



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

Region 51

(Sangamon & Menard Counties)





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Region 51 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.

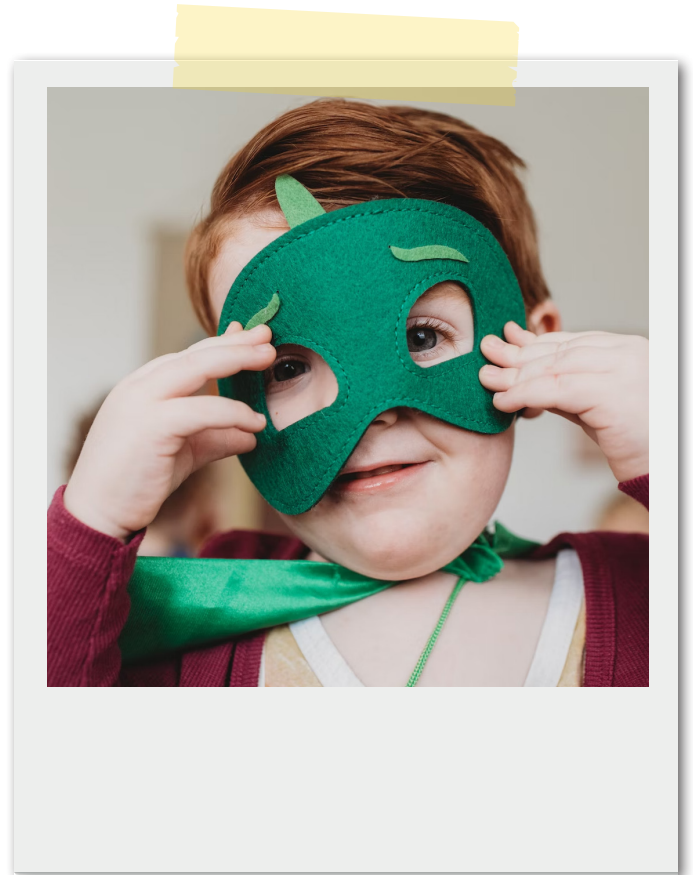
The experiences and knowledge families, caregivers, and early childhood professionals gain while navigating the complexities of the State's ECEC system is valuable, and understanding their lived experience in the local context is vital for decision-makers to ensure communities have access to the programs, 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 51 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

Birth to Five Illinois: Region 51 was able to capture knowledge, voices, and recommendations from those who sit on the Region's Action and Family Councils, those who participated in Interviews and Focus Groups, and those who contributed as Community Partners. Region 51 heard each individual, and every voice in Sangamon and Menard Counties echoed one another when it came to the Local and State Recommendations.

Each person identified how ECEC programming is expensive to both the parents/caregivers and owners/directors to operate their programs. More importantly, the quality of educational experiences during these very early years is crucial to child development and growth for the 8,870 children zero to age five who are without care at this time. Among other strategies, the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) reimbursement rates need to be increased to meet the true costs of high-quality care. Community members also shared how residents of rural areas in Region 51 have far less access than urban communities to high-quality ECEC providers. Given the low population density of rural communities, it is challenging for center-based providers



to serve every community; therefore, home-based providers and family/friend/neighbor care are important and valued parts of the rural ECEC supply.

Lastly, Council Members stated many efforts have existed in Sangamon County to support knowledge-sharing and funding, yet programs and investments are often uncoordinated with only regional concerns or a specific issue area in mind. One Action Council Member/Child Care Director states, “Over 14,000 children ages zero - five reside in Sangamon and Menard Counties yet only two of every five children are able to enroll in a licensed child care center or licensed child care home. Working families are desperate to find care and place their children on every waiting list available in hopes of being in the lucky 40%. Facilities are full or at maximum capacity for the number of staff employed. How can we make child care accessible to every family that needs it?” This statement reiterates the importance of investing in ECEC programs and services.

Additionally, Sangamon County has an Early Childhood Collaboration and 2.11 phone line to help with knowledge sharing and centralized intact. However, there is a lack of awareness about these two resources. Below are the Region 51’s State and Local Recommendations listed in order voted by the Action and Family Councils.

Region 51 Needs

Ongoing discussions during Council meetings, Focus Groups, Interviews, and general conversations about Region 51 brought up many ideas from Community Members to attempt to meet the needs of all the Regions’ families and caregivers and the 14,404 children ages zero to five. After identifying the most common and pressing ECEC needs, Regional Councils made recommendations for how best to meet them.

1. Educate the community on local resources and how to make referrals.
2. Educate pediatricians on how to make referrals.
3. Increase home visiting services to pregnant parents before and after the child is born.
4. Increase ECEC capacity and workforce in Menard and Sangamon Counties.
5. Increase the number of multilingual ECEC providers for English Language Learners.

Region 51 Recommendations

1. Increase capacity in ECEC programs caring for children from birth through age five by using workforce recruiters in the high schools and mentors in ECEC programs to keep the ECEC staff connected to scholarships and grant opportunities.
2. Invest in more home visiting programs to help pregnant persons, and develop resources to pass out to hospitals, doctors’ offices, and ECEC programs to recruit more Home Visiting advocates.
3. Launch a 211 campaign through United Way that includes social media, community outreach, and enrollment in the 211 system.
4. Increase the capacity of Head Start, Preschool for All, and Preschool for All Expansion programs.
5. Build a multilingual ECEC program offering before and after-school care.

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

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REGION 51 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.



14,404

Children Under
the Age of 6
in Region 51



5,369

Children 0-5
at 200% Federal
Poverty Level



2,326

Children 0-5
Without Publicly
Funded ECEC Slots

8,870

Number of children ages 0-5 without Early Childhood Education and Care slots in licensed and license-exempt child care centers and homes.

“Working families are desperate to find care and place their children on every waiting list available in hopes of being in the lucky 40%. Facilities are full or at maximum capacity for the number of staff employed. How can we make child care accessible to every family that needs it?”
- Child Care Director

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 51 NEEDS

1. Understanding of what programs/services are available and how to be referred to them
2. More home visiting services to pregnant parents before and after the child is born
4. Increased ECEC capacity and more ECEC professionals

REGION 51 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increase capacity in ECEC programs via workforce recruiters in high schools and ECEC programs to keep the ECEC staff connected to scholarships and grant opportunities
2. Invest in home visiting programs to help pregnant persons and develop resources to pass out to hospitals, doctors' offices & ECEC programs to recruit more home visiting advocates
3. Launch a 211 campaign through United Way with a social media, community outreach, and enrollment in the 211 system
4. Coordinate with the healthcare sector to learn how to implement a Community Navigators program.



“The amount of children missing out on quality early childhood education is unbelievable. Finding an opening is so hard that parents can't even begin to worry about the "quality" of the care, it is just about finding a spot for our kids.”
- Family Council Member

Overview & Acknowledgements

Introduction

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

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

This report will be used in a variety of ways.

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

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

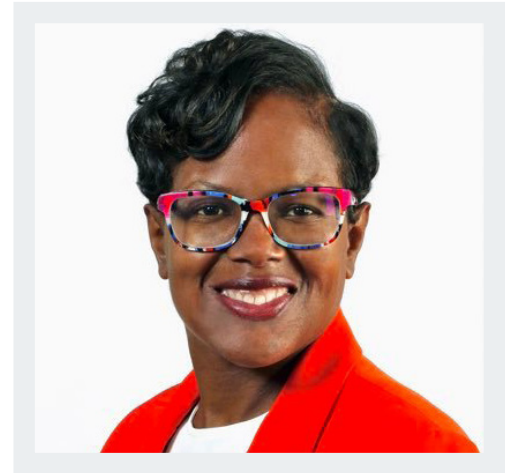
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand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

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



Letter from State Leadership

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Letter from Regional Leadership

We want to take the opportunity to spotlight a few partners, stakeholders, and groups for their contribution to the work that Birth to Five Illinois: Region 51 did in supporting the development and completion of our Regional Needs Assessment. We know we cannot individually thank every person who told their story or shared their experiences with us, but please know we are thankful for all of you.

Region 51 wants to thank all parents and caregivers. Thank you for giving us your voices and time. This will ensure we make Region 51 the best place for all children to grow, play, and learn. Words cannot express how grateful we are for each and every one of your impactful stories

We are grateful for Region 51's Action Council and Family Council members who dedicated their time and offered critical input on the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) needs in our communities. The Council members' perspectives greatly impacted the work of this Regional Needs Assessment by bringing forth qualitative pieces of data, which was done by providing a better understanding of the strengths, needs, and challenges of the Region. Each of the Family Council members' voices were vital to the Regional Needs Assessment as they shared the needs of their families and ideas to improve programs and services in our Region. Council members were also advocates for family needs with local and state officials to ensure all our children in Region 51 have access to quality and inclusive ECEC. Thank you all again for volunteering your time and sharing your passion and expertise to help our children thrive in Region 51.

Region 51 is also thankful for our community partners whose contributions and commitment to addressing equity in ECEC have made this work possible. We would like to thank our healthcare system, housing industry, library workers, parents, caregivers, foster parents, child welfare system, mental health system, nonprofit sectors, higher education, immigrant/refugee services, school districts, workforce, and faith communities. It takes a village to care for our community and Region 51 has come together to ensure all voices are at the table to serve together as one.

We would also like to thank our elected officials. Thank you for being our advocates and champions and for helping us spread the importance of ECEC for our children and families in Region 51.

An even bigger thank you deserves to go out to all our ECEC providers, not just in Region 51, but across the State of Illinois. Thank you for your commitment to caring for, prioritizing, and nurturing children in an enriching environment and giving parents and families the peace of mind they need. Your work does not go unnoticed.

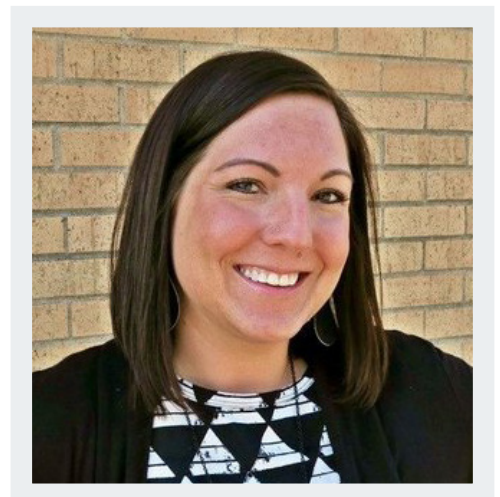
Finally, I want to thank Region 51's Team! Thank you for taking a chance on something new and working tirelessly to bring it to life to better the ECEC system in Sangamon and Menard Counties. Along with the Team within our Region, we thank the Birth to Five Illinois' State Team! Thank you for building the groundwork for us and for the continued support you all provided the entire way.

Thank you,

Ashley Earles (she/her)

Regional Council Manager: Region 51

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.

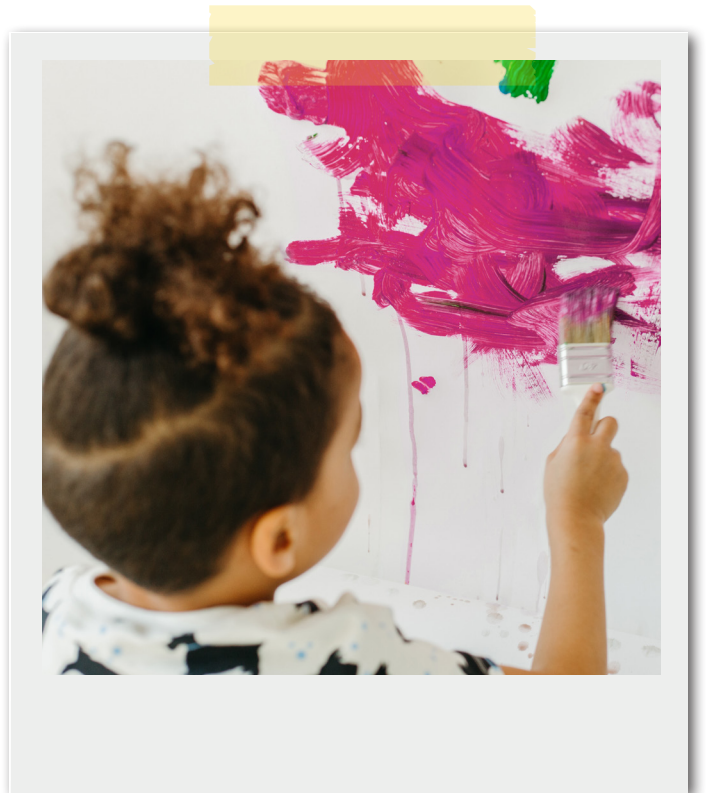
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early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

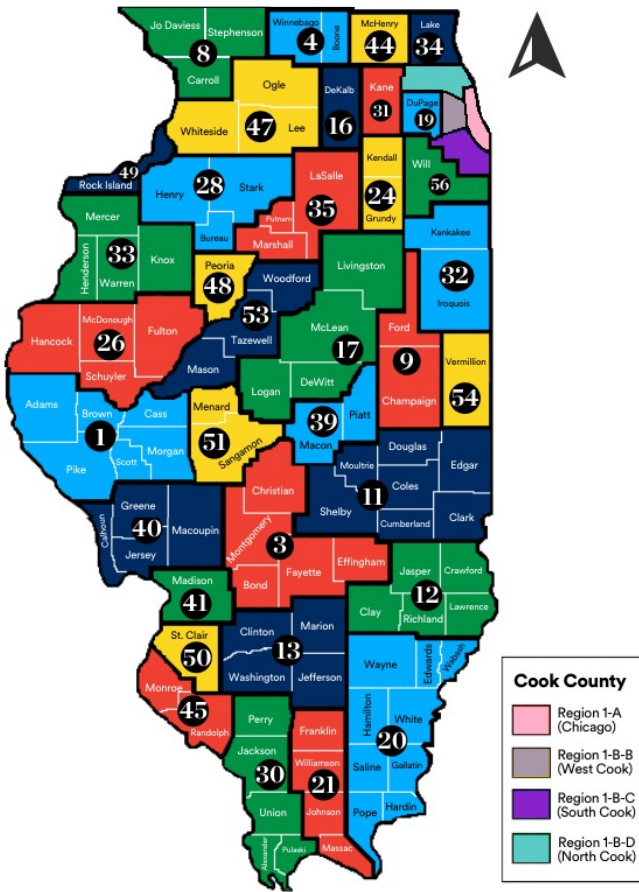


Timeline

- **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.

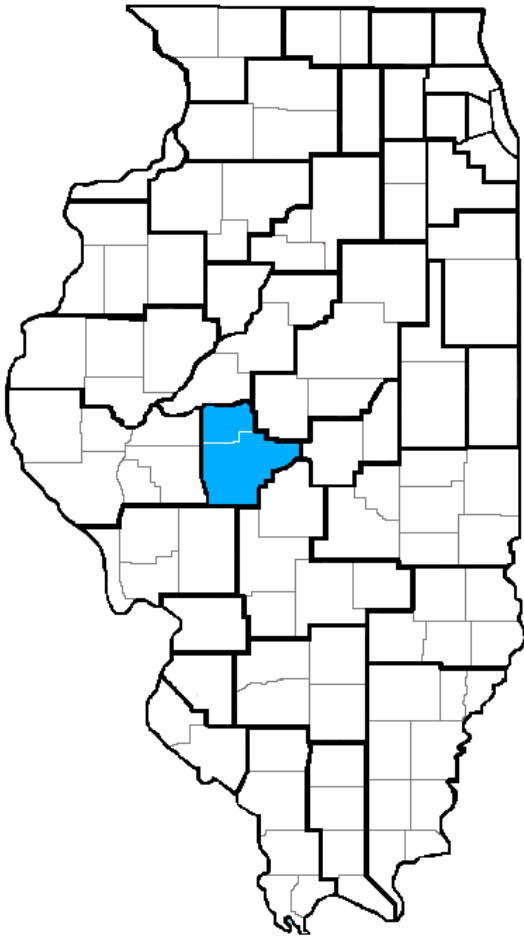
Regional Needs Assessment Methodology

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 51

Regional Community Landscape



Regional Boundaries

Region 51 is in central Illinois and encompasses Sangamon and Menard Counties, with Sangamon being the center of the State, and Menard located northwest of Springfield. According to 2021 Census data, Sangamon County has a population of 194,734. The largest city in Sangamon County is Springfield, the State Capital. Most of the workforce found in Sangamon County is in Springfield. The leading employers are the State, Memorial Medical Center, and HSHS St. John’s Hospital. Other popular employers in the Springfield area are SIU Medicine, Springfield Clinic, Bunn-O-Matic Corporation, Blue Cross Blue Shield Insurance Company, and the Illinois Army and Air National Guard. The homeownership rate in 2021 was 70%, the median property value was \$147,600, and the average commute time to work was 19.7 minutes.

Sangamon County has 43 public schools, 11 school districts, and 16 private schools. There are also colleges, including the University of Illinois at Springfield, and Lincoln Land Community College, as well as job-force-ready schools such as Midwest Technical Institute-Springfield, Southern Illinois University Medicine (SIU), St. John’s College of Nursing, and Capitol Area School of Practical Nursing.

Menard County has a population of 12,164. The largest city in Menard County is Petersburg. Most businesses found in the Menard County area are locally owned restaurants

and boutiques. The rural, open terrain of Menard County gives abundant space for camping, biking and hiking trails, boating on the Sangamon River, and acres of green space to enjoy the outdoor landscape. The homeownership rate in 2021 was 79%, the median property value was \$154,300, and the average commute time to work was 26.2 minutes.

Menard County has three public school districts. The Greenview Public School District serves children from Kindergarten to high school. The school district of PORTA is a consolidated school that makes up the rural towns of Petersburg, Oakford, Rock Creek, Tallula, and Atterberry, but also consolidates with Greenview for the pre-K program. The rural towns of Athens and Cantrall also consolidate to make up their school district, with Cantrall housing pre-K and elementary grades, while Athens houses junior high and high school.

Region 51 has strong agricultural communities with rich soil to grow corn, wheat, and soybeans. The abundant land is also used for raising livestock. Both counties are home to many family-owned farms and many farm workers that make tending the fields, caring for, and selling livestock their lifelong, generational livelihood. Region 51 is home to part of the nation’s historic tourist locations, as they are the childhood home and early workplace of our 16th President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln. Due to the well-preserved history surrounding Abraham Lincoln and his legacy, the most popular tourist attractions are the Abraham Lincoln Memorial Library, Lincoln’s Home, Lincoln’s Tomb, and New Salem State Park.



Birth to Five Illinois: Region 51's Ribbon Cutting.

Land Acknowledgement¹

Region 51 acknowledges that Sangamon and Menard Counties are the traditional homelands of Indigenous Peoples, specifically the Oθaakiwaki·hina·ki (Sauk), Meškwahki·aša·hina (Fox), Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo), Kaskaskia, Myaamia (Miami), and Peoria Tribes. 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 Region.

Regional Demographics

The communities that make up Region 51 differ in many ways; some are larger cities with abundant resources and services, while some are small, rural towns that have little to offer by means of the job market or child care options. Region 51 serves a large population of children, specifically between the ages of birth and five years old. Data will be shown throughout this report that highlights the importance of the areas of concern. It is the belief and the hope that out of these concerns, the community voices will amplify the recommendations that will allow Region 51 to be a better place for children to play, learn, and grow. Region 51 wants all children and families to be heard, educated, and given the opportunity to thrive.

Many community members gave praise to the parks, saying that they are a huge draw to the community as a place for families to get outside with their children and provide a common place for people to gather. However, it was also shared that there is such an increase in violence throughout the bigger communities, especially over the past two to five years, that it makes even the parks unsafe places to go with children. This point led to conversations around mental health, safety, and other important topics of concern for their children and families, which will be highlighted throughout this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment.

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

Population

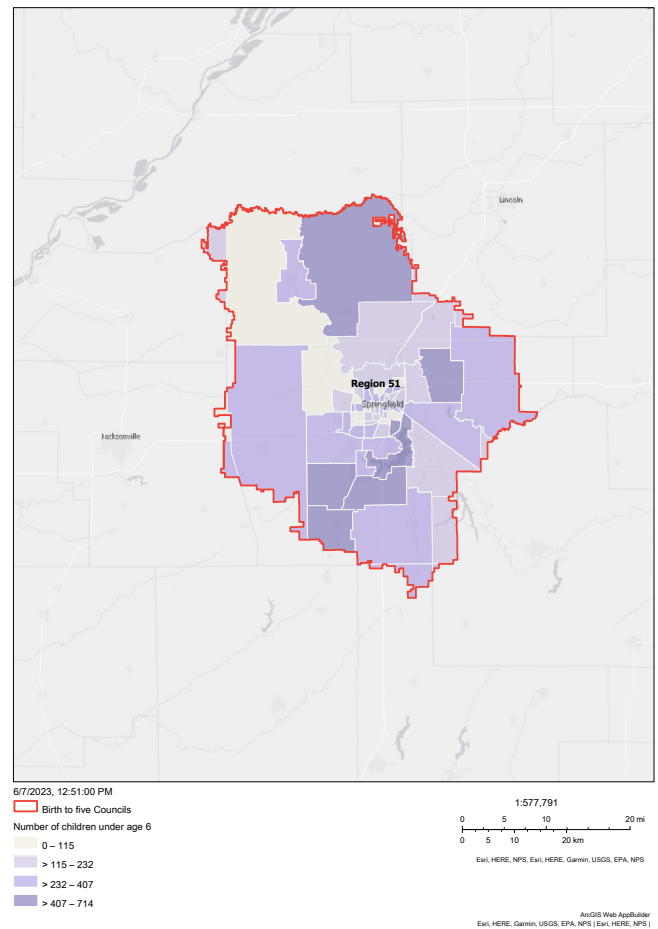
Region 51’s combined population of children in the age range from birth to six years old is 14,404, according to the 2020 Census data. To break this population down further, there are 7,085 children ages birth to two, and 7,319 children between three and five years old (Figure 1). The community feedback reflects a great need for early childhood resources for Region 51, especially in smaller towns where there are few or no existing options.

Race/Ethnicity

Region 51’s majority population of children, from birth to five years old, are white and these children are located throughout the entire Region. The population of Black children that are between the ages of birth and five years old, make up 17% (2,399 children) and are concentrated in the more populated communities of Region 51, such as the Springfield area. The breakdown of children under the age of six by race and ethnicity can be seen in Figure 2.

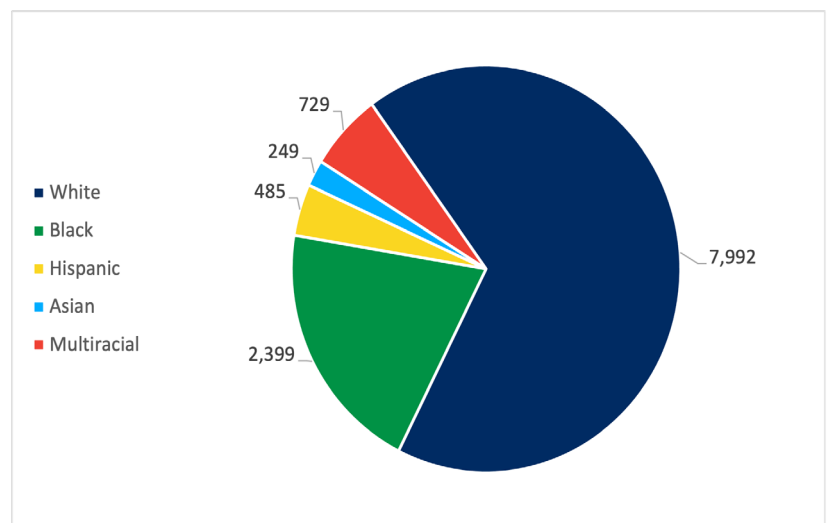
The 2020 population data from the Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM) reported that Region 51 had 485 Hispanic or Latine children, birth to five years old, living in the Region. The Hispanic or Latine population of children was also reported to be scattered throughout the Region. However, after more conversations with local nonprofit organizations that represent the Hispanic or Latine community, it was reported that these children are centrally located in Springfield and that this area will continue to see growth in its Hispanic and Latine population. They also report that they are serving families and children from Guatemala, Venezuela, and Mexico City who do not all speak the same language, which creates more barriers surrounding language and ease of translation. Community partners shared that families from Guatemala speak Tz’utujil, K’iche’, Q’eqchi’, Chuj, and Spanish. Families also speak French (Congo and West Africa), German, Polish, Russian, and Chinese.

Figure 1: Location of Children Under Age 6



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Figure 2: Children Under Age 6 by Race, Ethnicity



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Children and Families in Priority Populations

Priority populations are defined by the Illinois Early Learning Council as underserved and underrepresented populations.² The purpose of the priority populations list is to drive resources and attention toward improving access to high-quality, responsive services for children and families with limited to no access to economic or material resources. While the priority populations list addresses the access issue, Birth to Five Illinois strives to focus the attention of policymakers and early childhood stakeholders on identifying ways to engage these impacted communities to remove the systemic barriers causing the access issue within each Region. There were three priority populations identified in Region 51: children in families experiencing poverty or deep poverty; children in immigrant, migrant, and refugee families; children in families experiencing homelessness; and children/families involved with the child welfare system.

Children in Families Experiencing Poverty or Deep Poverty

One important discussion amongst Action and Family Council members was that families in the Region would not be able to afford child care or their essential needs living under 100% or 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) is a measure of income issued each year by the Department of Health and Human Services. Income thresholds vary by family size and composition. If a family's annual income is at or below 100% FPL, then that family and everyone in it is considered to be living at or below the poverty line (see Figure 3 for example). These guidelines illustrate a set minimum amount of income that an individual or family needs for food, clothing, transportation, shelter, and other necessities, and are often used to determine whether an individual or family qualifies for certain benefits and programs.

The areas of the Region that have the least access to economic resources are located on the eastern side of Springfield, but also several larger areas in Region 51 have many children under age six living in households that are at or below the poverty line, such as the Riverton-Spaulding area, and the east side of Pleasant Plains area. Households who are under 100% of the FPL are concentrated in and around the Springfield area.

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

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

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

For children between the ages of birth to five who are living at or below 100% FPL, 1,691 are from birth to age two, and 1,776 are three to five years old. Twenty-four percent of children ages birth to five years old in Region 51 are living at or below 100% FPL.

Children in Immigrant, Migrant, & Refugee Families

All of the resources that serve Region 51's migrant, immigrant, and refugee families are in the Springfield area of Sangamon County. This mirrors the IECAM data that shows that the Hispanic/Latine population is also found in this area, which makes these resources more accessible to non-English speaking community members.

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

One program is the Hispanic Women of Springfield which celebrates Hispanic Heritage through community outreach and cultural experiences. Another program is Western Illinois Dreamers which empowers immigrant communities by educating individuals about their rights and connects them to free or low-cost services, including immigration legal services. Western Illinois Dreamers has served 146 families from July to December 2022, serving eight Kindergarteners, seven three to five-year-olds, and eight birth to three-year-olds (a total of 23 children). The last known program is the Illinois Migrant Council which provides education, housing, and health services for migrant seasonal farm workers and their families. Illinois Migrant reports of those they serve, over 55% need Spanish translation services. They also report that 40% of the population is approximately located in the Sangamon County area, while 60% is in the Cass County area (Birth to Five Illinois: Region 1).

These organizations expressed common needs of this community, including an Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) program with multilingual teachers, better means of transportation, more spots for Head Start and other ECEC programs, before and after School care, and an investment in the hospitals so that community health workers can be embedded in the hospital to support pregnant people with pre- and postnatal care.

The Hispanic/Latine population is not the only non-English speaking population in our area, as there are many languages considered to be the first language in some of the school districts in Sangamon County. It was also voiced that cultural training for those who work with the public, especially teachers, school staff, and healthcare workers should be available so that individuals are more understood and respected.

“ Just because we are all Spanish-speaking in this room, we are not all the same.
- Community Member (Sangamon County) ”

“ When I worked in the Chatham School District, just in my school, I had forty-two languages and cultures.
- Superintendent (Sangamon County) ”

Children in Families Experiencing Homelessness & Unstable Housing

A topic of concern discussed in each Council meeting, interview, and focus group was housing. Both Sangamon and Menard Counties are experiencing an influx of unhoused people and neighbors experiencing homelessness, which is causing concerns about basic needs being met for adults and children. Some barriers to housing are long wait times, lack of affordable housing, landlord restrictions related to criminal backgrounds, and barriers to a livable income and employment.

“ Sangamon County needs more Emergency Shelters to meet the needs of those experiencing homelessness and then we need double the amount of permanent, affordable housing opportunities for those transitioning.
- MERCY Communities ”

“ There is no place for couples to go together or families to stay together.
- Community Member (Sangamon County) ”

Region 51 conducted a focus group with MERCY Communities, one of the Region’s programs offering services to women and children experiencing homelessness. They partner with the Heartland Continuum of Care, (HCoC), which serves as the primary Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) resource designated to develop, coordinate, and implement long-range plans meeting the needs of unhoused people in the Springfield area. Heartland HOUSED serves as the backbone organization tasked with developing strategy, supporting implementation activities, and facilitating the collaborative work of the Heartland Continuum of Care with the purpose of effectively addressing homelessness in Springfield and Sangamon County. MERCY Communities and HCoC provided Region 51 with real-time data from July 1, 2022, to April 5, 2023 (Figure 4). This data was for Springfield and Sangamon County on those experiencing homelessness. Emergency shelters are temporary, but immediate places to stay for anyone who is experiencing or may become homeless.

Figure 4: Number of Children Staying in Emergency Shelter, Transitional Housing

Age	Number in Emergency Shelter	Number in Transitional Housing
Birth to One Year Old	7	10
One Year Old	1	9
Two Years Old	5	13
Three Years Old	4	8
Four Years Old	3	9
Five Years Old	6	8
Six Years Old	3	4
Seven to Sixteen Years Old	14	23
Total	43	84

Source: MERCY Communities
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Transitional housing is set up to transition residents into permanent, affordable housing. It is not in an emergency homeless shelter, but usually consists of a room or apartment in a residence with support services. Rental assistance with optional supportive services for families with no time limit to achieve housing stability is a goal HCoC has in its strategic plan to end homelessness for 2028.

While there are resources available to the unhoused population in Sangamon County (such as Compass for Kids, Mini O’Beirne Crisis Nursery, MERCY Communities, Safe Families, Helping Hands, Abundant Faith, and Contact Ministries), there are few resources available for Menard County. It is important that resources are highly advertised, because so many people may not even know that they are available. Multiple focus groups and interview responses noted the need for all nonprofits and parents/caregivers to connect with each other so Region 51 can thrive as a community.

The lack of mental health care available in Region 51 is an important consideration related to supporting families experiencing homelessness, as well as families in general. A focus group participant shared, “Springfield has plenty of hospitals and resources, yet mental health is still a crisis here.” Many community members stated that it is important for the children’s mental health to improve, for it would then improve the well-being of the entire family.

“How can a child learn if their basic needs like food, shelter, warmth, are not even being met? They can’t.”
 - Community Member (Sangamon County)

Increased violence and drug use in the Region has become a major cause of concern for community members. Most community members expressed concern around the lack of mental health services for birth to five children for Sangamon and Menard Counties, which makes more access to mental and behavioral health a top recommendation for Region 51. To address these concerns, Region 51 would need to have more social workers, counselors, and mental health consultants available to families and children.

Children/Families Involved with the Child Welfare System

The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) is responsible for child protective services. As Region 51 engaged with the community, it was clear the area was not able to provide emergency placement for foster parents needing ECEC programs for children from birth to age five, Enrolling foster children in Early Intervention and bringing them to doctor appointments also posed challenges. Without the supporting documentation needed, foster families are struggling to provide children in their care with services and supports to help them thrive.

Region 51 conducted a focus group with Social Workers with Camelot, a local foster care program working on reunification with the child and their family or guardianship and adoption. Their comprehensive service line includes case management, foster parent support and training, in-home counseling, therapeutic mentoring, and access to telepsychiatry to help create healthy environments of care. The social workers voiced there are not enough agencies, social workers, therapists, or foster parents to service the number of children in care in Region 51. They would love to see a school social worker at each school to serve as the go-between for the child and the private and state child welfare agencies.

“Mental health is impacting the trauma that children are exposed to. Trauma-informed care is imperative in any early childhood setting.

- Community Member
(Sangamon County)

”

“A rise in violence will lead to a rise in trauma, which causes stress, parents are scared... and this toxic stress can have lasting effects on behavior.

- Community Member

”

“We had to say no to children because of lack of care. We had to say no to emergency and permanent placings. This is why [it is important to have] good relationships with Mini O'Brien Crisis Nursery and Lincoln Land Development Child Care Center.

- Focus Group Participant (Sangamon County)

”

Local Community Collaborations

Across Illinois, organizations, agencies, and individuals that care about young children have come together to form Local Early Childhood Collaborations. From urban neighborhoods to rural counties, Early Childhood Collaborations come in all shapes and sizes. They vary not only in their geography, but also in their scope of work, who is a part of Collaboration, and capacity. Despite these differences, one common thread ties them all together: they all understand the importance of regularly convening a diverse group of stakeholders to improve outcomes for children and families. Early Childhood Collaborations have the unique role and opportunity to reimagine the early childhood system, asking questions like, “How can we better align services in our community?” and “Where are the inequities in our community?” Questions like these lead to imaginative solutions and innovative partnerships at the local level.



Dave Newton (left), Ashley Earles (center),
Amanda DeFord (center), and Jay Boulanger (right).

In Region 51, there are two Early Childhood Collaborations in place. They are Sangamon HEART and the Continuum of Learning. At the time of publication of this report, both Collaborations are primarily made up of and focused on the resources that are in Sangamon County. Menard County community members may benefit from these Collaborations because sometimes providers’ service areas have multiple counties that includes Menard County. Both Collaborations focus on the importance of Early Education and Care (ECEC) for Region 51 and made recommendations throughout the years to better the ECEC systems for families and children in a number of different areas based on the needs of the community.

Sangamon HEART is embedded in the Southern Illinois University (SIU) Medicine Department of Pediatrics in Sangamon County and utilizes the Integrated Referral and Intake System, known as IRIS, to allow agencies to make direct referrals for programs and services. The vision of Sangamon HEART is to have ongoing engagement with local service providers at all stages of a child’s early years from prenatal to age three. This could include, but is not limited to, finding appropriate home visiting care, helping with enrollment to preschool, and aiding with early intervention processes. By utilizing the IRIS database, HEART aims to create a resource guide of all local agencies to have a common place where families can not only be referred for a needed service but to have the follow-through that ensures needs are met and services are received.

Some of the stakeholders that make up Sangamon HEART (at this time) are certain departments of Sangamon County Public Health, five home visiting programs, two hospice organizations, the Regional Office of Education (ROE), HSHS St. John’s Hospital, Springfield Public School District, the local Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) Agency, the Springfield Head Start programs, and a few nonprofit organizations that provide shelter and resources for women, children, and families that are unhoused or in need of refuge.

The Continuum of Learning is a project that focuses on education across a child’s lifespan (cradle to career) to be sure that every resident of Sangamon County is ready to learn, work, and succeed. One of the initiatives that emerged in August 2015 was the Sangamon Success Report, which provided recommendations for improving outcomes for children with limited access to economic resources in Sangamon County. The Success Report gave a set of 25 recommendations for improving education outcomes for youth in Sangamon County through evidence-based programs. With this shift toward using research evidence to inform the Continuum of Learning’s decision-making, the Sangamon Success report became the first road map for Innovate Springfield’s Social Innovation Program. In 2017, Innovate Springfield, Springfield Public Schools District 186, and Lincoln Land Community College’s Workforce Development joined the Continuum’s Leadership Council. At the same time, the Continuum launched its Community Partners Network, which was a group of service providers and community members who served as a sounding board and met quarterly to provide feedback on the Continuum’s strategic direction. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 barriers, the Continuum of Learning has taken a pause to reflect on the different needs of the community since the pandemic to determine the next steps for the Collaboration to continue to support the community.

Menard County community members would like to build a Local Community Collaboration. Some stated that it would take funding and a team of diverse stakeholders throughout the County.

“ Our little towns would greatly benefit from an Early Childhood Collaboration, but it would take time, money, people, lots of resources, and passion. We would need someone or a nonprofit to start this Collaboration for us to light the way for our community. Think of the lives this could change and opportunities it could bring!

- Community Member (Menard County)

”

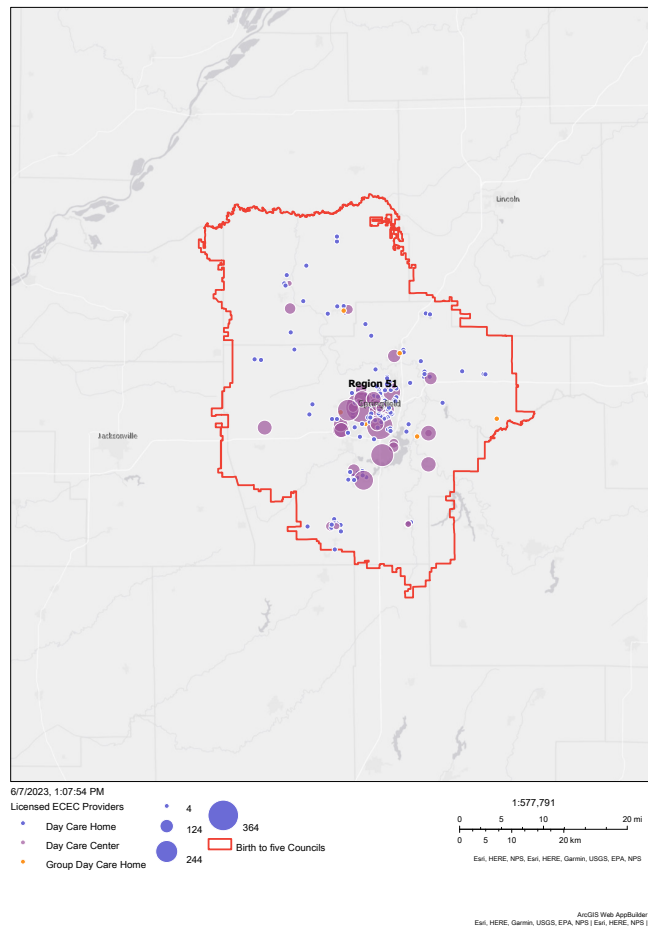
Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

Child Care & Family Child Care

Region 51 has 38 licensed child care centers, 138 licensed family child care homes, and 15 licensed exempt child care centers. These programs not only provide a safe environment for children to be in while their parents/caregivers are working, but a select few also provide high quality early learning opportunities.

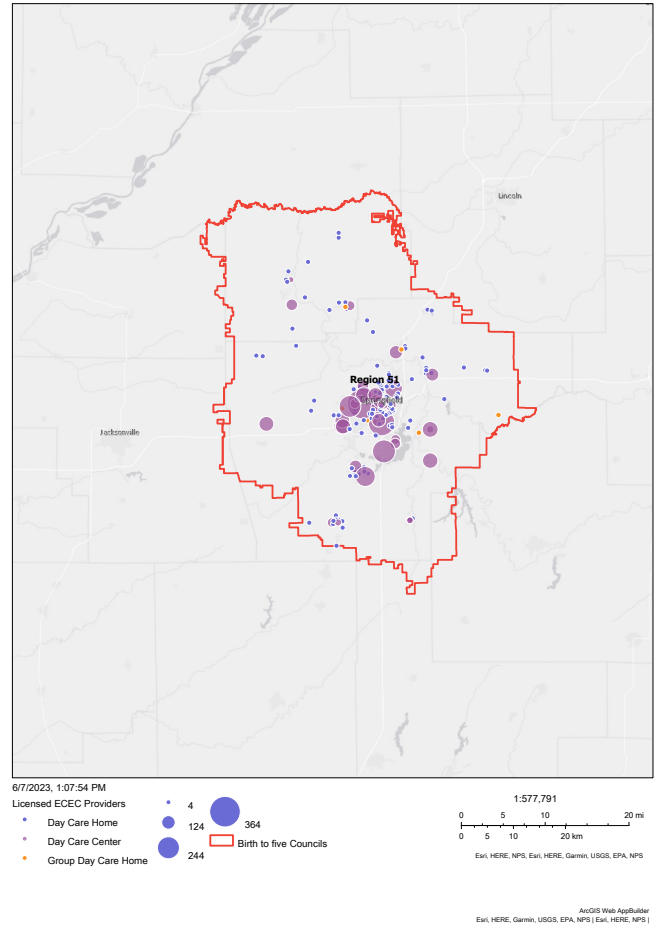
Figures 5 and 6 show the population of children living in Region 51 and inform us where ECEC locations are needed. There was a lot of feedback from community voices commenting on how Springfield is heavily concentrated with resources for care, but it still does not have enough child care options, while smaller towns have few to no options.

Figure 6: Location of Publicly Funded Programs



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Figure 5: Location of Licensed Child Care Providers



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

ExceleRate Illinois is the State's quality rating program for ECEC providers. Providers can achieve a rating of Gold, Silver, or Bronze. Of the licensed child care centers in Region 51, 17 child care centers (six Gold, ten Silver, and one Bronze) and 10 family child care homes (one Gold, birth Silver, and nine Bronze) have achieved an ExceleRate Illinois rating, documenting their efforts to go above and beyond what is required by DCFS licensing to meet the developmental and educational needs of young children.

Region 51 received positive feedback from community members in interviews, Council meetings, and focus groups regarding the strengths of child care. Strengths include having child care close to where they live, feeling their children are safe in the programs where they are enrolled, and feeling the providers care about the well-being of their children. Barriers identified include lack of available infant and toddler care, cost of care because not all families qualify for the Child Care Assistance Program (some merely by dollars), programs having various hours for parents and caregivers who work overnight shifts, and pickup and drop-off times not being conducive for all families. When children are sick, providers are not able to care for them, which in turn oftentimes requires families to take time off work without pay and families still must pay the provider for that day of care.

License-exempt centers are legally exempt from needing a child care license and serve children three years and older. They can be operated by public or private elementary or secondary schools, intuitions of higher education, or other accredited schools registered with the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), and on federal government premises if the program temporarily cares for children and the parents/caregivers are on the premises (such as the YMCA). Other examples are programs that care for a child for more than 10 hours per week and are operated by a church or social service agency, and programs offering short-term or special activities and operated by civic, charitable, or governmental organizations. There are 11 license-exempt centers in Region 51.

License-exempt family child care providers can care for up to three children or children from one family without being licensed. This can be a practical option for families in Region 51, especially those providers who are open during non-traditional hours and/or provide service in rural communities where there can be limited care options. Currently, there are 400 families using this care in Sangamon and Menard Counties.

Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)

The Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) is a program available to help families pay the cost of child care. Eligibility is

based on income, the parents/guardians being employed and/or going to an eligible educational activity, having children younger than 13 needing care, or children with documented disabilities or delays may be eligible up to the age of 19. The income eligibility limit includes families with incomes below the 200% FPL which is \$13,590 for an individual and \$27,750 for a family of four.

“
If my child is sick, or my provider closes, I have to make the decision between keeping my job or keeping care for my child. But I need both to survive.
- Community Member
(Sangamon County)
”



Press Conference with Senator Cristina Pacione-Zayas.

In 2020, 867 children birth to age two in the Region received CCAP. However, 2,614 birth to two-year-olds were eligible to receive CCAP. This means 1,747 children were eligible at 200% of the Federal Poverty Level but did not apply for CCAP and/or did not enroll in an ECEC program. There were 871 three to five-year-olds receiving CCAP in 2020, according to IECAM. However, there were 2,755 three to five-year-olds who were eligible, which means 1,884 children in this age range were eligible but did not apply for CCAP and/or did not enroll in an ECEC program.

From those who voiced their concerns, many families who may be eligible for CCAP do not participate in the program due to barriers such as a lack of awareness of how the program works and a lengthy, difficult application process for those English and Spanish-speaking.

“

I am scared to seek services with being new to this area. Not only do I not speak the language, but I have poor writing skills and filling out applications scares me. Plus, I do not know where to even begin for myself and my daughter to get help.

- Focus Group Participant (Sangamon County)

”

Preschool for All/Preschool for All Expansion and Head Start

The Illinois Preschool for All Program (PFA) is funded by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). The program focuses on providing high-quality educational programs for children ages three to four (and five-year-olds who are not eligible for Kindergarten) who live in households with limited access to financial resources and those who are determined to face barriers for academic success. There are 12 PFA programs and two Preschool for All Expansion (PFAE) programs (in Sangamon County) in Region 51. There are PFAs in every county and in all 14 school districts. Parents indicated a few strengths for the PFA programs, including access to special education services and that there is low or no cost to them. PFAE strengths identified include a schedule that meets the families' work hours and that they could see improvements in their child's social emotional, and educational skills. Challenges include that the PFA programs are half-day programs, difficulty transporting their child to an additional half-day ECEC program, lack of awareness of the enrollment or screening process, and not enough enrollment spots.

“

I even saw a difference in my child's education compared to my other child's education who I was unfortunately not able to enroll when they were three because I was not aware of the Preschool For All program at the time.

- Mother & Focus Group Participant

”

Head Start receives federal funding through U.S. Health and Human Services and serves children ages three to five. Eligibility is based primarily on income. Programs may enroll some children from families whose incomes are higher than 100% FPL if they meet other eligibility requirements. There are four Head Start programs in Region 51. Participation in both PFA and Head Start are free to eligible families. Strengths identified by parents and community members are that it is free of

cost and provides free family events. Challenges included a lack of openings in Region 51 due to a lack of staffing in Sangamon County and that one of the Head Start buildings has building issues which is causing them not to be able to open classrooms.

Prevention Initiative, Early Head Start, & Sangamon County Healthy Families Home Visiting (Birth to Three Programs)

The ECEC programs serving birth to three children are publicly funded by the state and federal governments and are tremendously limited in Region 51. There are three types of publicly funded programs for children in this age group: ISBE's Prevention Initiative (PI), federally funded Early Head Start, and the IDHS funded Healthy Families Home Visiting program. Participation in all three of these publicly funded programs is free to those who qualify.

PI programs provide comprehensive child development and family support services for expecting parents and families with children prenatally to age three who may face barriers for academic achievement. Region 51 has three programs, and they are all located in New Berlin, Riverton, and Springfield, all in Sangamon County.

Early Head Start, funded by U.S. Health and Human Services, provides similar services to that of Head Start, but serves expectant persons and their children aged birth to three. Eligibility is the same as Head Start and is based on income. However, other criteria such as experiencing homelessness and foster care can be considered for enrollment. Region 51 has two programs, one in Sangamon County and one in Menard County. Sangamon Healthy Families Home Visiting offers child wellness, parent/caregiver support, community resources, and family relationships in both Sangamon and Menard Counties. It is a voluntary parent education and support program offering home visiting to eligible first-time and second-time caregivers.

Parents using these services express a high level of satisfaction. The biggest challenge is that services are not all available to most families. There is a need for more Birth to Three services in all of Region 51. Council members and community members would like to see home visitors embedded in hospital systems to engage parents sooner for home visiting services.

Early Intervention

Early Intervention (EI), funded by IDHS, serves children ages birth to three with developmental delays and disabilities. According to IECAM Fiscal Year 2022 (FY22) data and Child & Family Connections #18, there were 305 children in Sangamon County and 17 in Menard County who received EI services. Strengths identified by parents and community members include many developmental services being offered in the homes, services offered at no- or low-cost to families, the system being easy to access at times, and their children can keep this service from birth to three. Challenges include up to a one-year waitlist, lack of speech therapists to provide services, transportation for children to get the services, requirements are different for an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) than an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) so they may not be eligible after age three, and it is difficult to ensure their child continues to receive services they need to meet developmental milestones during the transition to the school district.

Early Childhood Special Education

Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) is funded by ISBE and provides free, specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability who is age three through five - and their families. The ECSE is inclusive with the PFA and PFAE programs in Region 51 to ensure that all the students with disabilities are entitled to specialized instruction and services to enable them to access the general education curriculum. ECSE challenges include overwhelmed teachers, staffing shortage, families not able to enroll their children in an ECEC program due to their medical disabilities and not all programs are able to make those accommodations, and the challenging IEP process (families sometimes cannot attend due to transportation issues, and meetings can be overwhelming).

Parents and caregivers in Region 51 have several options for ECEC programs; however, due to a lack of openings, a two-year waitlist for infant and toddler care, lack of staffing, and lack of Head Start slots, children are not able to enroll. There is also a need for awareness of birth to five services; a recommendation was to do a campaign for United Way's 211 in Sangamon and Menard Counties to bring awareness to this resource.

Another need is to increase ECEC program capacity. During Council meetings, it was shared how difficult it is to navigate the Department of Child Family Services (DCFS) process to open a new ECEC program. This process needs to be smoother and clearer for individuals who want to open additional Centers and Family Child Care programs.

“

I moved to this area and have my 501c3 to be a child care provider but trying to follow the process, get answers from DCFS, and find a location in Menard County has been unrealistic for me while also being unsuccessful in finding care for my children.

- Family Council Member (Menard County)

”

Slot Gap

A slot gap is when there are more children eligible for enrollment in ECEC actual enrollment slots available. This term is used to describe the difference between the number of children who might need child care and the number of available spots in licensed child care, licensed family child care home, and license-exempt child care centers. The slot gap can also be calculated for the number of children eligible by caregiver income and the number of slots in publicly funded programs.

ECEC Capacity

Region 51 has 14,404 children from ages birth to five. However, there are only 5,534 available child care slots for children that age, leaving most families without a place to enroll their child(ren). The majority of community members who participated in interviews, focus groups, or on the Councils said they personally had been on a child care waitlist with some still being on those waitlists two years later.

Figure 7: Early Childhood Education and Care Capacity Slot Gap



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

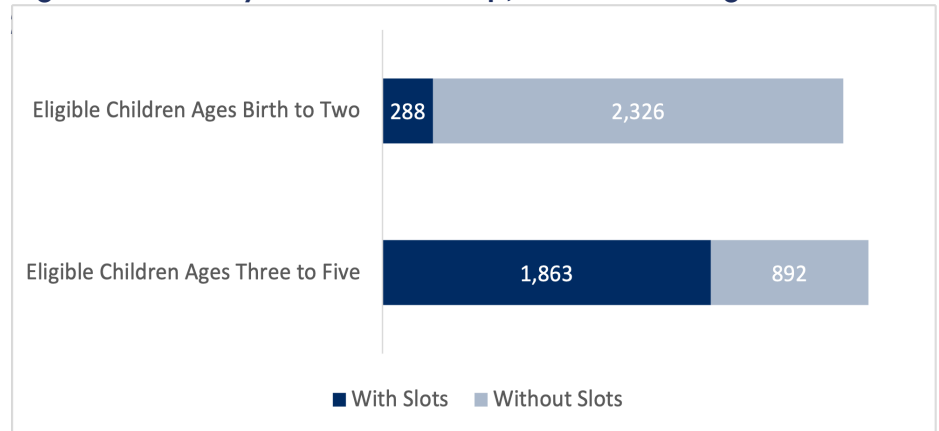
Families also said they had been placed on other waitlists for child-related services, such as doctor or specialist appointments and Early Intervention (EI) assessments. As of 2022, EI was able to serve 305 children (ages birth to three) in Sangamon County and 17 in Menard County. However, community members said a lack of therapists had kept their child(ren) waiting for services. Parents in a focus group reported how their children were screened, assessed, and found to have developmental delays but, due to a lack of speech therapists, would not be able to enroll their child in services.

Publicly Funded ECEC Program Capacity

To get a true understanding of the slot gap of publicly funded programs in Region 51, data was collected and discussed regarding those living at or below 100% FPL and those living at or below 200% of FPL, for the eligibility of the children.

There are 2,326 children birth to age two living at or below 200% FPL (\$26,200 for a family of four) in the Region. These children qualify for Early Head Start Center Based or Early Head Start Home Visiting (Figure 8). However, there are only 288 publicly funded slots, which leaves most of these families without affordable access to care for their children. Community members found it alarming to see so many of Region 51’s youngest learners lacking care. Region 51 has 1,863 eligible children ages three to five at or below 200% FPL. These children would qualify for Head Start, Preschool For All, Preschool For All Expansion, Prevention Initiative, and IDHS Home Visiting. However, there are 892 children ages three to five in Region 51, their families without affordable access to care.

Figure 8: Publicly Funded Slot Gap, Children Living at or Below



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Slot Gap Conclusions

From these discussions, our Action Council and Family Council found both slot gaps, especially for 200% FPL, worrying. Many community members voiced their concern about the type of care the children receive if they are not enrolled in any type of publicly funded programs or Early Childhood programs.

Council members also provided several possible drivers of the slot gap in the ECEC landscape in Region 51. Due to a lack of qualified, valued, and well-compensated, high-quality professionals, not all ECEC programs are fully staffed and therefore not all programs are able to be at full capacity. Another driver of the gap in slots is the location of the programs. Most of the ECEC programs are centrally located in Springfield. There is a Preschool For All Program offering only a few hours of care, with there being no options for after Preschool care in the area. There is also no transportation available to get the child to the next ECEC program; parents/caregivers are often forced to take time off work to make this transition happen if there is an option.

Overall, there is a lack of awareness of ECEC programs. Families are unaware of what is available to them in Region 51, so therefore they are not enrolling their children. The biggest driver for Region 51 is the two-year waitlist for birth to two-year-old care. Many families are simply unable to find care for their infants, so they make a difficult decision to either care for their own child(ren) at home or provide for their family by working. Other reasons for the slot gap identified by Council members were the effects of COVID-19 (causing some teachers to leave the professions) and those experiencing homelessness not being able to navigate the ECEC system when they are dealing with the effects of not having stable housing and triaging the needs of their family with little to no resources or time to focus on their child's early education. With each of these drivers, it would be extremely difficult to try to enroll each child in Region 51 without additional supports and more Early Childhood Collaborations from the community.

“We are so desperate to find child care, we can't even focus on whether it is actually 'quality' child care.”

- Community Member
(Sangamon County)

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

Region 51 has many resources and services available for families and especially children. However, the subject of the child care workforce is something that was concerning for many community members and ECEC professionals.

Data provided by the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) show that there are a total of 1,098 licensed center positions ranging from administrative staff to directors across the Region.³ It was reported, however, due to a lack of staffing, the Region does not have enough ECEC professionals to meet the demand of care needed in the counties. There are an additional 196 licensed family child care staff. Many families reported they were unaware of family child care services until they were put on the waitlist for licensed child care centers and had to look elsewhere for care. Sangamon and Menards Counties only have 136 family child care providers to serve the 14,404 children ages birth to five in the Region.

“ I had to leave my career because there was nowhere to place my children. ”
 - Parent (Sangamon County)

The ECEC workforce in Region 51 includes a heavy presence of female professionals with very few male professionals (see Figure 10). Most professionals are white women. Roughly 79% of the ECEC workforce is white, which illustrates an overrepresentation compared to the 7,992 (55%) of birth to six-year-olds within the Region reporting to be white. As shown Figure 11, the second largest group of ECEC professionals are those who self-identify as Black or African American. This aligns the demographics of Region 51 with 17% (2,399) of the number of children ages birth to five who identify as Black or African American.

Figure 10: Gender of Licensed Early Childhood Professionals

Position Type	Female	Male
Licensed Center Directors	90	1
Licensed Teaching Staff	893	17
Licensed Family Child Care Providers ⁴	134	5

Source: INCCRRA
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 11: Race and Ethnicity of Licensed Early Childhood Professionals

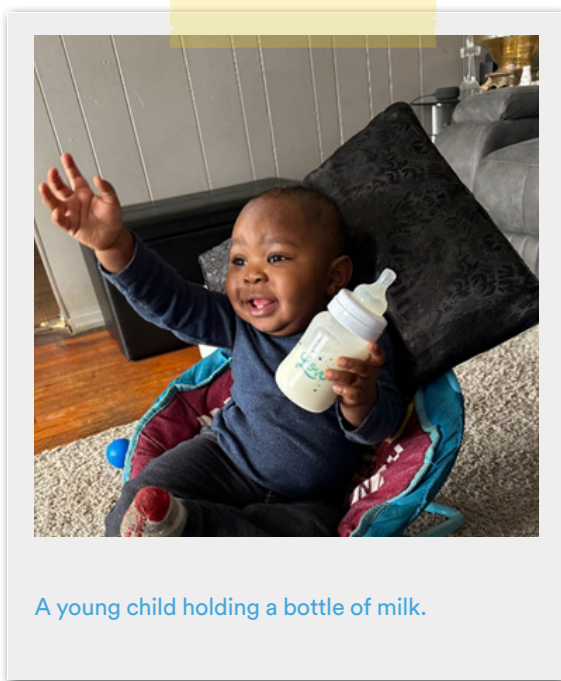
	Asian	Black or African American	Hispanic or Latine	Native American/ Alaskan, Pacific Islander, or Other	Multi-Racial	White
Licensed Center Directors	5	11	0	5	0	76
Licensed Teaching Staff	5	117	21	10	25	725
Licensed Family Child Care Providers	0	35	5	0	5	97

Source: INCCRRA
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

⁴Includes family child care providers and assistants, substitute/floaters, and other direct and indirect service providers.

The primary language spoken in Region 51 is English. It was reported by Gateways that the majority of the Licensed Center Directors, Licensed Teaching Staff, and Licensed Family Child Care Providers are English-speaking, with only 46 being bilingual in English and Spanish. Community members expressed how important it was to have additional resources for interpreters to help families and students navigate ECEC services and to invest in more multilingual ECEC professionals in programs. Many families are from Guatemala's indigenous communities, speaking more than 20 different dialects, which leaves families with barriers when trying to access care and services in Sangamon County specifically.

Like other areas of the State, Region 51 is experiencing a staff and teacher shortage which is preventing programs from operating at full capacity or expanding to meet community needs. Staff turnover is a big contributor to the workforce shortage, and it remains a concern among community members in both Sangamon and Menard Counties. Two of the Region's ECEC teaching staff focus groups reported having job satisfaction working with the children and having a director who made them feel supported, even though they receive low-paying wages and must navigate the process of onboarding new teaching staff on a regular basis.



A young child holding a bottle of milk.

There are many ECEC providers who are working and attending school to earn a degree but then leave the ECEC field for better financial opportunities and health benefits. One focus group participant shared how they have seen turnover in child care staff at the licensed child care center where their children attend, which causes stress for her child each time a new teacher is introduced to the classroom.

“ We try to find translators for in person, but we have to rely on virtual translators to meet the immediate need. This too can cause barriers and a disconnect for our clients. Our community needs more interpreters who are willing to go into the ECEC workforce to help connect non-English speaking families to the ECEC programs and services.

- Nonprofit Organization
(Sangamon & Menard Counties)

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“ Child care is very important for working families. We struggle with getting employees because of the pay and sometimes the work is hard. We are more than a ‘babysitter.’ We are a 76% low-income facility. Community is 85%. We serve children from areas that are over an hour away. Pay is terrible for staff, so makes staff hard to retain.

- ECEC Program Director
(Sangamon County)

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“ One of my main concerns is a lot of ECEC providers are at retirement age and if we are not able to recruit within our high schools to get additional ECEC professionals. We will have an even bigger shortage of teachers in one to two years.

- Action Council Member
(Sangamon & Menard Counties)

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Education & Career Development Initiatives

Gateways to Opportunity helps ECEC professionals obtain and track their professional development training hours. Gateways Scholarship pays a percentage of tuition and fees for ECEC professionals that meet their guidelines and wage criteria.

The Great S.T.A.R.T. (Strategies To Attract and Retain Teachers) Wage Supplement Program pays eligible practitioners semi-annually for different steps attained within the program. Community members voiced how this can be a great initiative, but it does come with a limit and has variables that make it difficult for individuals to qualify. Many shared concerns about payments being extremely late so individuals never know when to expect them.

The Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) Division of Early Childhood funds the Smart Start Transition Grants, which transition licensed child care programs from the Strengthen and Grow Child Care grants to Smart Start Child Care. These grants focus on providing stable and predictable funding to improve quality and supportive workforce development. The Individual Professional Development Funding is based on funding that the local CCR&R receives from IDHS to help child care workers with the cost of attending professional development trainings, the cost of travel and lodging, and the costs of certifications. ECEC professionals expressed how these were easy to access but that funds depleted quickly, so they had to be quick to apply.

The Smart Start Quality Support Program is the IDHS new support for quality improvement. Currently, 34 licensed child care that are serving at least 40% of children with funds from the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) children are participating. The Program helps the participating centers cover the staffing costs associated with higher quality care and guide staff in their quality improvement work.

The Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) Scholarship Program is aimed to address the shortage of qualified early childhood educators by encouraging the pursuit of credentials and advancement

of already-held degrees in early childhood education, with an aim toward building a strong, well-prepared workforce. This program is for people who are already working in the field but want to continue their education at a 2-year or 4-year college to obtain a college degree in the ECEC field, with the expectation that the recipient will continue to work in teaching or direct services in the ECEC field in Illinois.

Many training opportunities are found through the local Child Care Resource and Referral Agency (Community Child Care Connections), covering topics like classroom management, enhancing lesson plans, and developmentally appropriate practices. They also hold training sessions related to child health and safety. StarNet is a local ECEC network that provides training and workshops to professionals that aims to equip teachers with the support they may need to provide all children with a high-quality, equitable education in inclusive environments. The Gateways to Opportunity website also offers professional development training on a variety of ECEC-related topics.

“The interest of either going back to school or attending school for the first time has increased due to the ECACE scholarship opportunity. It is a positive incentive that does interest ECEC staff.

- Higher Education Navigator
(Sangamon County)

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The Child Development Associate Credential is an alternative method to college classes that allows ECEC staff to learn about child development with hands-on, in-classroom experience. Finally, the Illinois Early Care and Education (ECE) Credential is a program from Gateways to Opportunity that allows ECEC professionals to earn credentials based on

“ We are encouraged to have credentials, but we see very little benefit to us providers, and ExceleRate does not tend to line up with DCFS standards.
- Family Child Care Provider (Sangamon County) ”

their level of education, hours of experience in a classroom setting, and other factors. There are different levels of the ECE Credential, as well as specialized ECE Credentials for Infant and Toddlers, Directors, Technical Assistance, Family Child Care, School Age, and ESL/Bilingual professionals. However, many are unaware of the importance and benefits behind obtaining these credentials.

Figure 12: Number of Credentials by Provider Type, Type of Credential

Type of Provider	Type of Credential	Yes	No
Licensed Center Director	Illinois Director	28	63
Licensed Center Teaching Staff	Infant Toddler	61	896
Licensed Center Teaching Staff	Early Care & Education	393	564
Licensed Family Child Care	Family Child Care	7	129
Licensed Family Child Care	Early Care & Education	35	101

Source: INCCRRA
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Community Child Care Connections and Lincoln Land Community College both have Higher Education Navigators that provide personalized assistance to help ECEC professionals connect with colleges or universities that provide courses to advance their career. They also assist with applying for financial aid, finding scholarships, and other resources that help support an Early Childhood professional to pursue higher education.

Capitol Area Career Center offers ECEC courses to high school juniors and seniors, in which students learn about child development and receive hands-on learning experiences in a preschool classroom. After completing the two year-long courses, students receive an ECE Level 1 Credential. Many community members reported being unaware of this program and several other ECEC professionals reported that they have not been able to engage with the program because they are unresponsive to calls and emails.

Lincoln Land Community College in Springfield has a two-year ECEC associate degree program and a Child Development Center. They also offer classes to ECEC professionals who already have college courses or degrees. Staff noted that there is a resurgence of those returning to school to work toward ECEC degrees and credentials, which gives hope to the future of the ECEC field in Region 51 to, as an advocate and Higher Education Navigator shared, build “a workforce that is respected and treated equally to other vocations and compensated accordingly.”

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

The stories that families, parents, and caregivers shared about their ability to access ECEC within Sangamon and Menard Counties ranged from uplifting and inspiring to heartbreaking and frustrating. Some found care right away, while others experienced waitlists and unanswered call-backs. Some could easily navigate the paperwork needed for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), while others found it confusing or experienced language barriers that made the process difficult. Collectively, parents, caregivers, and families in Region 51 are frustrated with the current ECEC system. Community members expressed concerns about waitlists, cost, lack of quality programs, lack of staff, mental health concerns, transportation issues, and safety. There are great, high-quality ECEC programs in Sangamon and Menard County, but there is a high demand and need for more programs or more spaces available in existing ECEC programs.

“ We need more resources in our community to help us understand our community. I am not from this country, so I especially need more help to know what is here to help me and my children. I want my children to have an education but do not know how to enroll them or where.

- Community Member
(Sangamon County)

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ECEC Program Access

In Region 51, ECEC choices are limited. Menard County is a child care desert, meaning there is little to no access to quality care. During a focus group, some families shared how they are making decisions between leaving a career to stay home with their children or changing a career path entirely to meet the needs of their children and family. Family Council members shared how they are faced with putting their children in an ECEC program close to work as opposed to in their own community. Unfortunately, many told stories of their gut-wrenching decision to place their child(ren) into whatever space was available in an open ECEC program, regardless of quality so that they can keep their jobs.

“ Out of sheer desperation for child care after our school program was unable to provide summer care for two of my kids as planned, I placed my three kids in separate facilities just so I could continue to work. This resulted in greater financial strain, precious additional time away from family, and tremendous stress given the various pick up and drop off times and my work hours. Each facility/program required a specific age or grade level range, in which none of the three could accommodate more than one of my children. That time was one of the most logistically stressful, financially burdensome periods of my life. This is something no family should have to go through!

- Parent (Sangamon County)

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Transportation is another concern that families and providers expressed. One working parent from a focus group enrolled their child in a Preschool for All (PFA) Program and had to not only find another ECEC program for the remaining hours of care needed for the day once they left the PFA program, but also had to find transportation from the PFA program to the ECEC program. If transportation is not available, this parent had to leave work to make this transition - which is not always easy or even possible. Transportation issues can cause families to lose their jobs, not enroll in PFA programs, and must transport their children to the other ECEC program on lunch breaks to ensure they have eight hours of care.

The ECEC programs in Region 51 typically have a two-year waitlist for infant and toddler care and one year waitlist for all other ages.

“ There is a general lack of services and education for birth to five, or for parents to learn about the services. I like Head Start but they don’t have transportation in Menard County, and even if they did, I live far enough I would not be able to use it for my kid.

- Parent (Menard County)

“ I want a full-time, affordable child care that is good quality and developmentally appropriate for my children, but I cannot find that in my area due to the waiting issue and rise of the cost of child care.

- Community Member (Sangamon County)

Cost

Parents have shared that ECEC programs are expensive. Many families shared that they work so hard for their paychecks, but then those wages are quickly taken to pay for child care, leaving them with almost nothing to pay for other expenses. A parent in a focus group said, “the hardship and guilt of not being able to do anything extracurricular with my children because my wages go to pay child care first, then household bills, and a few groceries with nothing extra to spare.”

CCAP Limitations

Families who qualify for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) report how difficult it can be to meet the needs of their household. Many caregivers are working multiple jobs to cover co-pays and household bills. Others are working and going to school, which causes stress, financial challenges, and lack of quality time to spend with their children. One community member and a focus group participant shared identical stories about how they received advances in their careers but unfortunately had to deny these promotions. Family members elaborated that sharing their reality aloud brought a certain sadness to their situation, even if they were satisfied and happy with their child care program.



Megan Loberg-Simmering (left) with her two children (left).

“ People are living in poverty as it is, but now everything’s going up in prices, it makes it too hard to even live.

- Community Member (Menard County)

“ For those of us who do have a little relief by being able to utilize the Child Care Assistance Program, we have to make the decision to not advance our career or not take a promotion for fear that we will make just over the cut off to continue our assistance.

- Parent

One of the strengths identified was the one-dollar co-pay for working ECEC professionals who are also parents/caregivers of children receiving CCAP funds. Community members shared that it was uplifting to know that working families in the ECEC field can continue to work, enroll their children into a quality ECEC program, and only pay a one-dollar co-pay. Many community members would like to see this for all families to ensure that working families can continue to work and all children in Illinois can have access to ECEC programs. A community member who is a single parent that works three jobs shared that if it were not for the one-dollar co-pay, she would not have any time to spend with her child between going to school full time and her jobs at a school, an ECEC program, and the convention center.

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

“

I want to be able to spend time with my son so he can have the best childhood. I have to work more jobs just to pay child care then what's the point of working. And if I can't work, then I can't provide.

- Parent and Community Member
(Sangamon County)

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Regional Strengths & Needs

According to the community members of Region 51 there are many strengths, especially when it comes to ECEC programs and services. Many community members praised their school districts, ECEC programs, and the numerous resources helping families and children thrive.

Strengths

- Many opportunities for the different programs and services to collaborate and increase outreach in the community.
- Great K-12 education systems and school districts.
- High-quality, highly educated, and passionate ECEC providers throughout the community who want to support children and families.
- Several home visiting programs (prenatal to three years), ECEC programs and services (birth to five years), and library programs for families and children
- Sangamon and Menard Counties are diverse and inclusive.
- Many parents/caregivers are engaged in the services their children receive.

Unfortunately, many barriers exist for families attempting to access ECEC programs and services. Some of these barriers include the cost of tuition for ECEC programs and the lack of quality programs and/or openings within them. The Region also lacks support for families who do not work a “traditional” day shift.

Needs to Address Child Care Barriers

Ongoing discussions during Council meetings, focus groups, interviews, and general conversations about Region 51 brought up many ideas from community members to attempt to meet the needs of all families and caregivers throughout the Region.

“ I work a night shift and I have to rely on various family members to help with caring for my kids each night, and it constantly changes who can help. This is exhausting and frustrating to manage.

- Focus Group Participant
(Sangamon County)

”

Local Needs

- Educate the community on local resources and how to make referrals.
- Educate pediatricians on how to make referrals.
- Increase home visiting services to pregnant parents before and after the child is born.
- Increase ECEC capacity and workforce in Menard and Sangamon Counties.
- Increase the number of multilingual ECEC providers for English Language Learners.
- More transportation services for programs serving children from birth through age five.
- Adjust rules pertaining to sick children, as many families cannot afford to take off work (e.g., a sick child room for minor illnesses).
- More ECEC programs accepting CCAP.
- More ECEC programs providing care during various hours, including overnight.

State Needs

- Educate the public on the importance of ECEC programs and services.
- More affordable ECEC programs.
- More livable and fair wages for ECEC professionals.
- More mental health services for children birth to age five and their families.
- Clarity on where/how money is dispersed and prioritized in the ECEC system.
- A more efficient way of gathering information/data, pertaining to children and resources.
- Align the DCFS and Illinois ExceleRate education requirements.

Recommendations

Birth to Five Illinois: Region 51 was able to capture knowledge, voices, and recommendations from those who sit on the Region 51 Action and Family Councils, those who participated in interviews and focus groups, and those who have committed to this work as community partners. The voices in Sangamon and Menard Counties aligned when it came to the local and state recommendations.

State Recommendations

1. Raise wages for ECEC professionals.
2. Invest in more mental health workers.
3. Create one funding stream for the ECEC system.
4. Increase eligibility for CCAP requirements.
5. Create a statewide database to track children and services being used.
6. Expand IDHS and ISBE home visiting programs, targeting the highest-need communities (e.g., pregnant persons).
7. Improve alignment between the DCFS and Illinois ExceleRate education requirements.

Local Recommendations

1. Increase capacity in ECEC programs caring for children from birth through age five by using workforce recruiters in the high schools and mentors in ECEC programs to keep the ECEC staff connected to scholarships and grant opportunities.
2. Invest in more home visiting programs to help pregnant persons and develop resources to pass out to hospitals, doctors' offices, and ECEC programs to recruit more Home Visiting advocates. Make referrals through Sangamon Heart and launch a community campaign on the importance of engaging in home visiting programs.
3. Launch a 211 campaign through United Way that includes social media, community outreach, and enrollment in the 211 system.
4. Coordinate with healthcare sectors to learn how to implement the Community Navigators program.
5. Increase slots in Head Start, Preschool for All, and Preschool for All Expansion programs.
6. Build a multilingual ECEC program offering before and after-school care.
7. Invest in hospitals to help pregnant people before and after care.
8. Encourage recruitment and retention of quality bus drivers by raising wages, offering more incentives, and having a more inclusive system for the Region's bus routes.

Appendices

Appendix A: References

1. Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding (2021). Commission Report of Findings and Recommendations: Spring 2021. Site name: <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/documents/early-childhood-funding-commission-full-report.pdf>
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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.

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 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?

Others

1. How long have you been involved in Early Childhood Education and Care? What roles have you held during that time?
2. What challenges do you think families have in accessing Early Childhood Education and Care programs and services?
3. What programs do you know of in the Region that serve children birth through age five and their families?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. Is child care readily available and close to employers in your community?
7. What accommodations has your business or company made for professionals with young children? How have these accommodations impacted your business or company?
8. 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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