and/or FPL guideline to follow, many children (57%) under the age of six in the Region live at or below 200% FPL (Figure 3). Disparities across FPL create an inequitable division for the Region’s families. Finding data on children in families experiencing homelessness can be difficult.

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

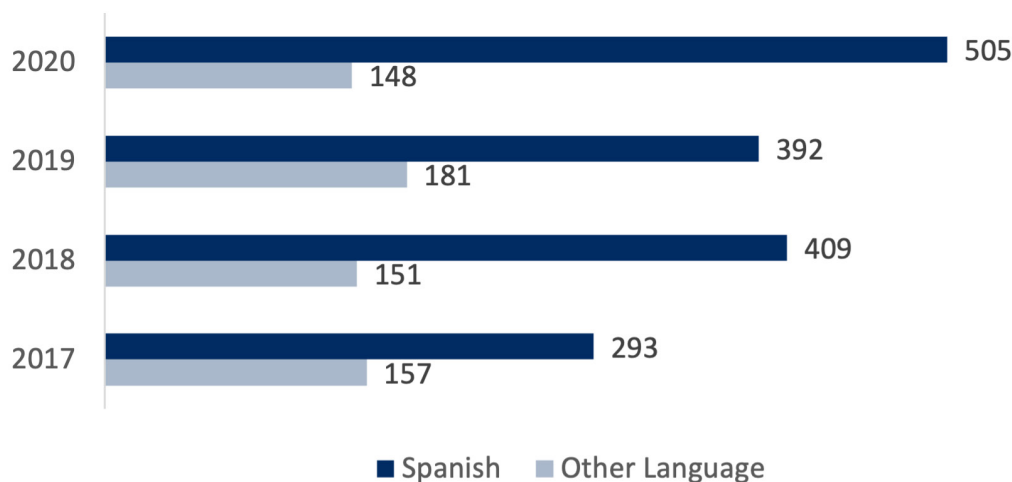
	At or Below 50% FPL	At or Below 100% FPL	At or Below 185% FPL	At or Below 200% FPL
Number of Children Ages Birth to Two	497	1,024	1,578	1,758
Number of Children Ages Three to Five	509	1,124	1,734	1,924

Source: IECAM  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Families and caregivers must self-identify as experiencing homelessness to the program or school, and many may not want to do so because of the stigma and shame around homelessness. Additionally, the definition of homelessness may not be understood by some families, since it includes many different types of sleeping situations, leaving them unaware that their family qualifies for services. A family that shares a house with a friend or relative, for example, is considered homeless because their sleeping situation is not fixed; rather, they might be forced to move if the other family asks them to leave. According to the Regional Office of Education #35, there are eleven Kindergarteners in LaSalle County and one Kindergartener in Marshall County who have been identified by a parent or caregiver as experiencing homelessness or being unhoused. The total number of students grades Kindergarten through 12th Grade in Region 35 who are receiving services through the McKinney-Vento program, which services families experiencing homelessness, is 95.

The number of households in Region 35 whose primary language is Spanish has increased, while households whose primary language is “other languages” has remained relatively fixed. Between 2017 and 2020, the number of Spanish speaking households almost doubled.

**Figure 5: Number of Households where Primary Language is Spanish, Other Language**

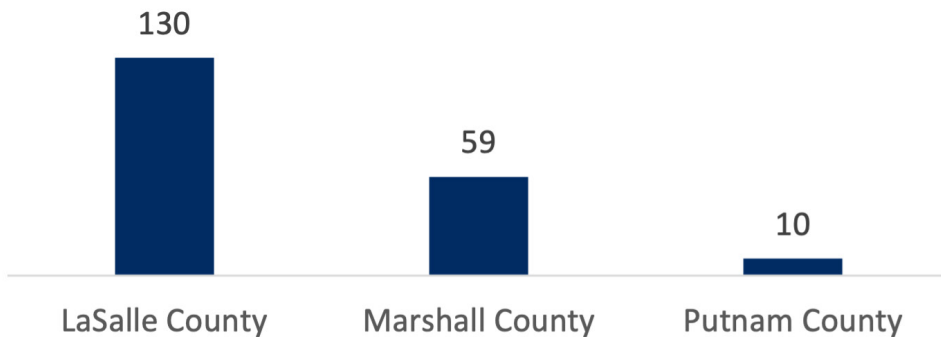


Source: IECAM  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Out of all the counties in the Region, LaSalle County has the highest number of children born to teen mothers (defined as age 19 and under). In 2020, there were 67 children born to teen mothers. Unfortunately, no organizations or programs currently exist in the Region to support teen parents.

LaSalle County also has the highest number of children in substitute care in the Region (Figure 6). Substitute care is the temporary placement of children outside their homes due to abuse, neglect, or dependency in a foster family home, group care, or institution. The inconsistency of substitute care for children can play a major role in finding child care or enrolling them in ECEC programs and services.

**Figure 6: Number of Children Placed in Substitute Care**



Source: Illinois Department of Child and Family Services  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

There is evidence of children with disabilities not receiving the interventions, therapies, and programming that is necessary and/or wanted as part of the family’s plan in providing for their children. Early Intervention (EI) data is difficult to obtain, due to the numerous evaluation avenues and the need for referrals. Families and community members continue to force the issue that the need for EI services is vital for Region 35.

“ I brought up my inability to understand my daughter’s speech at two separate wellness visits, as well as the concern for her low scores on the speech portion of Ages and Stages. However, I was told each time by her pediatrician ‘to not worry about it and she will catch up in preschool when she is around other kids that are talking.’ She has two older siblings at home with no speech or articulation delays, so this response did not make any sense to me. I sought out an evaluation on my own and found out her articulation was severely delayed. If I would have followed her pediatrician’s advice, it would have taken six plus months to even begin speech services.

- Community Member

”

Region 35’s demographic data provides insight into the population of families with children birth to age five, their family structure, socioeconomic status, work status, spoken language, and developmental milestones and abilities. The value of the data trends and community experiences is to identify recommendations for creating a more equitable system for our families. The demographic landscape paints a clear picture of where and why Region 35 is experiencing inequitable access to ECEC programs and services. While the Region is predominantly white, it is also home to families from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds who are struggling to receive what is necessary or required to be successful and feel a part of their community.

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

## Local Community Collaborations

Local Early Childhood Community Collaborations form when different organizations who serve children within a community join to address the needs of young children and their families in a coordinated way, often with the goal of increasing enrollment in quality, affordable ECEC programs so children enter Kindergarten ready to learn. Some Local Collaborations are standalone organizations, some are connected to larger agencies, and some are informal in nature. The State provides some technical and training support to Local Community Collaborations via Community Statewide Systems Supports (CS3) funded by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE).

“

Local Collaborations are essential because they have a deep understanding of where families are, especially those not in early learning programs, and how to reach them. They can build trust and community buy-in by strengthening relationships with diverse, community-based partners. Embedded in communities, they are positioned to identify root causes of early learning enrollment barriers and design strategies to overcome them.

– Illinois Action for Children (IAC)

”

Region 35 currently does not have any local community groups that meet the official definition of a Collaboration. However, there are factions to aid in education and community support. Currently, Region 35 has the LaSalle Early Childhood Collaboration, Mendota Child Family Connections, and the Community Advisory Collaboration at Mendota School District #289, all of whom meet regularly to discuss what local resources are available and to provide updates on Early Childhood initiatives and interventions.

Region 35 needs to provide a bridge between the community and ECEC. A Local Collaboration would allow for the recognition of barriers, prioritizing solutions, setting standardized goals for the Region, and the sharing of knowledge of funding streams and viable resources, all reflective of the community needs.



Maggie with a big smile inside the pig pen.



Earville, IL COOP Sign.

# Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

The ECEC landscape in Region 35 includes licensed child care centers, licensed family child care homes, license-exempt child care, as well as publicly funded programs: Preschool For All and Preschool For All Expansion, Head Start and Early Head Start, Prevention Initiative, Home Visiting, Early Intervention, and Early Childhood Special Education.

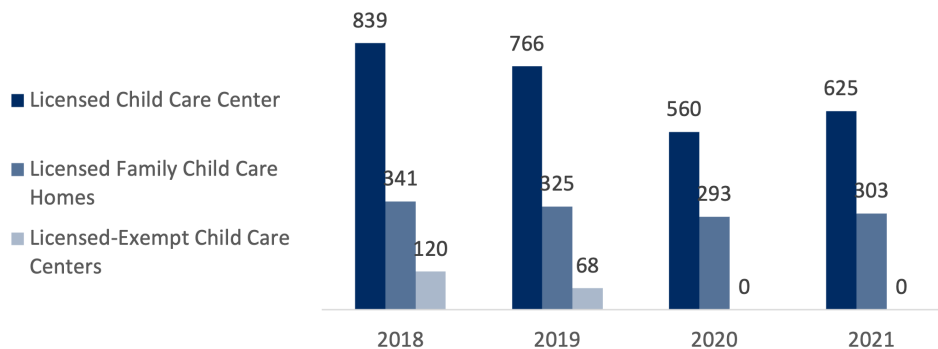
## Licensed & License-Exempt Child Care

Licensed and license-exempt child care programs are regulated by the Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS). There are nine licensed child care centers and 31 licensed family child care homes located throughout the Region. Since 2018, the number of license-exempt programs has gone from 120 to zero, and the capacity of licensed and license-exempt programs has dropped from 1,300 to 928 (Figure 7). The capacity across licensed

“ I have an Early Childhood Education background. I started looking for care one year in advance only to find long waiting lists. ”  
- Community Member

programs decreased due to COVID-19-related closures, as well as the inability to find and retain teachers and staff. While many families in the Region can access child care, there are some that must put their names on long waitlists for care or who find accessible care options unaffordable.

Figure 7: Early Care and Education Capacity, 2018-2021



Source: IECAM  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

The child care sites are clustered mostly in LaSalle County, with many miles between each cluster. There are three family child care homes located in the northern part of Putnam County, and one located in the northernmost part of Marshall County.

“ In larger populations, we see more child care; however, rural areas lack options. ”  
- Parent (LaSalle County)

## Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) Care

FFN care is also an option for many families. However, data is difficult to find because they do not have the oversight that is required of licensed programs. Families have leaned on FFN care due to a lack of availability of other care options in their area; many have been left with no other option. Concerns with FFN care include the inconsistency regarding last minute cancellations, safety, and possible lack of child development education or knowledge. This type of care is often found through neighborly conversation and friendly referrals.

## Illinois Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)

CCAP helps cover the cost for child care so families can work, attend training, or school. Eligibility is based on family income and size.

There are publicly funded programs available for families to access, each with their own set of eligibility and enrollment requirements. Figure 8 shows the number of program sites, the capacity of all sites per program, and the ages each program serves.

**Figure 8: Number and Capacity of Publicly Funded Programs, and Ages Served**

Provider Type	Number of Program Type	Capacity of Program	Ages Served
Preschool for All	10	1,058	3-4
Preschool for All Expansion	2	38	3-4
Early Head Start	5	57	0-3
Head Start	9	241	3-5
Prevention Initiative	1	12	0-3
IDHS Home Visiting	N/A	41	0-5

Source: INCCRRA  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

## Preschool for All (PFA)

PFA is a half-day program available to children ages three and four and funded through the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), while Preschool For All Expansion (PFA-E) offers full day preschool. The long-term goal of both the PFA and PFA-E programs is to provide high-quality educational services to all three- and four-year-old children that wish to participate. There are several ways for a child to qualify for PFA or PFAE, but the program prioritizes children who are experiencing homelessness and unstable housing, are currently or recently involved in the child welfare system, have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to support a disability, from an active-duty military family, or are part of a priority population.

The programs also prioritize families living at or below 50% and 100% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). According to the 2020 Census, there were 4,109 children ages three to five living in the Region, with 509 living at or below 50% FPL and 615 living at or below 100% FPL. There are 1,096 funded spots for children who qualify for PFA and PFA-E, leaving some families without the option of using the program if they wanted. Families expressed their appreciation of the PFA being a part of their school district; it is convenient and provides a sense of security.



## Head Start & Early Head Start

Head Start and Early Head Start funded enrollment has remained unchanged at 241 and 57, respectively, from 2018-2021. These programs are funded through U.S. Department of Health and Human Services who uses FPL guidelines to determine eligibility for enrollment. Early Head Start provides services to families with pregnant persons and children birth to age three. Head Start offers programs for eligible children ages three to five. Head Start and Early Head Start base eligibility on families with children birth to age five with incomes below poverty level guidelines. Children experiencing homelessness and unstable housing, families receiving public assistance, such as SSI (Social Security Income) and TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) are also eligible. Children in foster care are eligible without any income requirements. These programs are dedicated to lifelong learning and promoting the needs of our children through partnerships and collaboration. They intend to support families by providing resources and curriculum to encourage early learning, family well-being, and health. Parents/caregivers are encouraged to be part of the program to expand the opportunities to be successful.

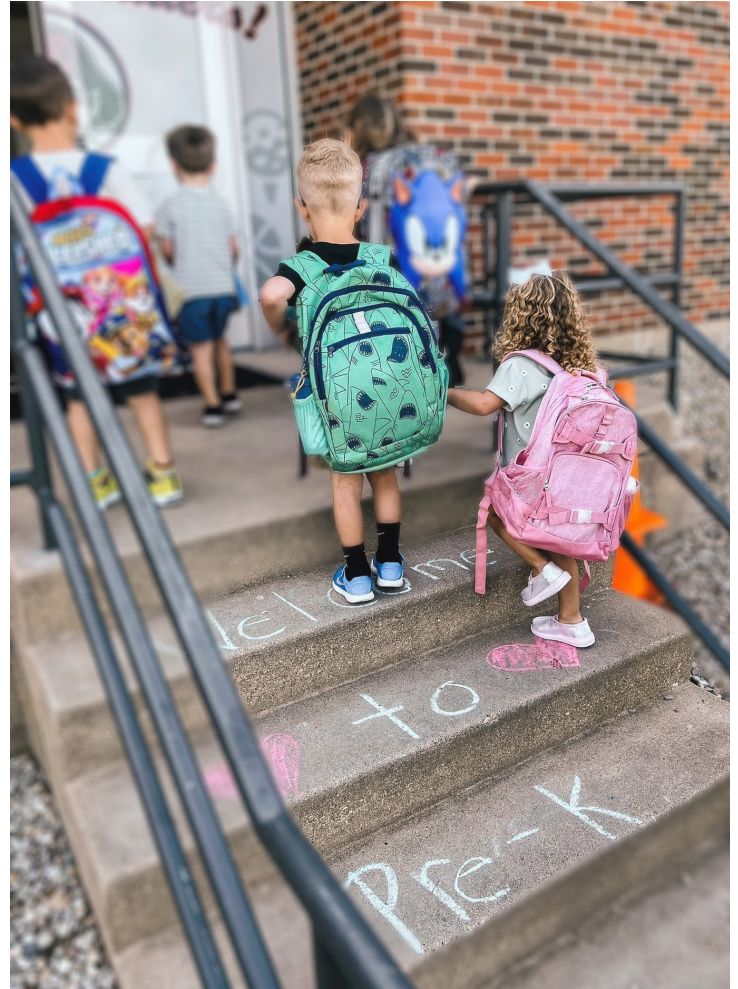
In Region 35, Early Head Start is available in LaSalle, Marshall, and Putnam Counties. Head Start is only offered in LaSalle and Marshall Counties. Families have expressed their appreciation for both programs, particularly the availability of bussing for the children that has alleviated stress. Some families expressed sadness in hearing the Head Start program was closing in their area. The commentary surrounding Head Start and Early Head Start in this Region was by far the most complimentary and appreciative of the programs and their offerings to the student and family

“

I remember when I attended Head Start, they would put the books we read at home on the train that ran across the entire classroom! It made me want to read every night with my mom!

- Community Member

”



Preschool aged students walking into Earville CUSD 9 Preschool.

“

I met my lifelong best friend during Head Start and I am 35 years old!

- Community Member

”

## Prevention Initiative (PI)

PI is funded through Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) for pregnant persons and children from birth to age three who face barriers for academic success. PI provides families with a solid base to prepare their child for future success in school. In Region 35, there has been a significant decline in the number of sites and capacity for this program, leaving only one site with 12 slots available within the entire Region. Not having access to this service may impact the Kindergarten readiness and future success of our youngest learners.

## Home Visiting

Families with children ages birth to five may also participate in home visiting programs. Home visiting is a free service that is either state or federally funded and provides family support and coaching through planned, regular visits with a trained professional based on a family's needs and schedules. Home visiting can be a connection to local resources, help with readiness for school, and support child and parental health. Due to our lack of providers, the data and family experiences with home visiting was difficult to collect. The current funded enrollment in Region 35 for home visiting is 41 and remained unchanged from 2019 to 2021.

## Early Intervention (EI)

EI is focused on supporting children between the ages of birth to three who have been assessed as having disabilities or other delays. The program is funded in part through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), general revenue funds, Medicaid, and insurance (when applicable). Children are evaluated and an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) is created to document services and supports a child may need. Currently, there are 114 children receiving EI services in the Region. While it is understood that all eligible families are not receiving the referrals they need, referrals are still being obtained at an increasing rate.

## Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)

ECSE is funded through IDEA along with state and federal funding. This service is provided to children aged three to five years old and is provided through local schools, as well as outside of the school district. Region 35 currently serves 198 children in Preschool for All with an IEP. The data on students not enrolled in preschool is not included in this data. At Kindergarten registration, there are reports of an increase of children that are not Kindergarten-ready and who would benefit from additional supports.

“Referrals are at the highest I have ever seen, and the workforce is not able to sustain the demand.”  
- Community Member

“A huge increase of special education referrals in the district and new students moving into the district is causing a need to hire more staff.”  
- Community Member

Families in the Region are appreciative of the ECEC programs and services available for their children; however, they do not have the capacity to serve every child whose family wants to place them into a program. The enormous slot gap has wreaked havoc on families because it limits their ability to pursue careers that fulfill them, have options for child care, allow preparation for Kindergarten, and receive support for children with special needs. A huge concern regarding all these programs is the overall lack and the inability to access them. Region 35 has clearly identified a need for more slots to be made available to our families and a system in place that lists all the services available to our families.

## Slot Gap

The slot gap is the difference between the number of children in the Region and the number of available spots for them to enroll in ECEC programs. The slot gap can be measured across all licensed center-based child care, licensed home care, and license-exempt child care centers, as well for the publicly funded programs such as Head Start, Early Head Start, Preschool for All (PFA), Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV), and Prevention Initiative (PI).

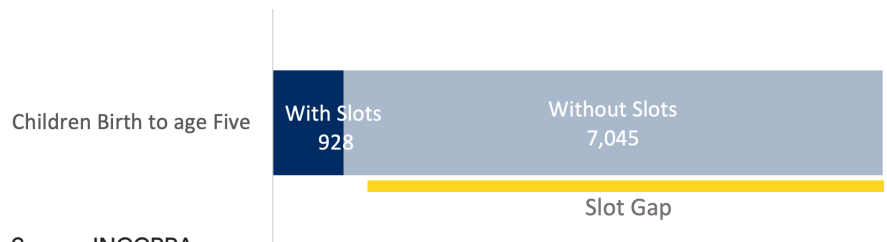
Overall, there are not nearly enough slots for the 7,973 children aged birth to five to attend a licensed or license-exempt child care program in the Region (Figure 8). Community members said the driving force for the overall slot gap is the physical number of ECEC options as well as a lack of ECEC teachers and staff. Community members also said that many caregivers throughout the Region make the difficult choice not to work due to limited access to quality child care.



Child holding sign for her first day of Preschool.

“ This area is so limited in resources and child care is so expensive to the point where some families are considering moving out of state. ”  
- Parent (LaSalle County)

Figure 9: Overall Child Care Capacity Slot Gap

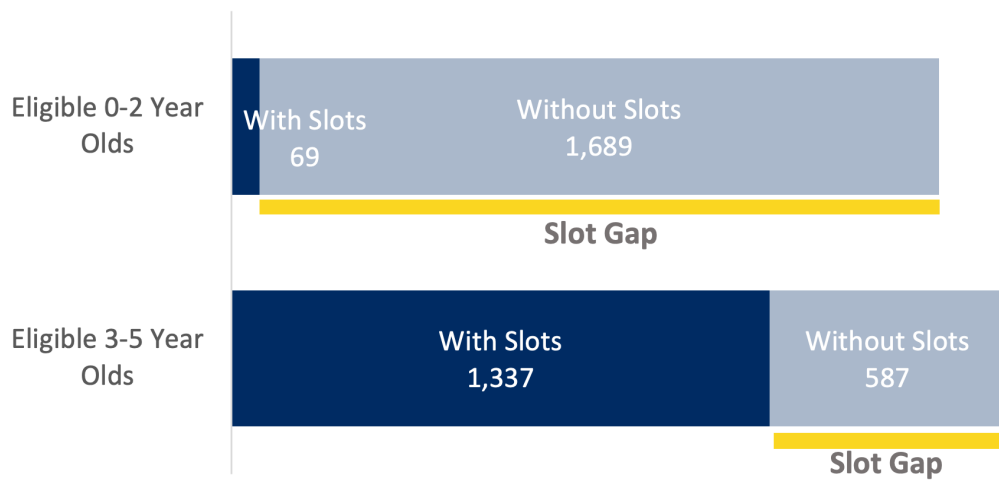


Source: INCCRRA  
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Publicly funded programs also have a slot gap, especially for children ages birth to two (Figure 9). While there are many ways to qualify for a publicly funded program, income is one main measure the programs take into consideration when enrolling a child. As such, the publicly funded slot gap only takes into consideration children whose families are at or below 200% FPL.

Children aged two in Region 35 only have 69 funded slots across Early Head Start and PI programs, both which offer center-based care and weekly home visits. Children ages three to five have more slots available to them through Head Start, Preschool for All, and Preschool for All Expansion funding; however, a slot gap still exists for this age group (Figure 9). Head Start is a mix of extended day morning and afternoon care and offers full day as well as full year options at locations through the Region. Nevertheless, some families still lack the opportunity to enroll their child in high-quality, affordable programs.

**Figure 10: Publicly Funded Early Childhood Education and Care Slot Gap**



Source: INCCRRA  
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

To give children what they need, the ECEC system needs to be reimagined so that it puts all children first. Region 35 has recognized the inability to provide ECEC slots for over 7,000 children. Beginning life with such a large divide only contributes to more challenges as the child progresses through their school years and beyond.

## Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

The ECEC workforce is an essential piece of a community. They provide environments that are safe for children, while being thoughtful about growth and development. While the ECEC workforce provides education and care for children in the Region, families can go to work, attend college classes, or do what they need to provide for their households. Currently, there is a real concern regarding the lack of workforce and its detriment to the success of our community members, families, and businesses. Members of the community have shared that the lack of workforce has created a domino effect that reaches all corners of the Region. This concern includes families not able to find ECEC for their children that has resulted in the loss of a job, an inability to apply for work or college classes, or the child missing out on early education and socialization opportunities desired by the family.

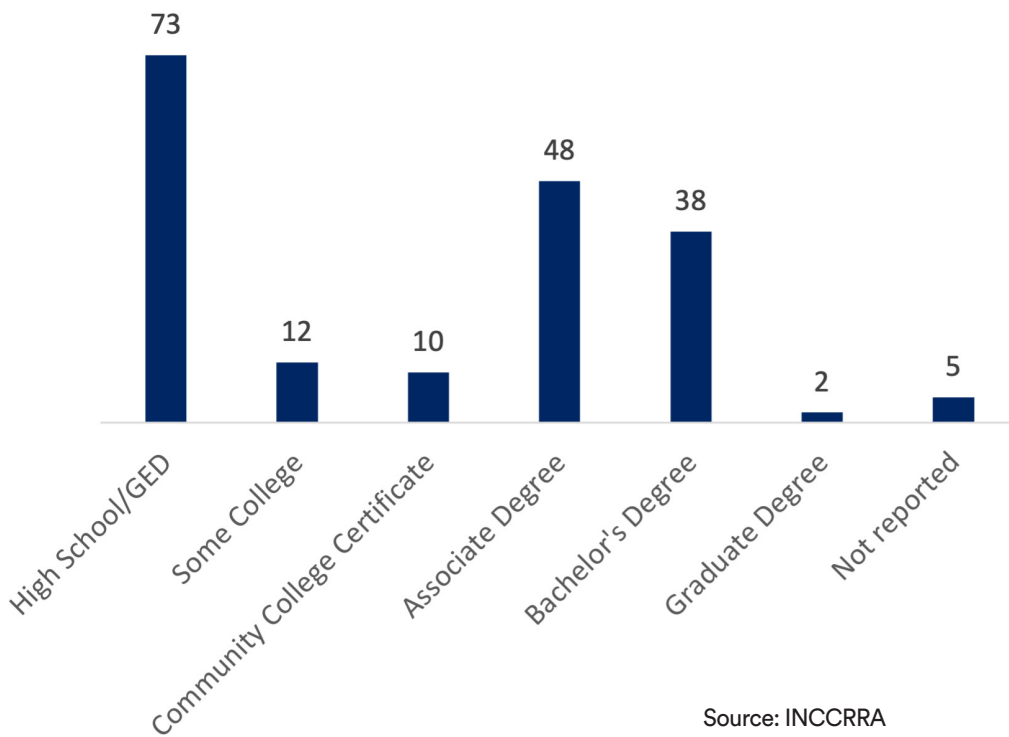
Data is important to examine to better understand our community. Region 35 data indicates there are 45 licensed family child care providers, 43 of whom are female and two are male. The race of the providers includes four who identify as African American/Black and 41 who identify as white. All family child care providers report their primary language being English; fewer than five are multilingual. Regarding the family child care staff whose levels of education are known, 28 have reported having a high school/GED education, one indicated some college attendance, ten reported having an associate degree, and one has reported earning a bachelor's degree. The ECE Credential has been earned by eleven family child care providers.

There are nine licensed child care centers with 35 directors. All licensed center directors in Region 35 (100%) identify as white. All the directors' primary language is English; fewer than five are multilingual. One director is male, and 34 are female. Teaching staff is comprised of 188 persons, 93% who identify as white, 5% as Hispanic/Latine and 2% as other races. There are 178 female and ten male staff members. The primary language amongst the staff is English; fewer than 5 report their primary language is Spanish and fewer than five list other as their primary language. Several staff members are multilingual. The ECE credential has been earned by 78 of the staff members.



Hay bales stacked in a farmer's field.

Figure 11: Highest Level Of Education for Licensed Center Teaching Staff



Source: INCCRRA  
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

In efforts to improve the workforce concern, the state of Illinois has provided support to students enrolling in ECE courses. Illinois Valley Community College (IVCC) offers scholarships created by the State (ECACE - Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity) to encourage students to enroll in ECE courses. IVCC also offers flexible class times/course offerings to support students and their needs. Professionals involved in ECEC have shared their intentional recruitment into the field as they wish to prioritize the needs of our community. While the state of Illinois has clearly recognized the dire need for ECEC professionals, it has still been a struggle to find them.

There have been community members encouraging professional development for the directors of ECEC and the administration of school districts. Although there are current professional development offerings for the ECEC workforce, leadership and encouraging a healthy work environment are not typical discussion topics. There has been an expressed interest by professionals in live or in-person training as opposed to prerecorded webinars.

Compensation and benefits have been considered a major barrier in encouraging others to join the ECEC workforce and a reason many have left ECEC for another opportunity. While ECEC leaders are trying to accommodate families and staff, they have found it difficult to find a middle ground that would allow a fair cost to families yet permit raises for their staff. In discussions with community members, Council members, and those in the ECEC field, one point has remained constant: the salaries and benefits of the job do not align with the responsibilities and expectations. This is well-known throughout the Region and State, which makes staffing centers and recruiting a daunting task.

“Physically being part of a grant issued within LaSalle County has brought new hope to educators.”  
- Community Member

“

Why would anyone pay college tuition for a career that only pays minimum wage!

- Community Member

”

The ECEC workforce is relied upon to provide care for our children for our families to work, attend meetings and appointments, and to support self-care. Prioritizing this work is integral in providing quality education and care for the community. With a fully staffed workforce, families will be able to make decisions regarding careers that fulfill them. They will be able to provide for their families without worries of who will be caring for their child(ren). The importance of the ECEC workforce cannot be described without including several facets of a community; its influence can affect the productivity and the well-being of its residents.

Thankfully, the need for improvement in ECEC has been discussed at length amongst members of the Region. These discussions have stimulated movement toward progress and change. Local Chambers of Commerce have engaged in problem solving discussions with local businesses to produce possible resolutions that fit the needs of our communities. Some school districts within Region 35 have started the beginning stages of researching ECEC, the benefits of offering it to their community, and applying for grants. Members of the Region have openly shared their struggle and wish to be part of the solution through joint efforts, such as joining the Birth to Five Illinois Family Council or Action Council.

## Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

Birth to Five Illinois recognizes the impact of family voice within ECEC and wants to emphasize the value of family input. The formation of the Family Council in each Region of the State intended to amplify that voice; we cannot progress effectively without it. Over the last year, our Region's families asked to eliminate the current slot gap, provide transportation solutions, refocus the cost of child care based on family needs, and create flexible hours of operation for child care. A well-marketed, easily navigated, attainable intake software/program that allows families to find all services and resources within their community is highly recommended.

Regarding slot gap, some families have shared frustration in finding a solution to fit their family needs. Families are relying on family and friends to provide care for their child(ren). Families within Region 35 have found themselves making complex decisions that are affecting their ability to acquire what they need/want for their child(ren) or family. Community members have reported missing work to provide care, which eventually led to dismissal from their job.

“ A lot of people do not want to work just to pay for child care. They would rather have that time with their child and save the extra cost.

- Parent, Family Council Member

“ They aren't hearing a large outcry for the need for Early Childhood Education and Care, but that is because the need has existed for so long that families are finding ways to make it work, even if they aren't ideal.

- Community Member

Additional transportation options could create solutions for our families in Region 35. Transportation for children receiving services is desperately needed. We have had discussions with families who are unable to get their children to needed services due to the inability to transport them from centers to the service locations. There is an expressed need for children to be transported from preschool to an after-school program that would allow families to work without concern for how their child would get from one facility to the next. The addition of PFA-E programs to more communities would also alleviate some of this burden within Region 35 due to its full day offering.

The cost of child care has also created obstacles for families. Council members have echoed that the preschool cost within the Region has left families to weigh the options of progress versus being unhoused. For some families, the cost of service is so high that they must decide if giving up one of their jobs would be more financially responsible.

Regarding the need for flexible hours that reflect shift work, the Region has spoken to the difficulties in obtaining care. Leaders within the area have worked with businesses to try to achieve an option that is adaptable for families, but it is difficult to attain. Responsibilities due to regulations and liability cause hesitation. The local business leaders in Region 35 are aware of the importance of this option for our families and have expressed their interest in continuing to find a solution.



Father (Kyle Mason) and daughter (Vayda Mason) previewing the new piglets for show season.



“ When I graduated and got a job at a salon, I got my own apartment. Since I quit working at the child care center, I had to pay full price and after 5 months I couldn’t afford my apartment and child care, so I had to sell everything and move out. My son and I were actually homeless for a little bit and couch hopping with friends and family.

– Parent

Families have been clear that they feel they lack awareness of what ECEC options exist. The need for coordination, such as an intake program, that can provide real-time information to families and provide viable options and alternatives for ECEC programs and services within the Region is necessary to remove this barrier. A “one-stop shop” for families would eliminate guesswork and be beneficial to all who choose to utilize local ECEC supports.

Within Region 35, we have found areas that need additional support, as well as communities that have begun the process of expanding equitable ECEC. Two school districts in our Region have shared their intentions of further researching and adding ECEC to their schools. One district within the Region has already begun the initial stages of implementation. Also, the need for adding another preschool to a school district has been realized and the elementary principal has started the application process for the Early Childhood Block Grant. While these districts are in the early stages of discovery and research, it is encouraging to know the schools are seeing the value of ECEC as a vital part of our community. These new potential opportunities also may allow more families to seek the opportunity for enrollment if they choose.

“ The after-school program at Earlville has been amazing for my daughter and me. Especially as a working single mom, it has been a lifesaver. When first moving to Earlville in the fall of 2018, there was nothing offered in the area for before/ after school care, and it was incredibly challenging. The staff is great with the kids. They keep my daughter safe and well-entertained. She has enjoyed it so much; she talks about wanting to be a counselor herself someday.

- Parent

# Regional Strengths and Needs

## Strengths

Region 35 has identified the following as strengths to be clearly identified and celebrated:

- Grants are available to our Region to support families (e.g., CACFP - Child and Adult Care Food Program, Early Childhood Block Grant).
- Earlville preschool/child care/after school care is an example of how programs can provide wrap-around support that meets the full-day care needs of children and families.
- Organized networking opportunities.
- Numerous food programs to support families, including:
  - Henry County Food Pantry, Henry
  - Illinois Valley Food Pantry, LaSalle
  - Marseilles Food Pantry, Marseilles
  - Mendota Area Christian Food Pantry, Mendota
  - Community Basket, Ottawa
  - Ottawa School District #141, Ottawa (birth to 18 years)
- Driven community members and leaders who want to be part of improving current ECEC offerings in the Region.
- Summit Learning Academy in LaSalle is a mentor program that aligns with professional expectations available to students enrolled in ECEC courses at Illinois Valley Community College.
- Scholarships (ECACE - Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity) offered to eligible college students to encourage ECEC course enrollment.
- Illinois Valley Community College flexible scheduling and course offerings are meant to fit student needs.
- Council members from our Region have shared positive feedback regarding the experiences they have had with the current ECEC options.
- Families appreciate the child care centers at their place of work.
- Families feel programs in the Region are preparing our children well (there just are not enough slots available for all who wish to attend).

## Needs

For ECEC programs to continue to support the children and families in our communities:

- Support for staff retention.
  - Health care options/benefits are limited or not offered.
  - Long hours.
  - Pay/salary concerns.
- A local early childhood networking Collaboration that shares local resources and aids in helping programs and families with their individualized needs.
- Language translation services.
- Special Education services.
- More ECEC programs and services.
- Disbursement of material for families to learn about child development and the stages and expectations of their child(ren).

For parents, families, and caregivers who need access to ECEC services and supports:

- A Coordinated Intake system/platform that is easily accessible and includes all available resources for families.
- Support with obtaining referrals.
- More knowledge of the screening process and awareness of where it is offered.
- More available child care.
  - Some families feel obligated to enroll their child in a program regardless of quality, religious preferences, or if it makes logistical sense due to the lack of options in our Region. There have been reports that some families travel 30 minutes out of their way to get their child(ren) to child care.
- More affordable child care.
  - Cost is of huge concern; it can exhaust family incomes.
- More accessible center locations.
  - Some families expressed their wish for the programs/locations to be offered in proximity to their work or home.
    - Accessible transportation.
    - Shorter wait lists for a child care/preschool opening.
- Availability of care for shift workers, children with special needs, and families experiencing challenges due to their immigration/refugee status.

## Recommendations

Region 35 Family and Action Councils developed recommendations that align with the findings in our Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment. The Councils have provided the voices that amplify both the family and ECEC professional view of our local early childhood system.

Increased access to ECEC.

- Eliminate the slot gap by supporting school districts, current programs, and individuals to build more, or expand current, ECEC facilities across the Region.
- Increase transportation options.
  - Allow Early Interventionists to come to the child, as opposed to the child going to the specialist.
  - Add community-based transportation specifically for children from birth to age five.
- Create a sliding scale to reevaluate the cost of child care based on family needs. In the current system, with upward career mobility, families risk losing the aid to pay for child care.
- Redesign hours of operation to include second and third shift care. Businesses hosting on-site or nearby child care services would allow families a safe and accessible choice for care.

Build a Coordinated Intake software program for communities to easily access resources.

- The new program must:
  - Be well marketed via social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, BeReal) and places families often visit (e.g., children's department in stores, pediatrician offices, sports sign-up events).
  - Include resources that are needed for the entire family, such as language services, dentists, therapists, ECEC program options, ophthalmologists, and Immigrant Advocacy.
  - Be accessible, intuitive, and easy to navigate for families.
  - Be attainable: for the intake program to be effective, it needs to be sustainable in cost and access for the entire Region.

Develop a structured screening system.

- Offer cadenced, community-based events that are highly publicized through social media, school districts, public libraries, and other commonly visited spaces.
- Includes representatives for Prevention Initiative, Early Intervention, Special Education, and language services to share information and answer questions.
- Hold the event on days/times that makes sense for families.
- Offer additional options for screenings if the cadenced event is not a fit for some families.

Recruit and retain the ECEC workforce.

- Develop marketing strategies to enhance interest in the ECEC field.
- Reevaluate wages and benefits.
- Offer quality professional development for administration, center directors, and staff.
- Continue scholarship opportunities for students wanting to enroll in ECEC courses.
- Continue encouragement of colleges/universities to offer programming related to ECEC courses through scholarships/grants.

Leverage the Regional Birth to Five Illinois Action and Family Councils to support creating a local Collaboration.

- Work with Regional Office of Education #35 to join efforts across the Region.
- Outreach to existing Collaborations for advice and guidance.
- Survey to collect data on individuals interested in participating in the creation of a local Collaboration.
- Offer webinars, training, and fact gatherings to increase the knowledge of how to start a Local Community Collaboration.
- Deepen relationships with local schools and centers to gather input.
- Connect Kindergarten and ECEC staff to strengthen Kindergarten readiness and curriculum knowledge.

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 35, 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: 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 s 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 supports and services?
2. What s 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?

### Mothers Who are Incarcerated

1. What are your child care arrangements at this time? Tell me about how being incarcerated has impacted your relationship with your child? How often are you able to communicate with them?
2. What Early Childhood services does your family use/has your family used? Are those transferrable to whoever is caring for your child currently?
3. Do you feel like your child(ren) receive quality/good care in those programs? Why or why not?
4. What does quality/good care for your child look like to you?
5. Do you know of other Early Childhood supports or services in your community?
  - a. How did you find out about these supports or services? Were you told you should use those services?
  - b. What was that process like? Were you placed on a waitlist? How long did it take to receive services once placed on a waitlist?
  - c. Was the process explained to you? If not, how did you find information about the process?
6. What have been the biggest supports and barriers for you and your family in:
  - a. Locating early childhood services?
  - b. Locating other services needed for your family?
  - c. Understanding early childhood development and care?
  - d. Connecting with local supports?

### Grandparents as Caregivers

1. Tell me about your family and the children currently in your care.
2. There are many Early Childhood services (Head Start, Early Intervention, Licensed/Exempt Child Care Centers, Pediatricians, etc.) What Early Childhood services does your family use/has your family used?
3. What does quality/good care look like to you?
4. What is the travel time like for you to reach those services?
5. Have you been put on waiting lists for those services? What was that experience like?
  - a. What challenges did your family face due to being placed on a waiting list?
6. Have you missed appointments or been unable to use a service due to travel time or because transportation isn't available?
7. Do the child care services you're using now meet your family's needs?
8. What, if anything, has been particularly helpful in making Early Childhood Education and Care work for your family?
9. What barriers or challenges has your family had with using Early Childhood services in your community?
10. Have any of the children in your care been referred to services? What was that process like?
11. What services don't currently exist in your community that you think would be helpful to families, in general?



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