



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

Region 53

(Mason, Tazewell & Woodford Counties)





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Region 53 Executive Summary

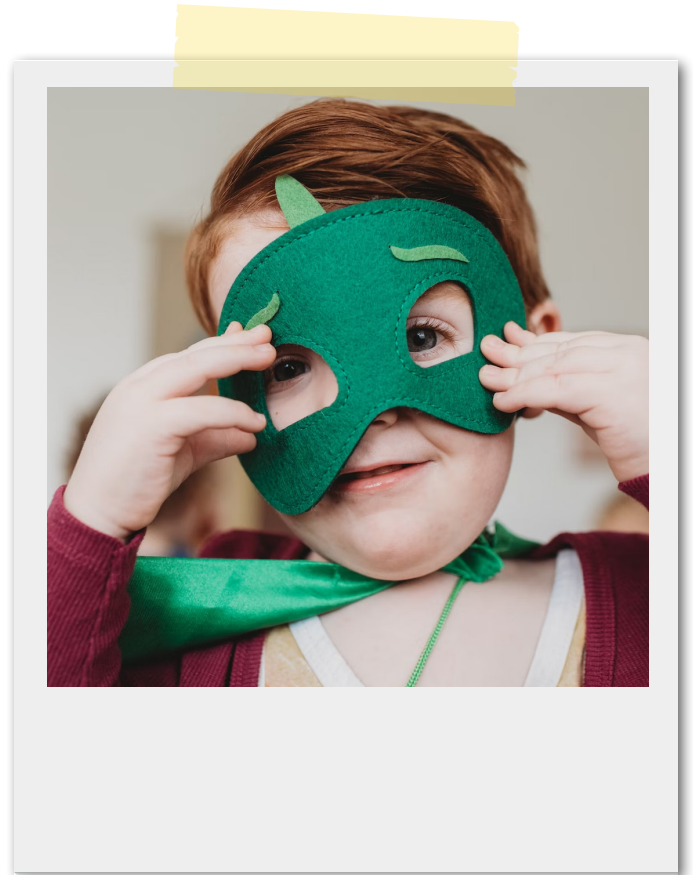
In 2021, the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Funding issued a report with findings that highlighted the inequities in ECEC funding in Illinois and the need to create a better statewide infrastructure to support ECEC professionals, expand services and programs 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 53 Needs Assessment, which includes recommendations developed by our Action and Family Councils. Additional findings, analysis, and recommendations can be found in the full report.

Key Findings

Region 53 has great ECEC programs available to children and families in the community. The Collaboration work that is already well-rooted in the Region has made great strides in providing resources and referrals to families in need of services and set the stage to build out from existing community systems work. However, the lack of child care and the lack of a robust child care workforce has families and providers of the Region in crisis mode. Families, especially those living in rural communities, report traveling large distances to get to child care, creating unnecessary time and financial burdens. Families that work non-traditional hours rely on family or friends for child care and when those are not options, they are forced to drop out of the workforce. Families do not have the option to choose child care based on quality, rather they must choose based on what is available at the time, and that is not much.



Region 53 has a large variety of publicly funded programs for children birth to age five. Despite this, most families are unaware of what is available. Even if they know what is available, they cannot enroll their children into mostly half-day programs due to a lack of transportation or wrap-around care services. “Who can leave their job in the middle of the day to run and pick up from preschool to drive to child care and then drive back to work? That is not a thing, people cannot do that, so we just do child care through a friend.”-Woodford County Caregiver

Overall, while more child care, transportation, and workforce are sorely needed, Region 53 has the structure to make a difference in the lives of children birth to five and their families. The Collaboration work and variety of programs are a fantastic step in the right direction. The community just needs to expand on what is working and work together to restore and rebuild what is not. Community and families in the Region are resilient and creative and that has been highlighted in interactions throughout the last year. They are more than capable of creating an equitable system that works for all families.

Region 53 Needs

1. Child care for full-day and non-typical hours
2. Retention of qualified staff
3. Additional Early Intervention (EI) therapists to serve rural areas
4. Affordable child care options including increased acceptance of Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)
5. System alignment and growth

Region 53 Recommendations

1. Increase funding to attract and retain staff in all realms of the ECEC landscape
2. Provide incentives for child care workforce
3. Offer flexible scheduling to address both staff needs and families’ needs for non-traditional child care hours
4. Provide incentives for child care centers and homes to increase CCAP utilization
5. Create a data resource that collects statewide data and displays it in an easily accessible and understandable way

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

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REGION 53 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.



13,043

Children Under
the Age of 6
in Region 53



4,630

Children 0-5
at 200% Federal
Poverty Level



3,406

Children 0-5
Without Publicly
Funded ECEC Slots

72%

Number of children in working families
without availability of child care slots

“We could open a whole new center with the kids we have on our waiting list, and I have had to shut down classrooms due to staffing issues.”
- Child Care Center Director, Tazewell County

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

REGION 53 NEEDS

1. Child care for full-day and non-traditional hours
2. Retention of qualified staff
3. Additional Early Intervention (EI) therapists to serve rural areas
4. Affordable child care options including increased acceptance of the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)

REGION 53 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increase funding to attract and retain staff in all areas of the ECEC landscape
2. Provide incentives for the child care workforce
3. Offer flexible scheduling to address both staff needs and families' needs for non-traditional child care hours
4. Provide incentives for child care centers and homes that accept more families utilizing CCAP



“The teacher shortage is still going strong. We are not getting applicants coming in that have any education, if we get applicants at all.”
**- Child Care Center Director,
Tazewell County**

Overview & Acknowledgements

Introduction

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

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

This report will be used in a variety of ways.

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

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

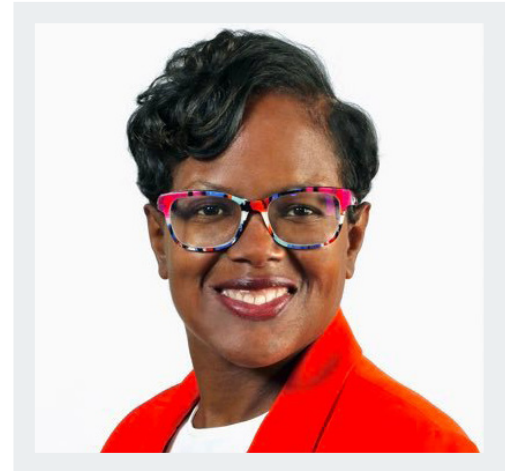
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand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

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



Letter from State Leadership

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Letter from Regional Leadership

The Birth to Five Illinois: Region 53 Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment could not have been created without the help of our community. Our Team thanks our Action Council and Family Council members for showing up to meetings, engaging in discussions surrounding the data, and providing their priceless input in creating a robust picture of our Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) landscape in central Illinois. Many thanks go out to those who took part in interviews and surveys to ensure we were capturing the important voices of those who were not collected as part of the work of our Councils.

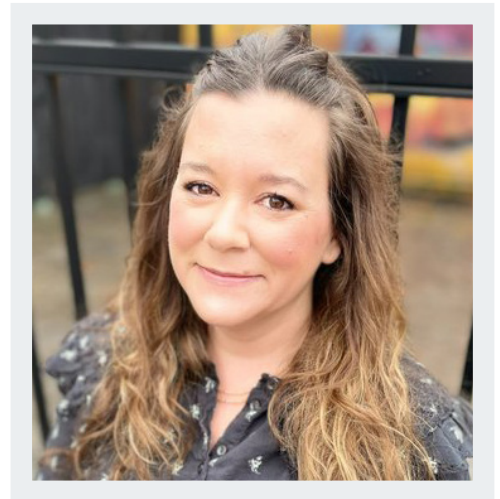
We owe gratitude to countless community partners who allowed us to set up tables, participate in events, and let us use their spaces as a platform for this important work. Of course, meetings are always better when there are snacks to munch on, so we want to thank those in the community that donated food and baked goods to keep up energized!

A special thanks goes out to Vance Moore for noticing our need for office and meeting space and going above and beyond to provide that space in such a short time. Most importantly, we cannot leave out the thanks to our families who have helped man tables, hand out promotional items, build and set-up office furniture, and be our moral support. Families are our why, and without their stories, vulnerability, expertise, and grace we would not be in this position today, so thank you families of Region 53 for sharing a glimpse into your worlds!

Thank you,

Felicia Farden (she/her)

Regional Council Manager: Region 53
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.

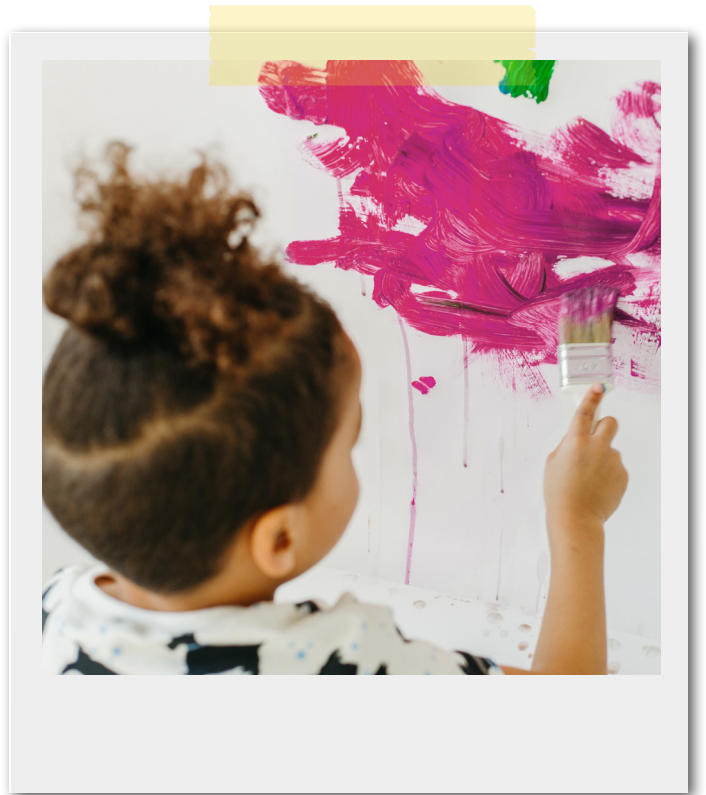
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early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

Our **vision** is 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.

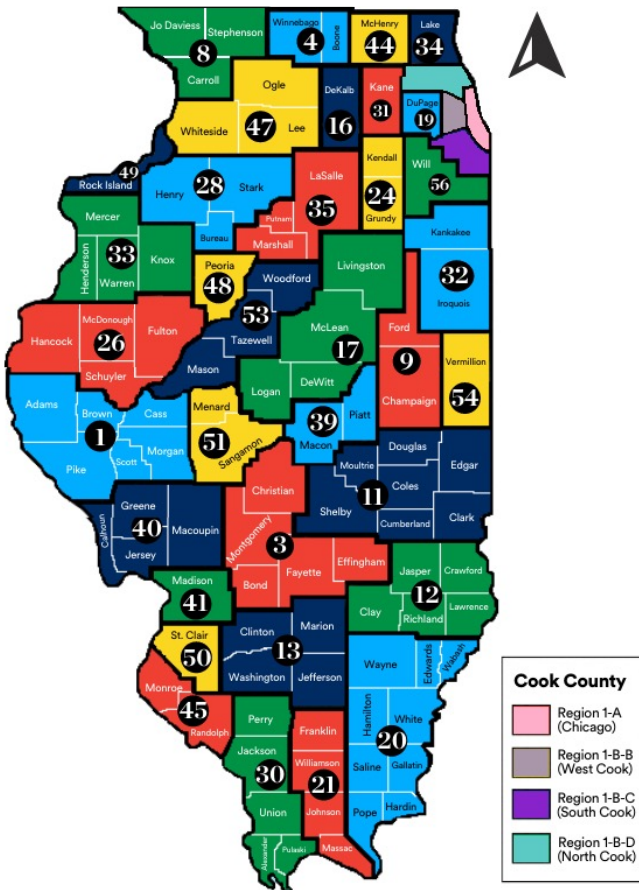


Timeline

- **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.

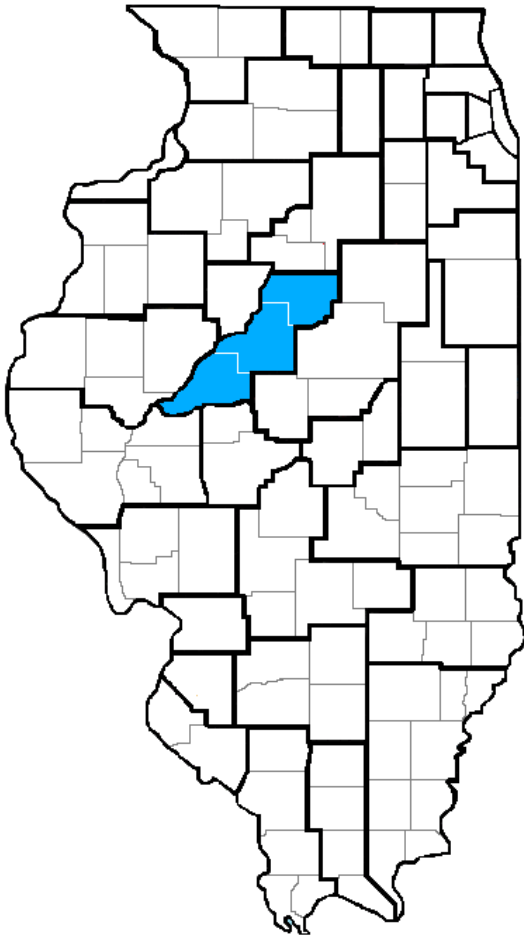
Regional Needs Assessment Methodology

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 53

Regional Community Landscape



Regional Boundaries

Region 53 is in central Illinois and consists of Tazewell, Mason, and Woodford Counties. All three counties sit on the eastern side of the Illinois River. Healthcare, manufacturing, and agriculture are three of the big industries located in this Region. Tazewell County is the largest county and holds Pekin, Washington, East Peoria, and Morton, which are the Region's largest cities. Havana is the major city in Mason County, while the rest of the county holds small rural communities spread throughout farmland. Woodford County is home to Eureka, the county seat, that is also rural in nature.

Education is an important aspect of our community, as we have Illinois Central College, Eureka College, and Spoon River College all within our Region. This area has a variety of programs for children from birth to age five, a fantastic ability to collaborate, and a strong sense of community. However, a lot of services are across the river in Peoria County, which, despite being a short distance, is a barrier to families seeking services.

Land Acknowledgement¹

To recognize historic and ongoing injustices experienced by Indigenous Peoples, including forced removal, forced assimilation, and genocide, Region 53 acknowledges that Tazewell, Mason, and Woodford Counties are the land of the Oθaakiiwaki-hina·ki (Sauk) and Meškwahki-aša·hina (Fox), Myaamia (Miami), Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Sioux), Kaskaskia, and Kiikapoi (Kickapoo) Nations. It is our responsibility to honor Indigenous Peoples and their continued existence and contributions.

Regional Demographics

Region 53 covers three counties that are home to some mid-sized cities and a lot of small, rural towns. There are 182,869 people in the Region and 13,043 children birth to age to five. Census data suggests a very slight decline in the population of children between 2017 and 2020, with 2017 data showing 13,970 children, a loss of 927 children from the Region. The birth to age two and three to five populations are almost evenly split, at 6,248 children birth to two and 6,795 children aged three to five.

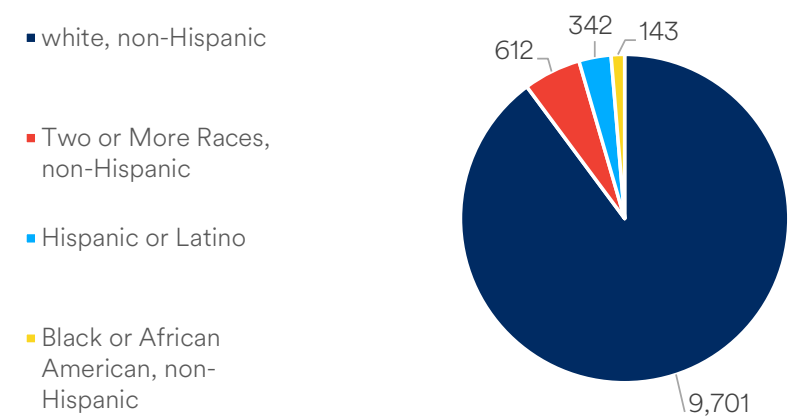


Eli's Coffee Shop, Metamora, IL.

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

The majority of Region 53’s population is white. While overall racial/ethnic diversity is lacking, there are trends in the data that suggest racial and ethnic populations are increasing throughout the Region. 2017 Census data shows 91% of children ages birth to five living in the Region identified as white, non-Hispanic; that number decreased to 90% in 2020. During this time, children ages birth to five that identify as Hispanic or Latino rose from 3% to 3.16% (indicating a need for bilingual staff or translation capabilities to support these students) and children ages birth to five identifying as Two or More Races, Non-Hispanic rose from 4% to 6%. Numbers show that families speaking a language other than English increased from 182 in 2018 to 312 in 2020.

Figure 1: Children Under 5 by Race and Ethnicity²



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Children and Families in Priority Populations³

The Illinois Early Learning Council (ELC) has identified 12 priority populations across the State, which are specific demographic groups of children and families who should take priority in policy and funding decisions to ensure equitable access to ECEC resources, services, and programs. Through the course of this work, interviews, surveys, and focus groups were held to try to capture the experiences of the families and children that live within the priority population demographic. The priority populations identified and discussed by Action and Family Council members include children in families in poverty or deep poverty (as defined by the ELC as families with income at or below 100% and 50% the Federal Poverty Level, respectively), children/families with child welfare involvement, and children with disabilities.

The data shows a staggering 4,630 children in the Region are living at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), a measure of income level created by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that calculates the minimum amount of money needed by a family to afford their basic household needs, such as food, housing, utilities, and other necessities (Figure 2). Thirty-five percent of children under the age of six live in poverty, throughout the Region (Figure 3). This means that a family of four survives on \$30,000 per year or less.

Figure 2: Annual Federal Poverty Levels at 50%, 100%, 150%, and 200%

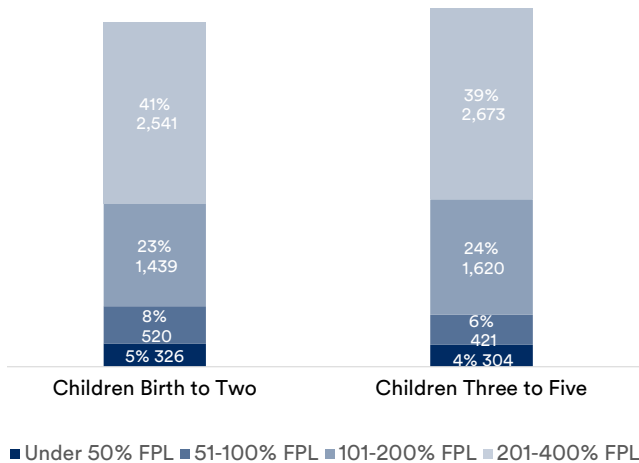
Federal Poverty Level Guidelines	50% FPL	100% FPL	150% FPL	200% FPL
Family of Four	\$15,000	\$30,000	\$45,000	\$60,000

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

²Some racial/ethnic Census categories not included in table due to small numbers: Asian (6), Some other Race (1). There were no people who self-identified as American Indian or Alaska Native or Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

³<https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/earlylearningcouncil/access/documents/priority-populations-updated-2021.pdf>

Figure 3: Children Under 6 by Age and by Federal Poverty Level



Source: IECAM

Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Many children in this demographic are living in small rural communities that lack access to resources available in more populated areas. Community members have reiterated that to keep rural towns sustainable, access to child care and early childhood programs and services is needed. A family living in poverty simply may not have access to transportation to commute a long distance to receive needed services. Additionally, most publicly funded Early Childhood programs, such as Head Start and Preschool for All, have income guidelines that are tied to eligibility for the program. Knowing the number of children living at various poverty levels highlights the level of need for publicly funded programs throughout the Region.

Erikson Institute’s Risk and Reach Report⁴ presents county-by-county data on risk factors that undermine optimal child development as well as the reach of

publicly funded programs and services that support early childhood well-being. The data allows for the evaluation of how well we are reaching children experiencing risk factors in specific geographies. When looking at the child maltreatment numbers, in Illinois as a whole, 2% of children birth to age five have been indicated as victims of abuse and/or neglect. Comparatively, Mason County (8%) and Tazewell County (3%) are both above the state average of children birth to age five reported as survivors of abuse and/or neglect. The consequences of experiencing abuse are far-reaching and can be long-lasting.

The barriers families face while raising children with disabilities has been a topic that has been brought up in almost every Council meeting and community conversation. There are 297 children aged three to three receiving Early Intervention services and 739 children aged three to five with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in a school setting. These numbers would be much higher if families had fewer hurdles to jump through to access needed services for their children.

A long-time resident in Tazewell County shared that they had gone through the “system” with their autistic child 20 years ago and their four-year-old was just recently diagnosed. Though this parent shared that the resources provided now are fantastic, they also noted, “Our Early Intervention service coordinator has been amazing, Easter Seals was a huge blessing, and the Play Project was great in getting my child ready for school. But the waiting lists are still just as bad as 20 years ago.”

We cannot tell the story of the Region and expect adequate resources without the knowledge of our demographic landscape. Understanding our Region’s demographics is integral to knowing the type and number of resources necessary to have an equitable and accessible ECEC system that adequately supports all families.

“ Depending on where you live in this Region and what your family looks like, your needs are going to be different.
- Community Member ”

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.

⁴ <https://riskandreach.erikson.edu/>

Local Community Collaborations

Local Community Collaborations are groups of diverse stakeholders that come together regularly to work towards improving outcomes for children and families. They focus on aligning services and creating needs assessments to pinpoint inequities. Region 53 has a robust community collaboration landscape, with three recognized Collaborations. The All Our Kids Network (AOK), Early Childhood Forum of Central Illinois, and Central Illinois Home Visiting Collaboration are all working in across the Region to create a system that benefits families by making intakes and referrals more seamless and easier to track.

The AOK Network operates through the Tazewell County Health Department and covers Tazewell, Woodford, and Peoria counties. The AOK Network’s focus is on collaboration across service sectors to improve family outcomes. They engage parents as partners to promote healthy pregnancies, promote growth for children ages birth to five, and offer resources to build on the health and well-being of caregivers. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the AOK Network continued to see growth in resource referrals and the number of families utilizing their services. The Integrated Referral and Intake System (IRIS) has been used as part of the AOK Network’s mission to enable service providers and the families they serve to have a one-stop place to find connections to a multitude of programs and services.

The Early Childhood Forum of Central Illinois utilizes partnerships among service providers to provide training, inform policymakers of important happenings, and manage referrals. The Forum is a recipient of a Birth to Five Illinois Implementation Grant, with a focus on enhancing services for families in Tazewell, Peoria, and Woodford Counties. The \$117,050 grant will enable them to launch a new Early Childhood Navigator position, communicate reach and enrollment data with the collaborative and the community, and create new Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with partner agencies.



Child in Illinois River, Tazewell County, IL.



Children forming a circle with their hands.

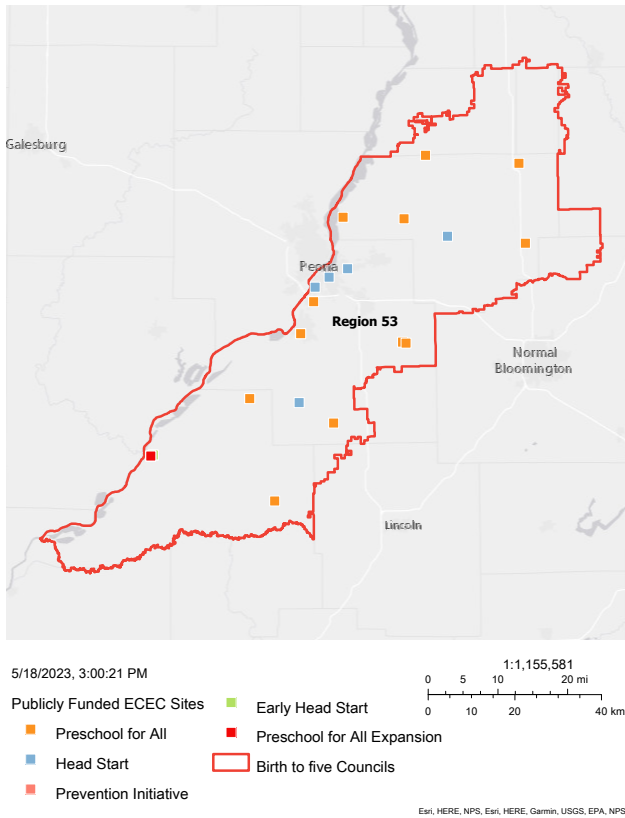
The Central Illinois Home Visiting Collaboration focuses on Tazewell and Peoria Counties. Their goal is to increase enrollment in early learning programs by developing meaningful relationships with the families they serve, allowing families to determine what referrals meet their needs.

Though there is a strong network of Collaborations in Region 53, there is no formal Collaboration operating in Mason County. There are, however, informal Early Childhood Councils Health Advisory Councils doing similar work as the abovementioned Collaborations.

“Knowing what the separate agencies are working on is an integral piece in knowing what gaps exist and where more collaboration is needed.”
-Community Member (Mason County)

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

Figure 4: Publicly Funded ECEC Sites



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Figure 5: Publicly Funded Programs by Site and Capacity

Program	Sites	Capacity
Prevention Initiative	2	90
Preschool for All/Expansion	13	852
Head Start	8	274
Early Head Start	1	8
IDHS Home Visiting	--	5
Early Intervention	--	297

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Region 53 has a variety of programming and services for children birth through age five. Participating in ECEC programs during this period can have a huge impact on a child’s development. This Region has a strong publicly funded group of programs to benefit children and families, and they are spread throughout the Region in a way that benefits urban and rural families when transportation is offered. Waitlists exist in almost all ECEC programs offered in the Region, which is unfortunate because, overall, families in our Region praise the opportunities provided.

Early Head Start

Publicly funded programs for children from birth to age three include Early Head Start, which serves all three counties despite incomplete data showing the program only serves Mason County. Early Head Start is a federally funded program that supports family engagement, early education, and health services to children, while also providing services to expectant parents. To be eligible for Early Head Start, family income needs to be at or below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level or have another attribute that has been locally determined to create barriers to family success and well-being.

Prevention Initiative (PI)

The PI program is only operating in Mason and Tazewell Counties with a total of 98 slots, according to the current data. PI is state-funded through the Early Childhood Block Grant and administered by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). It provides family support and engagement for expectant caregivers, as well as support for families with children under the age of three in either a center-based program or as a home visiting service, with the goal of preparing children for success. Multiple factors determine a family’s eligibility for this program including income, a child’s developmental status, and what program policy identifies as family and community “risk” factors.

Early Intervention (EI)

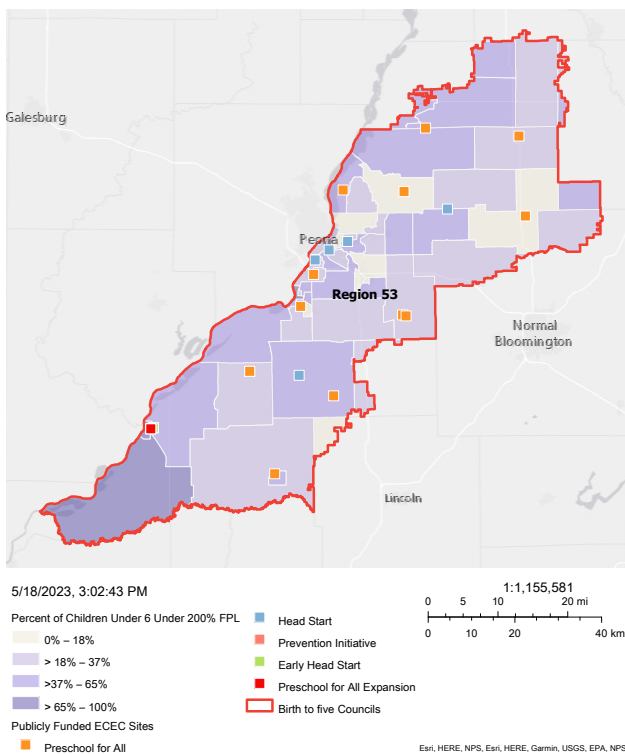
EI serves 297 children younger than age three in Region 53. EI is funded through the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS). Any family in need of services with an income below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) qualifies for free physical, developmental, and speech therapy, whatever the child needs. EI providers typically come to the child’s home, child care, or whatever setting is natural for the child. Currently, families in Region 53 have expressed frustration over long the waitlists for EI services. Sometimes children wait so long, they turn three while still on the waitlist and no longer qualify for this important and impactful program.

Head Start

For children ages three to five, Head Start has eight sites spread evenly throughout the Region with an enrollment of 274 children. Head Start has the same goals as Early Head Start program (which services children from birth to age three) and is also federally funded. The population served reflects that of Early Head Start, aside from the age of the child. Head Start is offered in a center or a family child care home or can be provided as a home visiting service. Families in Region 53 have shared fantastic Head Start success stories. Families involved with the child welfare system expressed gratitude for Head Start programming because it provides continuity of care for children experiencing trauma and crisis situations, both during and after the reunification process.

“ I felt like we were really cared for with distance, transportation, consistency, friends, and support. - Caregiver (Tazewell County) ”

Figure 6: Percent of Children Under 6 Under 200% FPL/Publicly Funded ECEC Sites



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

PFA and PFA-E are funded through the Early Childhood Block Grant (administered by ISBE) and are based in centers or schools. They provide developmental screenings, parent education, and promote family involvement. There are thirteen PFA/PFA-E sites spread throughout Region 53 and are capable of serving 852 children. Priority is given to children who are experiencing barriers to academic success and those living in families that earn less than four times the federal poverty guidelines. Children diagnosed or with a suspected disability/condition that impacts learning in these programs must be receiving services that are consistent with their Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

Overall, Region 53 has fantastic programs and services available for children and families that are in communities where eligible families reside. However, different funding sources have differing priorities and eligibility criteria, which can be confusing for families. Also, half of our Region’s programs only offer half-day services making families responsible for finding care outside of program hours. A Mason County caregiver noted that working from home made it difficult to engage with her daughter

Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

during the day and she thought her child was missing out on learning opportunities. The child is enrolled in a half-day PFA program, and her caregiver thought enrolling her in Head Start in the afternoon would be a great solution. The family went to Head Start to see what was offered, but no one was available to answer questions about the process. It took weeks for this parent to be able to access the paperwork and fill it out. However, when she turned it in, she was informed there were no available openings and to reapply next year if the family income circumstances had changed. This caregiver was very frustrated because her time was wasted and, in her opinion, a quick conversation would have spared her from all the unnecessary work. The family ended up finding private child care, but they have to transport between the PFA and the child care programs mid-day and eat lunch in the car. Most parents and caregivers do not have the flexibility to provide this type of transportation for their children in the middle of the day.

Transportation continues to be an issue for most programs. Lack of funding for transportation and hiring bus drivers has proven to be the most challenging recently. Because of the rural nature of Region 53 and rising fuel costs, transporting children to and from programs is time-consuming and costly. Caregivers are often given challenging choices when it comes to publicly funded programs, due to the half-day schedule and lack of transportation. They either must find someone to take their child to and from preschool, find a child care center that will provide transportation and wrap-around care, opt out of preschool and go with full-day child care, or simply and sadly, drop out of the workforce. Families must make so many difficult decisions; early childhood services should not contribute to this stress.

There are numerous bright spots in Region 53's ECEC landscape. For example, Woodford County Special Education Association hosts weekly developmental screenings for children instead of only in the spring and fall (as is done in other communities). Family members in all counties report they are happy with the family engagement aspect of preschool programs and feel their children are more prepared for Kindergarten.

“ Having the availability of speech therapists at the school is very helpful. Trying to fit those therapies into their busy schedule would have been difficult.
- Parent (Tazewell County) ”

“ As our PI and PFA grants are in their 5th year and the costs of running the program have gone up (staff salaries, materials, etc.), the district has been instrumental in helping our program financially to keep classrooms and family education going. If we were a standalone PFA or PI, we would most likely have had to close. We are very fortunate to have a generous district that is supportive of early childhood education.
- Community Member (Tazewell County) ”

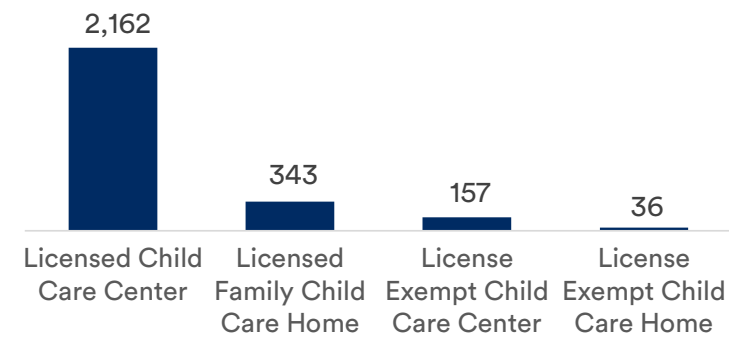
There are also preschool programs (outside of Preschool for All and Head Start) funded through various school districts throughout Tazewell and Woodford Counties that provide additional options for families. These programs are important aspects of our communities, and local districts recognize them. One of the largest Preschool for All programs in our Region has had to rely on extra school district funding to adequately serve enrolled children. When collaboration with local school districts/associations programs become more available, families face fewer barriers to enrollment, and children can thrive.

Child Care

Child care in Region 53 was one of the most highly discussed topics during our community stakeholder and caregiver conversations. There are multiple types of child care in Region 53, offering play-based and curriculum-based programming to assist in educating our youngest learners and to accommodate families

with typical working hours. The larger cities house large centers like the YWCA in Pekin, and Cadence Academy in Pekin, East Peoria, and Morton. License-exempt before and after-school programs are helpful once children enter Kindergarten. There are also quite a few child care homes in the Region. Despite having incomplete data surrounding Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) Care, community members shared that they are choosing FFN as an option, especially in Region 53's smaller, rural towns where there are not enough centers. FFN care is an ideal substitute for caregivers who work non-traditional hours, lack transportation, and are unable to pay the high cost of "traditional" child care.

Figure 7: Capacity by Child Care Type



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

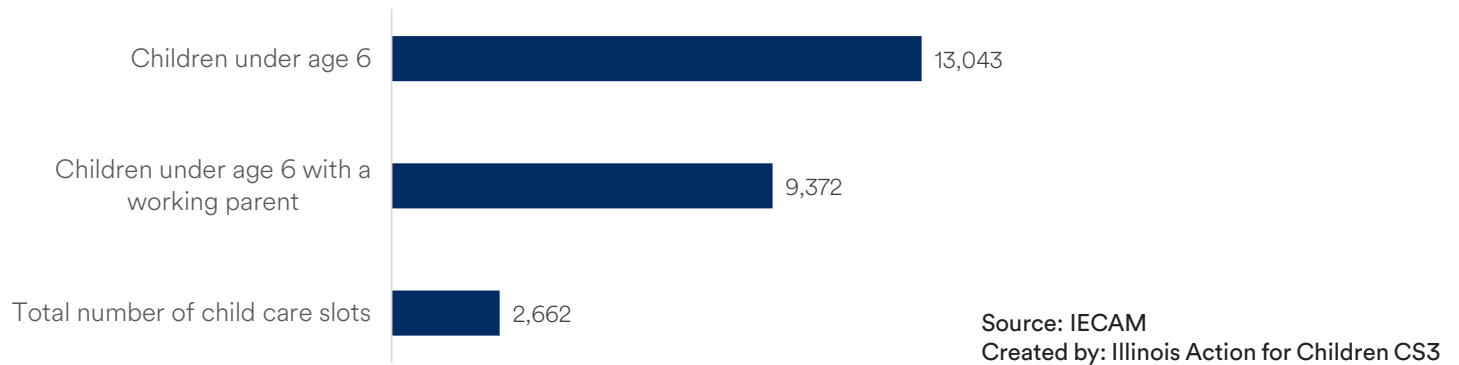
The Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) is funded through a mix of federal and state funding. Currently, there are 562 children receiving CCAP assistance. Based on our demographics, we know that 4,630 children birth to age five are living at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). To qualify for CCAP, a family's income cannot exceed 225% of FPL. This resource is underutilized in Region 53, despite being available to cover child care expenses in centers and child care homes, both licensed and license-exempt, care provided by non-relatives in a child's home, and care provided by relatives in the relative's or the child's home. Not only does CCAP provide financial assistance, but it also works with local Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies to assist families in their search for ECEC resources and child care.

Family members have noted that the process to get approved for CCAP is confusing to navigate, especially the web version of the application which ends up in "some cyber black hole" and is never processed. Child care providers' experiences with CCAP are also not always pleasant. They reported that they allow children to be enrolled in child care while they have an application pending with CCAP, which will back pay up to 45 days; however, applications are not being processed for months, which places an unnecessary financial burden on child care providers.

Knowing what is in the Region for ECEC programs is an important piece in understanding what is currently working and what could be done better. It is especially helpful for families who have discussed the need to have better access to information about the Region's resources, so they can attempt to utilize them. In other words, as a family member in Mason County stated, "you don't know what you don't know."

Slot Gap

Figure 8: Number of Children Under the Age of Six, with a Working Parent, and Overall Child Care Slots



A slot gap is the difference between the capacity (or slots) a child care program has and the number of children who qualify for enrollment in the program. Slot gap can be measured for overall child care capacity, which includes the number of children who can attend a licensed child care home, licensed child care center, or a license-exempt child care center.

Overall, there are only 2,662 licensed and license-exempt child care home and center slots in Region 53 (Figure 6). However, there are over 9,000 children with working caregivers in the Region, leaving many families without access to care. Some families have decided to work different shifts to be able to avoid child care altogether but are missing out on time together as a family. Many families have reported they rely on Family, Friend, and Neighbor care; however, the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) reports that there are only 36 license-exempt family child care homes, which are limited in the number of children they can care for at one time.

Grandparents in the Region reported they are helping to fill the child care gap by transporting grandchildren to and from half-day preschool programs and then providing care for the rest of the workday. Yet many of the families in the Region do not have a “typical” 9:00am to 5:00pm schedule. This is an issue because there are no licensed centers or homes that provide child care for non-typical work schedules, such as second or third shift. As a result of the lack of child care slots, there are multiple social media pages where desperate families ask strangers to help find or provide child care. Families are making their child care decisions based on what is available over finding a safe and quality child care option that does not have a long waitlist. Region 53 families have also reported they have had to miss work or quit their jobs due to the lack of child care.

“Child care is not available second or third shifts or on the weekends. Finding a dependable in-home provider willing to work with CCAP for payment is also deeply challenging.”
- Community Member (Tazewell County)

Families and caregivers are dealing with rising costs, navigating work and home life post-pandemic, and are also faced with the harsh reality of not having access to ECEC programs. Many caregivers have had to drop out of the workforce to stay home with children; some have reported they have missed interviews and have had to miss work to the point they were fired because they did not have adequate child care. It goes without saying, losing a job has compounding and long-lasting effects on a family’s financial well-being. Professionals have noted that children are coming into kindergarten lacking academic and social-emotional skills due to the unavailability of care.

Community members said that a lack of teachers and staff, inconsistent CCAP payments, and challenging accreditation and licensing requirements are possible drivers of slot gaps in the Region. They also said that most child care centers cannot offer the same benefits or pay as school districts, which makes it difficult to retain qualified teachers and staff. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic caused classroom closures, and in some cases, those classrooms never re-opened.

“As I have discussions with people who used to manage these facilities, many conversations have been focused on how the state of Illinois continues to push mandates that make it increasingly difficult for a small facility to stay afloat. Facility accreditation, licensure, and stringent individual licensure requirements, on top of an already stretched workforce, created issues in terms of staffing. In both cases, it appeared the demand and need were present, but the everchanging rules and regulations put in place by our state government drove the ultimate cost of doing business to a level that was unsustainable long-term.

- Mayor

”

Another slot gap to consider is the one for state and federally publicly funded ECEC programs, including Early Head Start, Head Start, Preschool for All (PFA), Preschool for All Expansion (PFA-E), and Prevention Initiative (PI). While each program uses their own set of criteria to determine enrollment eligibility, family income is always a factor. As a result, the funded capacity (or slots) is typically measured against the number of children who live at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). Because different programs serve different age groups, the publicly funded slot gap discussion in this report is broken into programs for children ages birth to two and children ages three to five.

Prevention Initiative and Early Head Start have 98 slots that are available to children ages birth to two who live at or below 200% FPL in Region 53. However, it should be noted that the data for Early Head Start is incomplete, as there are more children served in both Tazewell and Woodford County than are accounted for in a neighboring Region’s numbers. These programs are home-based and because of the rural nature and size of the Region, providers have indicated that it is difficult to add more children to their caseloads. Another thing to take into account is some of the families in Region 53 are unhoused and may be living with other families. These circumstances can make families hesitant to sign up for any sort of home visiting programs because they do not have the freedom to invite providers into a home that is not theirs.

Figure 9: Publicly Funded Program Slots for Children Ages Birth to Two

Program	Slots	Children Ages Three to Five at 200% FPL
Early Head St	8	2,285
Preve	90	2,285
Total	98	2,285

Source: IECAM
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

There are a total of 1,126 publicly funded slots for children ages three to five, leaving 1,219 eligible children without a slot. When community members were asked about the drivers of the slot gap for publicly funded programs, the biggest issue raised was that most in the Region have long waitlists. By the time there is an opening, children have aged off the waitlists. However, some community members noted their programs always operate on a waitlist so as not to have a decrease in their funding.

Figure 10: Publicly Funded Program Slots for Children Ages Three to Five

Program	Slots	Children Ages Three to Five at 200% FPL
Head St	274	2,345
Preschool f	832	2,345
Preschool f	20	2,345
Total	1,126	2,345

Source: IECAM

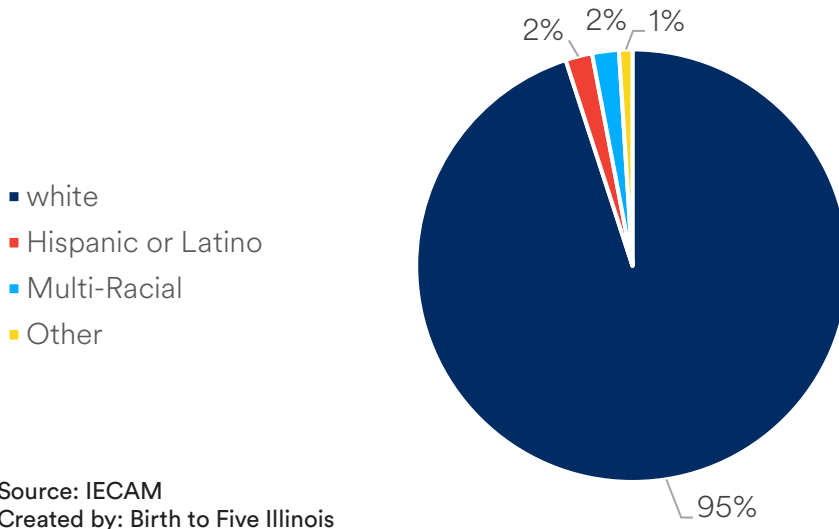
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Additional drivers of the slot gaps in publicly funded programs that community member identified were the inability to retain staff in addition to the lack of physical space to add classrooms; qualified teachers to open existing classrooms; not only buses but also bus drivers to transport children to and from programs.

Understanding the Region's slot gap and contributing factors can help determine where the greatest needs are and direct funding and resources to support children and families in those areas.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

Figure 11: Licensed Center Teaching Staff by Race and Ethnicity⁵



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

The needs of children birth to age five cannot be addressed without also acknowledging the needs of the ECEC workforce that devotes their time to them. The workforce in the Region is well educated, with the overwhelming majority having at least some college. Data shows that the majority of the ECEC workforce in Region 53 self-identifies as white. Looking at regional demographics, one could assume the racial/ethnic makeup of the workforce is representative of the children that live here, but according to community conversations, the demographics of staff are slowly beginning to not match that of the community served. Only 13 staff in the Region reported being bilingual. As mentioned in demographics, having bilingual staff is a small, but growing need.

Historically, women have been the primary child care workforce, so it is not surprising that women make up most of the Region’s child care staff at 99%.

“We have a Spanish-speaking student this year and zero resources to support them as an English Language Learner. Family engagement is really important to us and we cannot engage this child’s family. We need staff that are bilingual.”
-Community Member (Mason County)

As with most of the state of Illinois, the ECEC workforce in Region 53 has challenges to overcome, but there are many passionate people working to have a great impact on children in the Region and numerous initiatives currently in place to help stabilize and attract new people to the workforce. Digging into the data provided insight into what is happening but hearing directly from those working with children helped paint a far more robust picture. It is not an exaggeration to say every publicly funded program and child care program in the Region has expressed frustration regarding the ability to hire and retain staff.

An Action Council member from Woodford County noted that they are desperate for more home visiting staff and are currently covering visits and stepping in to fill multiple roles to remain operable. This lack of staff negatively affects families and children because building relationships is an important part of home visiting; when multiple staff are in and out of a home, those valuable relationships cannot be built and nurtured. Some families reported having had up to five different home visitors within a three-year period, forcing them to retell their stories multiple times. This sentiment has been echoed by those in the child care workforce. “Kids need routine, and we are covering in classrooms that we are not normally in, causing confusion for the children, multiple times per day.”

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on Region 53’s workforce. None of the child care centers in Region 53 closed during the pandemic, but 81% did have to close classrooms due to staff not

⁵ Less than 1% of respondents self-identified as Black or African American. Other includes Native American/Alaskan Native, Pacific Islander, or Other, but does not include Asian or other listed categories.

returning to work because of safety concerns and pay. Workforce navigators from Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (CCR&R) believe the combination of rising costs, lack of financial incentives, and taking on more work due to being short-staffed have caused staff to leave child care to work in publicly funded preschool programs, as paraprofessionals in school districts, or leave the Early Childhood field altogether. Initiatives that help boost pay, like the Great START Wage Supplement Program that provides supplemental income for the child care workforce, are highly praised and appreciated but there are worries about what happens when that boost runs out.

Child care staff surveyed and interviewed throughout the Region shared that benefits such as medical insurance, sick time, and paid time off are great incentives that would keep them at their current workplace. Providing discounted or free child care was also something staff said would be helpful for employee retention.

Retaining staff is not the only issue in Region 53. Finding qualified staff has been a real struggle. Thankfully, there are high school programs and higher education opportunities that are actively working to attract new people into the field. For example, Pekin Community High School has an on-site child care center that has helped the school retain their staff and prepared high school students for careers or further ECEC education. Students enrolled in the high school's Early Childhood program leave with a Level One ECE credential, which makes them workforce ready.

“ Yes, it's nice that we are getting money from the State to help supplement teacher salaries, but what happens when that money is gone? I'm going to have to seriously jack-up the prices to families.
- Child Care Center Director (Tazewell County) ”

“ I am not making enough to pay for my child to come to the child care that I work at, and that is just sad. We should at least get a discount.
- Child Care Staff (Tazewell County) ”



Four hands stacked on top of each other.

ECE Navigators at Illinois Central College and Regional CCR&R offices help guide people through the college process. Colleges are also working to make sure their courses are offered on multiple platforms and times to accommodate students' needs. A bright spot for people already working or who were previous employees in the ECEC field who want to further their education is the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) Scholarship Program, which pays the total cost of college expenses (after financial aid) to help build a solid, qualified workforce.

The ECEC workforce has consistently come up in our conversations with providers and community members. No matter how many child slots are funded and how many physical classrooms there are, those spots cannot be filled without a qualified workforce that is appreciated and paid appropriately. The time for staying in a career because “you love what you do” is not sustainable; these people are taking care of and educating the future of our community.

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

When looking at experiences that parents, families, and caregivers in Region 53 face in regards to access to ECEC, it is important to first define access. In the educational system, access is commonly defined as the ways in which educational institutions and policies ensure—or at least strive to ensure—that students have equal and equitable opportunities to take full advantage of their education.⁶ There are many factors that can increase or decrease the level of access to programs. Common barriers that parents, families, and caregivers in Region 53 reported facing on a daily basis include lack of transportation, high cost of child care, lack of availability of care, not being able to choose based on the quality of care, lack of qualified staff to educate their children with disabilities, and the lack of overall knowledge that specific resources even exist.

Transportation Barriers

While discussing barriers to access with our Action and Family Councils, many members expressed their frustration with the lack of transportation in our Region. Parents and caregivers need transportation, not only from school buses getting children to and from school, but also the public transportation in rural areas to assist them in getting to other child care services, prenatal appointments, pediatrician appointments, and court hearings. One Family Council member described having to plan her morning around a 20-minute commute, one way, to get her child to child care because no other transportation or care options were available.

Family Council members, as well as many community members, shared they must leave work in the middle of the day, or rearrange their work schedules entirely, to pick their children up from preschool and transport them to another child care option. Parents and caregivers shared their stories of having to choose between being available to transport their children between programs or working, potentially leaving their children without valuable learning opportunities.

“Being in a rural community, it is not unheard of for a child to be on the school bus for 45 minutes to an hour. I do not like this for my own child, but working in the school district, I also understand there is a bus driver shortage.”

- Family Council Member
(Mason County)

Barriers Due to Cost, Access & Quality

Family Council members discussed the extremely high price of child care in their communities and how not all parents/caregivers qualify for CCAP.

One member shared that her son was supposed to attend the child care center where she currently works. Due to not qualifying for CCAP and not receiving a discount from her employer, the cost of full-time child care was too expensive. To help alleviate some of the cost, she only sends her son to the child care center three days per week, while her parents keep her child the other two days each week.

We heard that families want the ability to choose child care based on quality, trust, and care. Unfortunately, with the current ECEC landscape in Region 53, the ability to choose simply is not there.

“Child care is expensive out of pocket. Not all families qualify for CCAP due to making too much money but could use the help.”

- Family Council Member
(Tazewell County)

⁶ <https://www.edglossary.org/access/>

With limited spots at child care centers, parents/caregivers are having to choose care based on what is available rather than what they consider to be quality care. Wait lists at child care centers are growing longer and longer, with some centers having wait lists well over a year long. A Family Council member who recently moved to Tazewell County from out of the country shared that one child care center that she contacted told her their wait list was over two years long.



Child holding hands with two adults.

With wait lists growing exceedingly longer each day, families may find themselves in desperate situations. Many families are turning to social media to find care for their children in a safe and trusted environment so they can go to work. Family Council members also discussed the need for child care during non-traditional hours. A lot of the parents and caregivers in Region 53 work in healthcare, manufacturing, and the service industry. These positions do not lend themselves to traditional working hours. Parents and caregivers have shared having to miss multiple scheduled shifts and even losing their employment because child care during these hours simply is not available.

Along with not having second and third-shift care, families in Region 53 are also faced with the challenge of almost zero full-day publicly funded options. Most preschool options in the area only offer half-day programming, again forcing caregivers to rearrange their work schedules or opt for child care instead of publicly funded programming. Without transportation to and from services, more full-day options, or child care options during non-traditional working hours, the ability for families to choose their providers or even have the option to work is nonexistent.

Regional Strengths & Needs

The Family Council, Action Council, and community members at large all expressed that Region 53 has many strengths in the current ECEC system. While praising the existing programs, they also acknowledged that there were areas in which ECEC may be more accessible and equitable to families and where it may better support providers.

Strengths

- Strong Sense of Community
 - Neighbors help each other overcome child care and transportation obstacles.
 - Families and caregivers are willing to share their stories.
- Resilient ECEC Network
 - Existing Local Community Collaborations.
 - Passionate ECEC providers contribute their stories to enhance the available quantitative data.
 - Location and variety of publicly funded programs meet the needs of the Region.
- Educational Support
 - High school programs introducing Early Childhood Education.
 - Supports available for people interested in pursuing higher education.

Needs

- Child care for full-day and non-typical hours.
- Retention of qualified staff.
- Additional Early Intervention (EI) therapists to serve rural areas.
- Affordable child care options including child care centers and homes and increased acceptance of the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP).
- Trauma-informed and culturally sensitive training and professional development to serve diverse populations, including Spanish-speaking children, children with disabilities, and children that have experienced abuse and/or neglect.
- Transportation, especially in rural areas.
- System alignment and growth.
- Funding structure.
- Common intake process.
- Clear messaging and organization of available resources.
- Efficient and comprehensive data collection.
- Non-competitive and collaborative funding for braiding financial streams.

⁶ <https://www.edglossary.org/access/>

Recommendations

The needs of Region 53 should be addressed in a community-systems way, which requires the collaboration of the private sector, local and state government, ECEC providers, and community organizations working together to:

- Increase funding to attract and retain staff in all areas of the ECEC landscape.
- Provide incentives, such as loan forgiveness, tuition reimbursement, free transcript retrieval, paid training and professional development opportunities, tax breaks, collective bargaining for health insurance, and child care reimbursements for the child care workforce.
- Offer flexible scheduling to address both staff needs and families' needs for non-traditional child care hours.
- Provide incentives for child care centers and homes that accept more families utilizing CCAP, such as higher reimbursement rates, higher reimbursement for equipment, and a streamlined CCAP experience for all.
- Adequate funding is needed to provide full-day publicly funded programs that provide transportation.
- Collaboration among community organizations and local governments to promote and provide resources that families in the Region have expressed a need for, such as gas vouchers, public transportation, trauma therapies, efficient referrals, developmental screenings, English language learner courses. etc.
- Create a data resource that collects statewide data and displays it in an easily accessible and understandable way.

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

Appendices

Appendix A: References

1. Erikson Institute (2019). Illinois Risk and Reach Report. Site name: <https://riskandreach.erikson.edu/>
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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/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 childcare services you're using now meet your family's needs? If not, please describe what would better fit your family's needs.
4. What, if anything, has been particularly helpful in making Early Childhood Education and Care work for your family?
5. What barriers or challenges has your family had with using Early Childhood services in your community?
6. Have any of the children in your care been referred to services? What was that process like?
7. What services don't currently exist in your community that you think would help families, in general? What services would help parents/caregivers, specifically?

Parents/Families/Caregivers of Children Involved in the Child Welfare System

1. Please tell me your story and the story of your family, e.g., who are you, how do you support yourself, how many children do you have, how old are they, where are they now, etc.?
2. What was that like for you as a parent?
3. What was it like to navigate the juvenile court system? Do you believe the system fairly represented your interests/rights as a parent, as well as your children's interests/rights?
4. What would you change or improve, if anything, to ensure the system effectively supports children and families?
5. What public or private resources/programs did you use, if any, to support your and/or your children's needs before your children were placed in state custody, e.g., food benefits, healthcare benefits, home visiting, child care subsidies, Head Start, etc.?
 - a. If resources and programs were used:
 - i. What was it like to access these programs and navigate the enrollment process?
 - ii. How well did these resources and programs meet your needs and your children's physical, mental, social and emotional development needs?
 - iii. What would you change or improve, if anything, to ensure resources and programs effectively support children and families?
 - iv. Do you believe that more effective and/or more easily accessible programs and services would have prevented your children from being placed in state custody? If so, how and in what ways?
6. What public or private resources/programs do you use now, if any, to support your and/or your children's needs?
 - a. In what ways do these resources and programs help you be the best parent you can be? What is lacking and if you had it, how would it help you?

- b. In what ways do these resources and programs help your children develop physically, academically, socially and emotionally? What is lacking and if your children had it, how would it help them grow, develop, and thrive?

Early Childhood Professionals and Others

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

Foster Parent

1. Please describe the children currently or previously in your care, e.g., who are they, what challenges do they face, what are their prospects once they enter the foster care system, and what determines their short- and long-term prospects?
2. From your perspective, what is it like for children, parents, and foster parents to navigate the foster care system?
3. Do you believe the system fairly and effectively represents children's interests?
4. Do you believe the system fairly and effectively represents parents, families, and foster parents' interests?
5. What would you change or improve, if anything, to ensure the system more effectively supports parents, families, and foster parents?
6. What public or private resources/programs do children, parents and foster parents have access to once they are involved in the foster care system?
 - a. How difficult/easy is it to access these programs and navigate the enrollment process?
 - b. How well do these resources and programs meet children's physical, mental, social and emotional development needs?
 - c. How well and in what ways do these resources and programs meet foster parent needs, as well as support you to be the foster parent you strive to be?
 - d. What would you change or improve, if anything, to ensure resources and programs more effectively support children and foster parents?
 - e. Do you believe that more effective and/or more easily accessible ECEC programs and services would prevent some children from being involved in the foster care system? If so, please describe the programs and services and how and in what ways they might prevent involvement.

7. What happens when the foster care system comes up short or fails to meet children’s and/or foster parents’ needs?
8. What are your overall thoughts, opinions and perspectives on both state and local policies, programs, systems, and resources that support foster children, families and the foster parents who support them?
 - a. What is the state and/or our community doing well to support children, families, and foster parents?
 - b. What could the state and/or our community do differently or better to support children, families, and foster parents?
9. What was it like to navigate the juvenile court system? Do you believe the system fairly represented your interests/rights as a parent, as well as your children’s interests/rights?
10. What public or private resources/programs did you use, if any, to support your and/or your children’s needs before your children were placed in state custody, e.g., food benefits, healthcare benefits, home visiting, child care subsidies, Head Start, etc.?
11. What public or private resources/programs do you use now, if any, to support your and/or your children’s needs?
 - a. In what ways do these resources and programs help you be the best parent you can be? What is lacking and if you had it, how would it help you?
 - b. In what ways do these resources and programs help your children develop physically, academically, socially and emotionally? What is lacking and if your children had it, how would it help them grow, develop, and thrive?
12. What are your overall thoughts, opinions and perspectives on both state and local policies, programs, systems, and resources that support children and families?

Questions for Kindergarten Teachers

1. Please describe the children you work with, e.g., who they are, what kind of families and communities they come from, and what is their home life like.
2. How well and in what ways are your students prepared to thrive in kindergarten?
 - a. What developmentally appropriate skills and abilities do your students possess when they first enter kindergarten?
 - b. What developmentally appropriate skills and abilities do your students lack when they first enter kindergarten?
 - c. Assuming variance among children, why do you think some kindergarten students are more prepared to thrive than others?
 - d. What academic differences do you observe and experience among kindergarten students who participated in preschool, pre-k, and/or any other early learning programs and those who did not? To what do you attribute these differences?
3. How and in what ways do you believe the COVID-19 pandemic affected young children’s development?
 - a. Why do you believe this?
 - b. What specifically have you observed and/or experienced?
4. What do you observe and experience with respect to students’ social and emotional readiness for kindergarten?
5. How and in what ways does social and emotional readiness vary among your students?

6. How and in what ways have you had to adjust your teaching and/or expectations of students to accommodate the variance in students' social and emotional readiness?
7. What could or should happen in young children's development so every student enters kindergarten prepared to thrive?
8. What role should parents, caregivers, the community, and/or the state play in ensuring all children are prepared to thrive in kindergarten?
9. What state and/or local policy and program changes would you like to see enacted and practiced to ease children's transition into kindergarten and ensure they are prepared to thrive?

Guardian Ad Litem, Attorney & Judge Interview Questions

1. Please describe the children and/or families you work with, e.g., who they are, what challenges they face, what are their prospects once they enter the juvenile court system, and what determines their short- and long-term prospects.
2. From your perspective, what is it like for children/parents/caregivers/families to navigate the juvenile court system? Do you believe the system fairly and effectively represents children's interests? What about parents/families/caregivers?
3. What public or private resources/programs do children and families have access to once they are involved in the juvenile court system?
 - a. How difficult/easy is it to access these programs and navigate the enrollment process?
 - b. How well do these resources and programs meet parent and/or family needs?
 - c. How well do these resources and programs meet children's physical, mental, social and emotional development needs?
 - d. What would you change or improve, if anything, to ensure resources and programs more effectively support children and families?
 - e. Do you believe that more effective and/or more easily accessible programs and services would prevent some children from being involved in the juvenile court system? If so, please describe the programs and services and how and in what ways they might prevent involvement.
6. What does the juvenile court system do to hold (involved) parents and families accountable for ensuring children's physical, mental, social and emotional needs are met?
7. What happens when accountability systems reveal shortcomings and/or failures?

Domestic Violence Advocacy Questions

1. How have your services changed over the past few years?
2. How do you think those changes impact families/Early Childhood Education and Care?
3. What challenges do you think families have in accessing Early Childhood Education and Care?
4. What has your experience been in providing services to families in recovery or experiencing substance abuse disorders? Involved with the justice system?
5. Do you know of any programs to support children birth-five from families who are unhoused?

Appendix C: Additional Resources

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

1. Community Action Partnership of Central Illinois (CAPCIL) Annual Report (2021):
[fe87f0_ea856b8c7dd14afc810037233cc2c650.pdf \(capcil.info\)](#)
2. Tazewell-Woodford Head Start Annual Report (2021-2022):
[2021-2022 Annual Report - Final.pub \(twhsp.org\)](#)

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