



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

State & Regional
Needs & Recommendations



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Statewide Needs & Recommendations

After reviewing quantitative and qualitative data, Regional Teams met with their Council members to identify strengths, needs, and recommendations related to the data they found. Strengths were largely Regionally based and did not apply statewide. However, a review of the Regional Needs Assessments revealed common needs and recommendations that were applicable statewide. Region-specific strengths, needs, and recommendations are provided below.

Statewide Needs

These were the most prominent needs identified across the State; additional needs are listed below by theme:

- More affordable and available slots in ECEC programs.
- More livable and fair wages for ECEC professionals.
- More mental health services for children birth to age five and their families.
- A more efficient way of gathering information/data pertaining to children and resources.

Access/Affordability/Need for Funding

- Increased access to affordable child care options.
- Improved access to publicly funded half-day and full-day preschool programs, and second and third shift slots, to meet the growing demand for ECEC.
- A family navigation system to ease the enrollment processes and to help families find appropriate programs and services.

CCAP

- Solutions to address the limited CCAP eligibility.
- Per policy, the provider may not charge the State more than its private pay parents. As CCAP rates are raised, providers must also raise the private pay rates to an equal amount, forcing many caregivers to find alternative arrangements that they can afford. We need a CCAP policy that does not cause a disruption of care, both for the child and their family.

DCFS

- Increased transparency for DCFS licensing requirements, policies, and procedures.

Special Education

- Improvements in the evaluation process for special education services.
- A decrease in excessive wait times for disability screenings and diagnoses.
- An increase in service providers (i.e., speech and physical therapists) in classrooms.

Workforce/Professional/Staff/Provider

- ECEC workforce needs include increasing staff compensation, scholarships, and an ethnically diverse workforce in higher level positions.
- Social-emotional support for ECEC professionals.
- Improved workforce recruitment and retention of ECEC staff, particularly the recruitment of multilingual educators to meet the needs of English Language Learners (ELL) and therapeutic staff.

Data

- A more efficient way of gathering information/data pertaining to children and resources.
- Implement an advanced data collection mechanism that guarantees comprehensive, precise, and pertinent information is acquired, which will provide imperative insights to enhance ECEC programs.

Language

- Enhance access and communication within all ECEC settings with efforts to minimize language barriers.
- Applications need to be readily available and equipped to cater to diverse languages and abilities.

Transportation

- Improved public transportation infrastructure to increase accessibility to promote equity, ensuring that all families, regardless of their socioeconomic status or location, have opportunities to access the resources necessary for the well-being and development of their children.

Awareness

- Increased information sharing with families about programs and services that are currently available and/or under-utilized.
- Clear, concise, and understandable language regarding how children qualify for Early Intervention services.

Mental/Behavioral/Emotional Health

- Increased access to/awareness of available mental health/social emotional resources.
- Wrap-around and/or integrated services that address the social-emotional, behavioral, and therapy needs of children and their caregivers.
- Lower qualifying thresholds to access EI, especially for social-emotional health.

Statewide Recommendations

Create, Expand, and Improve

- Create more publicly funded center-based programming for all ages (particularly in rural areas) for children, especially for children ages birth through two.
- A more streamlined referral service among ECEC providers.
- Provide more specialized care providers (i.e., speech and physical therapists) in classrooms.

Grants and Other Funding Support

- Program investments including full-day programs, more locations, and different types of care.
- Fund or reimburse rates for smaller class sizes or ratios at maximum group licensing sizes for providers receiving state or federal funding to keep costs down for infant, toddler, and two-year-old programs.
- Reinstate 2% cuts made in the current cycle to Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) funding and across the board increases in the current cycle continuation grant to accommodate the rising cost of goods and services relative to inflation and the increase in personnel costs relative to increases in the Illinois minimum wage requirements.
- More PFA/PFA-E full day educational programs for working parents and caregivers with expanded grant capacity to allow programs to provide before and after school care for working parents.
- Reinstate funding for Child Care Restoration Grants or target new public funds to offer higher wages, benefits packages, and bonuses for continuing education; make these funding streams available on a multiyear/permanent cycle to allow for long-term business model forecasting.
- ISBE should provide progressive funding for multi-year grants. A minimum of 3% increased funding to cover compensation increases, staff benefit cost increases, cost of living adjustments, and increased operational expenses.

CCAP

- Expand CCAP eligibility.
- We encourage IDHS to continue to decouple private pay rates with CCAP rates and streamline the application process.
- The State should increase the amount of CCAP payments for second/third shift care more than payment for first shift care to provide an incentive for providers to increase second/third shift slots.
- The State should provide an online portal that families and providers can use for paperwork.
- The State should improve the DCFS payments approval process to decrease wait time for payments. This improvement will increase the number of programs willing to accept DCFS payment vouchers for children in DCFS care and thereby increase the number of families willing to foster children who are not old enough to be enrolled in public school.

DCFS

- Improve communication and consistency with DCFS licensing agents to support more licensed home-based providers.

Special Education

- Increase access to quality screenings: Implement developmental screening requirements with systemic technical support and oversight for child care providers to ensure developmental delays are remediated at the earliest intervention point.
- Increase the availability of inclusive child care for children with disabilities and require Early Childhood Special Education courses at the associate level.

Workforce/Professional/Staff/Provider

- Provide ECEC staff with equitable pay and benefits that include medical, sick time, vacation time, retirement, and FMLA (Family and Medical Leave Act).
- Create statewide salary guidelines for ECEC staff to ensure equitable living wages and annual increases and establish incentives for early learning professionals.

Data

- Improve public facing data system with current demographic data that includes priority population categories, eligibility, slot gap, enrollment, and provider and program quality data by community level and/or zip code.
- The system should ensure seamless coordination and tracking of aggregated data across various funding sources, including dual-funded slots, license-exempt slots, preschool slots, services to priority populations, screening methods, results, and waitlists.

Language

- Enhance accessibility and inclusivity by offering comprehensive language support to Spanish-speaking families and children, including the provision of qualified translators/interpreters and culturally responsive providers.
- Revise and enhance the application processes for programs like publicly funded housing, CCAP, Individualized Education Plans (IEP), and Social Security, by developing simplified applications that utilize clear, user-friendly language and offer alternative formats to accommodate diverse abilities and languages.

Transportation

- Continue to elevate transportation and explore different ways of access for families. We encourage the State to explore alternative delivery models to get services to families to meet these needs.
- Establish funding to support transportation costs, such as community partnerships, partnerships with school districts, and transportation specific grants to fund ECEC programs that need to update their fleets to meet workforce challenges.

Unique & Notable Recommendations

- Programs need to be developed to entice pediatric dentists to accept Medicaid in the Region. Policy change would be recommended to increase reimbursement rates for services provided and to expedite payments to providers. Another option would be for the State to create a new program with a prepaid dental card separate from existing insurance plans that would pay each provider directly.
- Incentivize ECEC professionals and programs to be more culturally responsive, linguistically accessible, and inclusive of children with disabilities. Provide funding to support staff development and make structural or programmatic changes over the next three years.
- Create low-interest rate loan programs to incentivize center AND home-based providers interested in expanding/establishing licensed centers for care.

Region 1

Adams, Brown, Cass, Morgan, Pike, and Scott Counties

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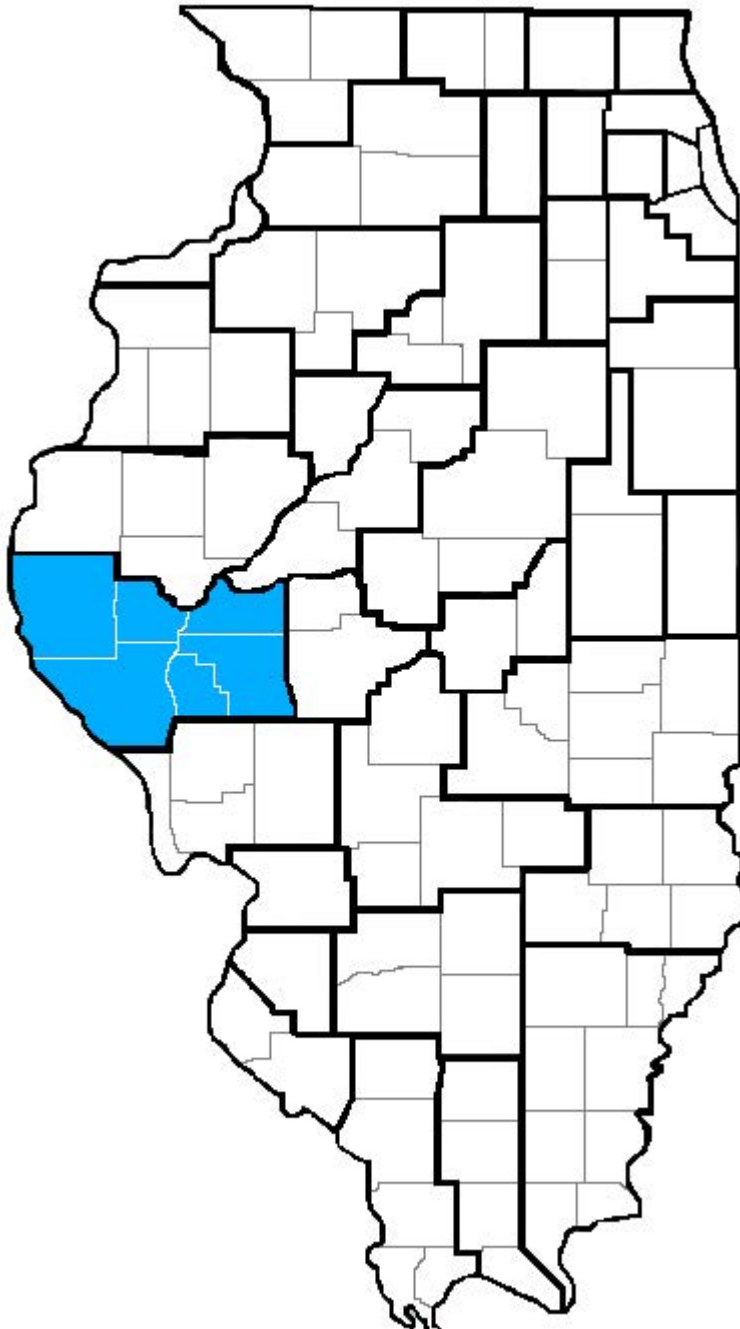
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Regional Strengths & Needs

Region 1 has strengths to build upon in several areas, which offers a foundation from which to drive solutions to Regional needs.

Strengths

- Foundation of strong community partnerships: In all but one county in the Region, there is an existing network of community agencies that gather regularly to share information and resources. These groups can be tapped to identify contacts with critical community partners and to communicate the need for ECEC-specific committees or groups dedicated to systems-wide support within the ECEC landscape.
 - The Brown County Early Childhood Collaboration and their partner, The Tracy Family Foundation (and by extension, Dot Foods), provide a regional model for how employers can engage the workforce to determine child care needs and promote public/private Collaborations to fund initiatives to meet needs as identified.
 - The Adams County Health Department All Our Kids Network (AOK) provides a Regional model for an ECEC specific Collaboration and how those Collaborations might serve the community.
 - The Integrated Referral and Intake System (IRIS), administered by the AOK Network in Quincy (Adams County), provides a Regional model of a Coordinated Intake and referral system.
- Innovative regional ECEC program models: Region 1 has several program initiatives that can serve as models for other programs to follow. Examples of these regional models include, but are not limited to:
 - Transitional Kindergarten in Quincy models how to identify and serve children who require an additional year at age five to prepare for Kindergarten.
 - The Loretta M. Eno Early Learning Center, attached to the Blessing Health System in Quincy (Adams County), tailors hours and programming to the needs of the healthcare workforce in that community and provides a model for other regional healthcare systems in communities with a substantial healthcare workforce.
 - The Early Years Program (EYP) in JSD117 provides a regional model for maximizing services under the Prevention Initiative Grant, with seven full time home visitors serving over 100 children in Jacksonville, Illinois. The EYP also offers the only Preschool For All Expansion Grant in the Region.
- Utilization of public education funding for 3–5-year-olds:
 - With 18 of 20 school districts currently running PFA programs for three- to five-year-olds, the regional footprint of these public funds is significant.
 - PACT Head Start is utilizing federal HS/EHS funding to provide center-based and home-visiting services in the most remote counties of the Region, providing a model of how one program can combine resources to serve a large service delivery area.
 - The blended funding model in the Early Childhood and Family Center, in Quincy (Adams County), combines federal Head Start funds with ISBE Early Childhood Block Grant funds in one program and serves as a model for collaboration between these two funding streams.

- Training and educational opportunities: The infrastructure for offering training and educational opportunities to the workforce is expanding in several different institutions and across varied delivery systems (online and in person). These opportunities include:
 - The Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) program at John Wood Community College (JWCC) and Lincoln Land Community College (LLCC). These programs provide scholarships/support resources to current ECEC workforce members to advance education and training in ECEC skills and certifications.
 - Early Childhood Education Professional Educator Licensure (PEL) program at Quincy University provides licensure for certified teachers in Early Childhood.
 - English as a Second Language (ESL) endorsement at Illinois College offers teacher candidates and current educators with a PEL the opportunity to gain language and cultural skills for multilingual learners.
 - The Vocational Preschool at Quincy Area Vocational Technical Center program offers high school students direct contact and training with preschoolers as they learn child development and child care skills for further education in the ECEC workforce.

Needs

- Improve outreach to families and awareness of available services in rural areas: The rural nature of the Region means there is a universal need for increased access to, and awareness of, existing services.
- Increase ECEC capacity for ages birth to three years old: The lack of services for children from birth to three years old is reflected in the number of publicly funded education programs for this age demographic, which currently is less than 50% of the programs offered for three- to five-year-olds. Infant and toddler slots in center-based care facilities have the highest wait lists of any early childhood demographic.
- Recruit and retain a stable, diverse, and high-quality workforce: Regional workforce needs rank among the highest and most critical needs in the ECEC landscape. These needs are reflected in the following areas: recruitment/pipeline development, education and training, and compensation.
- More affordable child care for families: There is a high demand for child care throughout the Region, and a lack of licensed centers demonstrating Bronze, Silver, or Gold quality standards according to the ExceleRate rating system used statewide.
- More availability of quality developmental screenings: Access to consistent, quality developmental screenings is challenged by the rural nature of Region and the lack of ECEC programs in some areas, specifically in the birth to three age demographics.
- Access to language supports: As the Region continues to diversify by the number of languages spoken, there is a need to increase translation and interpretation services, as well as a need for educators trained in specific English language instructional strategies for multilingual learners. The need in this area is greatest in Cass, Morgan, and Pike Counties.
- Increased access to/awareness of mental health/social emotional resources: Across all sectors, ECEC stakeholders report an increase in the need for the workforce and the children/families accessing ECEC programs about mental health and social emotional resources.

- **Transportation:** Transportation for children and families throughout the Region poses a challenge in terms of funding to programs and the workforce. Many programs are struggling to maintain pre-COVID levels of transportation to students, with some school districts cutting or eliminating transportation in PFA programs. These cuts put the burden of transportation to these programs on child care centers, home-based child care providers, and parents/caregivers. Where transportation is provided, home-based child care providers who live too close in proximity to the schools to qualify for bus service may not have the capacity to transport the children in their care to educational programs during the day.
- **Increased funding and eligibility to publicly funded education programs:** Publicly funded education programs need to have funding levels re-examined at the federal and state levels to compensate for the rise in overall costs of goods and services, as well as the increases in the Illinois state minimum wage requirements. Rising minimum wages impact both eligibility for children/families, as well as the ability of ECEC employers to offer competitive compensation packages to their staff.
- **Access to data:** More data is needed in Region 1 to accurately measure where the greatest needs are in the most diverse and remote areas.

Recommendations

The Region 1 Councils discussed dozens of recommendations for systemic changes that could improve the lives of the families and children in the local communities. They understood, however, the necessity to prioritize those recommendations that would have the most profound impact on the greatest number of community members throughout the Region.

Improve outreach to families and awareness of available services in rural areas:

- Establish Collaborations or subcommittees of current Collaborations/working groups that are specific to ECEC systems and programs.
- Develop more networking opportunities for professionals to increase awareness of current opportunities and engage with each other.
- Implement additional integrated referral systems to improve access, outreach, and awareness of critical services to families.
- Create a listing or database of resources by county with birth-to-three programs to be provided to new parents upon discharge from hospitals after labor/delivery.
- Engage the private/business sector in Community Collaborations for workforce needs identification and access to resources.

Increased birth to three services:

- Maximize publicly available funds to establish more programs and services. Increase the utilization of Prevention Initiative funds.
- Expand child care slots for infants/toddlers in home and center-based settings.
- Identify collaborations between private providers/community-based organizations and public funding opportunities.
- Increase the amount of evening and weekend home visiting hours for working parents/caregivers.
- Develop an initiative to incorporate developmental training for home providers into the workday so voluntary training does not consume valuable provider off hours.

Recruit and retain a stable, diverse, and high-quality workforce:

- Specifically recruit and incentivize hiring for candidates who are diverse by race/ethnicity and language ability, especially at the administrator level.
- Offer all employees of child care centers a form of reduced co-pay regardless of income; this must be subsidized to centers so cost is not passed on to families/caregivers.
- Reinstate funding for Child Care Restoration Grants or target new public funds to offer higher wages, benefits packages, and bonuses for continuing education; make these funding streams available on a multiyear/permanent cycle to allow for long-term business model forecasting.
- Grow the number of vocational or course-for-credit programs to allow high school students to earn course credit for entry-level credentialing and to graduate ready to enter the workforce.
- Expand ECACE to focus on high school level recruitment and home visiting professionals.
- Improve safeguards for ECEC personnel and providers who conduct home visits.

- Promote awareness of the ECACE scholarship and provide marketing materials/contact information directly to ECEC employees in the workplace; continue to build the role of Higher Education Navigators
- Streamline and shorten Professional Educator Licensure programs in Illinois (like Teach Ready in Florida) to increase the number of teachers available to ECEC programs and to retain these tuition dollars in the state of Illinois.

Increased access to affordable child care choice:

- Simplify the CCAP application and process.
- Eliminate the tiered reimbursement model for CCAP funds or make exceptions for regional hubs and counties bordering Tier 2 communities with a similar standard of living costs.
- Expand CCAP income guidelines to include more people/families.
- Improve communication and consistency with DCFS licensing agents to support more licensed home-based providers.
- Create low-interest rate loan programs to incentivize center and home-based providers interested in expanding/establishing licensed centers for care.

Increased access to quality screenings:

- Implement developmental screening requirements with systemic technical support and oversight for child care providers to ensure that developmental delays are remediated at the earliest intervention point.

Access to language supports:

- Create a regional/statewide resource list for ECEC professionals to access when searching for interpretation/translation services.
- Collaborate with Beardstown School District to establish a program to recruit and provide resources to multilingual candidates for ECEC workforce.
- Promote awareness of the ESL Endorsement and other continuing education opportunities in the instruction of multilingual learners.

Transportation:

- Establish funding to support transportation costs (for example, community partnerships); partner school districts to prioritize transportation-specific grants to fund ECEC programs that need to update their fleets to meet workforce challenges.
- Revisit current bus driver qualification requirements that are prohibitive to hiring.

Increased funding and eligibility to publicly funded education programs:

- Reinstate 2% cuts made in the current cycle to ECBG funding and across the board increases in the current cycle continuation grant to accommodate the rising cost of goods and services relative to inflation and the increase in personnel costs relative to increases in the Illinois minimum wage requirements.
- More PFA/PFA-E full day educational programs for working parents/caregivers with expanded grant capacity to allow programs to provide before and after school care.
- Coordinate applications between Head Start and PFA programs to maximize publicly funded education slots.

- Adjust Head Start income requirements to meet the increase in Illinois' minimum wage requirements to allow families earning more under increased minimum wages in to services.

Collect critical regional specific data:

- Conduct community surveys to determine the impact of families' decisions to commute their children into the communities in which they work.
- Gather an accurate measurement of the number of children in undercounted immigrant populations in Cass County.
- Provide accurate and consistent reporting on priority populations.

Region 1-A

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Regional Strengths & Needs

The ECEC Stakeholders engaged throughout this process agreed that the City of Chicago has many strengths in the current ECEC system. While rediscovering the diversity and complexity of the ECEC program offerings, they also acknowledged that there are areas in which the system urgently needs to be made more accessible and equitable to children and their families.

Region 1-A Cook County - City of Chicago Strengths

- Various Public Data Sources Document the City's Diversity:
 - Race, ethnicity, socio-economic, linguistic, community boundaries.
 - Publicly funded programs, eligible children for publicly funded programs, and number of children served.
- ECEC Landscape:
 - Variety of publicly funded ECEC programs – Home Visiting, home child care, center-based, and school-based programs.
 - Enrollment efforts taking place across the city that include various outreach strategies and application supports – centralized application system, hotline support, in-person support at programs and libraries, parent ambassadors/trusted community leaders doing door knocking, canvassing, and providing info at community events.
 - Once enrolled in ECEC programs, families feel informed about their child's development and are connected to other services/supports (e.g., special education services).
- ECEC Workforce:
 - Many existing workforce initiatives and scholarship opportunities in place.
 - Highly educated workforce
 - Racially and linguistically diverse workforce.
- Community Collaborations:
 - Collaborations meet families where they live and work to provide enrollment support and assist with navigating systems and accessing other family supports.
 - Collaborations provide real-time feedback to city and program leaders about families lived experiences to support program improvements.

Region 1-A Cook County - City of Chicago Needs

- Improve Public Facing Database System, Including:
 - Current demographic data based on State's priority population categories.
 - Breakdown of data by community level and/or zip code.
 - Unduplicated count of children being serviced by all ECEC programs.
 - Unduplicated slot gap data.
 - Unduplicated enrollment numbers.
 - Establish responsive feedback system to improve data sources from community stakeholders.

- ECEC Landscape:
 - Streamline the complex and confusing ECEC system by providing a one-stop shop at the community level that informs families about ALL the programs they are eligible for (i.e., enrollment support and referrals to other services).
 - Increase number of ECEC programs to serve all children, especially those in the birth to age three group.
 - Urgent improvement of enrollment efforts for children/families in State's priority population categories, especially those in Early Intervention and Special Education programs.
- ECEC Workforce:
 - Increase staff compensation.
 - More funding to meet scholarship demands.
 - Need more ethnically diverse workforce in higher level positions.
- Community Collaborations
 - Need more Collaborations to serve families meaningfully and effectively across communities.
 - Need to better resource local Collaborations: figure out a better way to connect them to broader framework to allow for two-way communication and support collective action.
- Slot Gap:
 - Need actual slot gap data (capacity vs. filled) by community and age group.
 - Need ECEC programs to serve eligible children and meet families' needs based on priority population categories, work schedules, and location.
 - Address workforce issues because programs may have program slots but not the staff to fill classrooms.
- Family Engagement:
 - Improve messaging and referrals to wrap around services through cross-sector partnerships (e.g., behavioral/mental health supports, child welfare, housing)
 - Identify and improve transition processes through various age groups (birth through postpartum, 0-3 programs, 3-5 programs).
 - Revisit program contracts/expectations to prioritize categorically eligible children and retrain staff to meet expectations.

“ I don't know about the programs. It's very hard to differentiate which program I qualified for - EC, HS, CCAP, etc. I didn't have anyone to really help me figure out what I qualified for. ”

- Focus Group Participant

Other Needs/Opportunities Identified by ECEC Stakeholders

- Establish citywide ECEC policy table that identifies and advocates for Chicago ECEC needs and opportunities.
- Convene stakeholders already providing urgent supports to recently arrived refugee families to formalize a process for providing access to ECEC programs and wrap around services.
- Create space for collaborations to convene for peer support and connect with local programs.
- Increase parent ambassadors/community leaders/navigators to go to all communities, similar to political canvassing door-to-door, to provide materials in languages other than English and Spanish.
- Identify, improve, and expand program offerings for families with English language learners and dual language or immersion ECEC programs.
- Review Bellwether Report to build up identified workforce needs and influence workforce initiatives. Formally connect to ECRC Workforce Subcommittee to create an action plan.
- Provide program incentives for allowing staff time to go back to school to acquire higher credentials.
- Increased State scholarship funding for new ECEC workforce candidates.

Recommendations

The Region 1-A Councils discussed various recommendations that could improve the lives of Chicago's families and children. They understood, however, the necessity to prioritize those recommendations that would have the most profound impact on the greatest number of community members throughout the Region.

- Improve public facing data system with current demographic data that includes priority population categories, eligibility, slot gap, enrollment, provider, and program quality data by community level and/or zip code (city, county, and state).
- ECEC Landscape
 - Families recommend building upon the Chicago Early Learning ECEC program system to streamline offerings by providing community hubs for one-stop shop services that provides intake support to families about ALL the programs for which they are eligible and “warm referrals” to cross-sector wrap around services.
 - Increase number of ECEC programs to serve all children, especially those in the birth to age three group.
 - Urgent improvement of enrollment efforts for children/families in State's priority population categories, especially those in Early Intervention and Special Education programs.
- Identify programs with staff vacancies and increase workforce initiatives to programs (e.g., ECEC programs, Early Intervention).
- Create sustainable funding plan that leads to an action plan to address:
 - Increased funding for ECEC programs, especially for the birth to age three group.
 - Identify funding sources for increased compensation.
 - Provide sustainable funding to support existing and new Collaborations that align to city and state ECEC initiatives.
- Establish citywide ECEC policy table to advocate for variety of ECEC issues, including but not limited to, increasing Federal Poverty Levels to accurately reflect current economic needs, universal child care, and other city, state and federal policy issues.

Region 1-B-B

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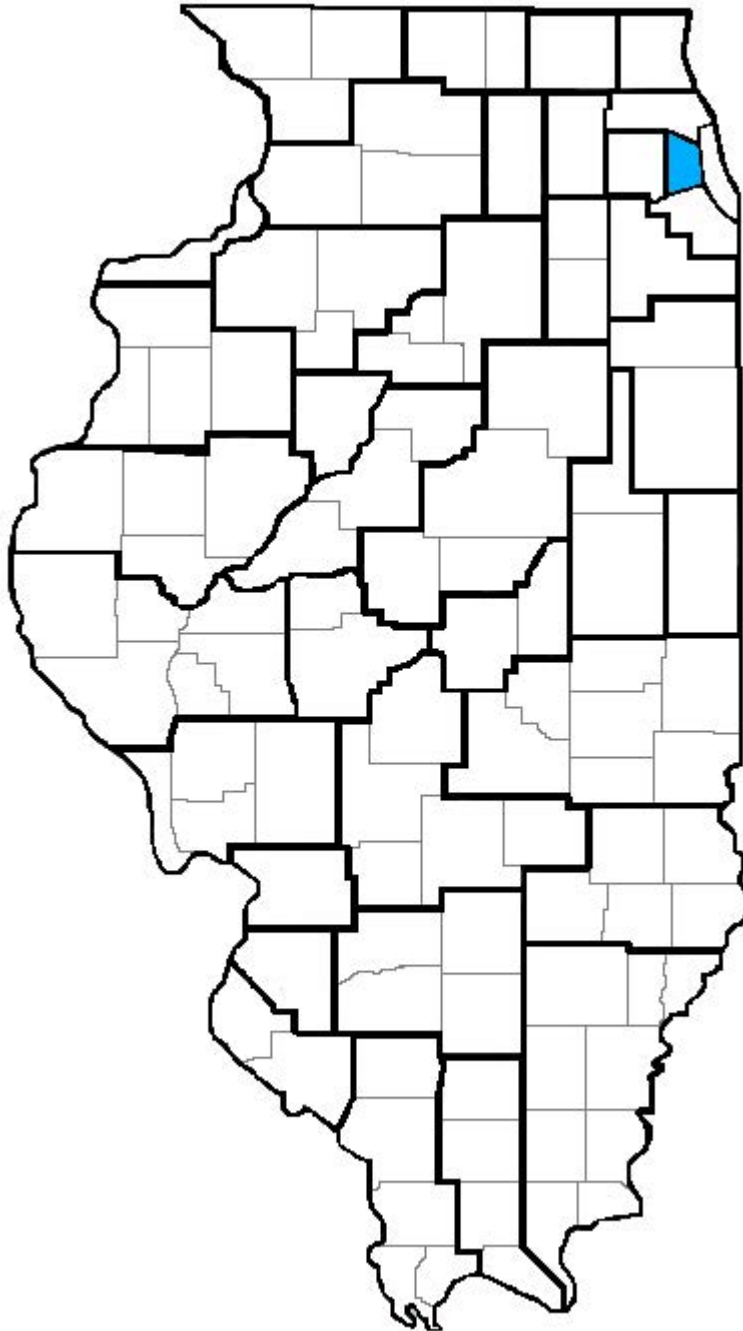
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Regional Strengths & Needs

The Family Council, Action Council, and community members at large all expressed that Region 1-B-B has many strengths in the current ECEC system. While praising the existing programs, they also acknowledged that there were areas in which ECEC needs to be more accessible and equitable to families and where it needs to better support providers.

Strengths

- **Bilingualism/multilingualism throughout the communities:** The community promotes the acceptance of speaking a native or second language, bringing validation to family language and cultural heritage.
- **Cultural responsiveness and inclusion:** Parents and caregivers feel ECEC providers are not only gradually improving their cultural responsiveness to harness inclusion, but also strengthening their efforts to be developmentally inclusive.
- **Diversity:** The Region is racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse.
- **Support for families with children with developmental delays and disabilities:** Community feedback from parents and caregivers of children with a developmental delay/disability highlighted the benefits of Early Intervention and specialized services that have had a positive impact on their families. There are support groups in virtual spaces for the Region and programs (park districts/public play spaces) that are accommodating and supportive of their children's needs.
- **Variety in child care options:** Within the ECEC landscape, there are several options for child care in the eastern part of the Region, including publicly funded programs, center-based programs, and home-based child care providers.

Needs

- **Accurate data to depict the Region's landscape:** The Action and Family Councils voiced concerns with the validity of Census data, reflecting on the negative experiences of their family and community members when completing the Census. For some community members, there is a deeply rooted mistrust of government entities, which leads to inaccurate data and information being collected.
- **Affordable Housing:** In Region 1-B-B, the rising cost of housing, and scarcity of subsidized housing has a huge impact on families, and therefore early learners. The CEDA Needs Assessment reports that in our Region, described as the "West Region", 92% of households of families with limited to no access to economic/material resources are paying over 30% of their income on housing. Fifty eight percent of these households are paying over 50% of their income on housing.
- **Support for Newcomers (Immigrants, Asylum Seekers, Refugees):** There are not enough organizations in the Region that support the unique needs of these groups.
- **Support for children/families with developmental delays/ disabilities:** There is feedback of an immense need for expanded service delivery.

- **Affordable, quality child care:** Council members expressed how the communities in the east and southeast of the Region are living under the 200% FPL and have the highest concentration of publicly funded programs serving children from birth to age five. However, in the northwest area of the Region, there is a similar concentration of children living under 200% FPL but a scarcity of federally funded programs to serve these children.
- **ECEC workforce recruitment and retention:** Action Council urged for increased acknowledgement and respect for Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) care. During and since the COVID-19 pandemic, many families have been using FFN care providers because their typical care provider had closed, and never reopened, or they do not feel safe having their child cared for in a congregate setting. FFN providers are continuing to take on additional responsibility, and they deserve support in providing quality early education experiences to children they serve.

Recommendations

Through the process of gathering family opinions and engaging local stakeholders, we have identified recommendations to address early childhood needs within Region 1-B-B. These recommendations are based on input we received from families, community members, and business stakeholders who are living in and using the ECEC system in our Region.

- **Fund full-day ECEC programs like PFAE with transportation:** Working families from priority populations cannot sustain full-time employment with 2.5 hours of Preschool for All (PFA). Families are utilizing Family, Friend, and Neighbor care for many reasons, including lack of availability of PFA/Head Start programs and language barriers that limit their capacity to access critical services.
- **Launch ECEC workforce recruitment and retention efforts, including wage increases and/or targeted incentives:** Efforts should include mental health support; incentives to attract new and keep experienced early childhood practitioners; supports for Family, Friend, and Neighbor care; and co-pairing and training with specialized service providers to ensure ECEC teachers are versed in behavioral practices and equipped with a “toolbox” of supports.
- **Increase service and delivery options for children with developmental delays/disabilities.**
- **Improve CCAP processes by reviewing the eligibility requirements to meet the unique needs of families and improving processing and payment systems for providers.**
- **Support Newcomers (Immigrants, Asylum Seekers, and Refugees) by including trauma informed, culturally responsive supports and transitional education plans for children.**
- **Expand Community Collaborations:** Currently, there are only two ECEC Community Collaborations serving two out of the 36 municipalities in the Region. We recommend the implementation of mentoring programs and incentives for communities interested in start-up. An increased presence of Collaborations in the Region would provide access to critical resources and increase the likelihood that families will be connected to necessary community services.
- **Expand federally funded child and adult food programs (SNAP, WIC), affordable housing, and housing assistance programs.**
- **Streamline comprehensive data systems to ensure there is equity in the allocation of resources across the Region.**

Region 1-B-C

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Regional Strengths & Needs

When looking at the strengths and needs of Region 1-B-C, it is important to be mindful that each community is different. What is a strength in one community may not be in another. Similarly, what is a need in one area of the Region may be more or less severe in another area. After speaking with families and community stakeholders, we identified several strengths and needs. These changes will not come overnight, but this is a start.

Strengths

- Parents and caregivers take ownership of their child's ECEC experience and want the best for their children.
- Higher concentration of ECEC programs in minoritized communities.
- Educational support for ECEC teachers and providers, such as Gateways to Opportunity, ECACE scholarships, and other support for staff to grow in their careers.
- Providers network within the Region and are supportive of each other.
- Awareness in the community that is centered on developing strong family support.
- Workforce members are committed to the work, with a very strong work ethic, despite low wages.
- Families have positive relationships with school staff.
- Communities are ready for potential new partnerships.
- Families love their neighborhoods and feel a part of their communities.

Needs

- Community Navigators that can connect families and providers to programs and resources and provide support when applying for ECEC services.
- Affordable quality care with extended hours for families that work non-traditional hours.
- Early Intervention services, Home Visiting, and easier access to special needs supports.
- Increased program capacity and more full-day classrooms.
- Stronger support for immigrant families and all families that speak languages other than English.
- Increased number of programs in ECEC deserts and on the west side of Region.
- Dismantlement of silos and segregation within ECEC programs across the Region.
- Transportation support for families, caregivers, and ECEC providers.
- Recruitment of a racially diverse ECEC workforce with better pay and benefits, and initiatives to support educational and career advancements.

Recommendations

Because the Region is so racially and socio-economically diverse and segregated, it was challenging to determine the actual needs of the full Region. Many families in the area have limited resources that do not address what their families need. Ensuring that resources match families' needs is just a first step. Region 1-B-C would benefit the most from having affordable, quality ECEC programs that are accessible and equitable for all children in the Region. There is a great benefit in having these programs run by a highly qualified ECEC workforce. Therefore, the recommendations are centered around four areas:

- Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion
- Accessibility and Affordability
- Quality
- Workforce Development

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

- Program funding to support families that speak languages other than English. Funding will allow programs to hire interpreters or give stipends to parent educators who are willing to interpret for other families.
- Establish community navigators who can help support intentional outreach efforts that target marginalized and under-resourced communities and families while helping to provide a seamless ECEC application experience.

Accessibility

- Increase publicly funded program capacity, locations, home visiting programs, and hours of care to provide a more equitable ECEC landscape.
- Enable publicly funded programs to partner with licensed and license-exempt providers to assist with/provide transportation.
- Provide incentives to ECEC programs that are strategically placed along public transportation routes.
- Implementation of child care cost caps/limits or relaxed income restrictions that will allow all children, regardless of family income, the ability to attend a high-quality program.

Quality

- Optimize community partnerships and Community Collaborations to develop unified mechanisms to connect families across the Region with resources and ECEC programs.
- Engage license-exempt providers in home-based coaching programs that will supplement the educational development of children in their care.

Workforce Development

- Encourage programs to hire specialized staff and provide professional and educational development at little or no cost to staff.
- Create statewide salary guidelines for ECEC staff to ensure equitable living wages and annual increases.
- Establish long-term benefits and compensation incentives for early learning professionals.

Region 1-B-D

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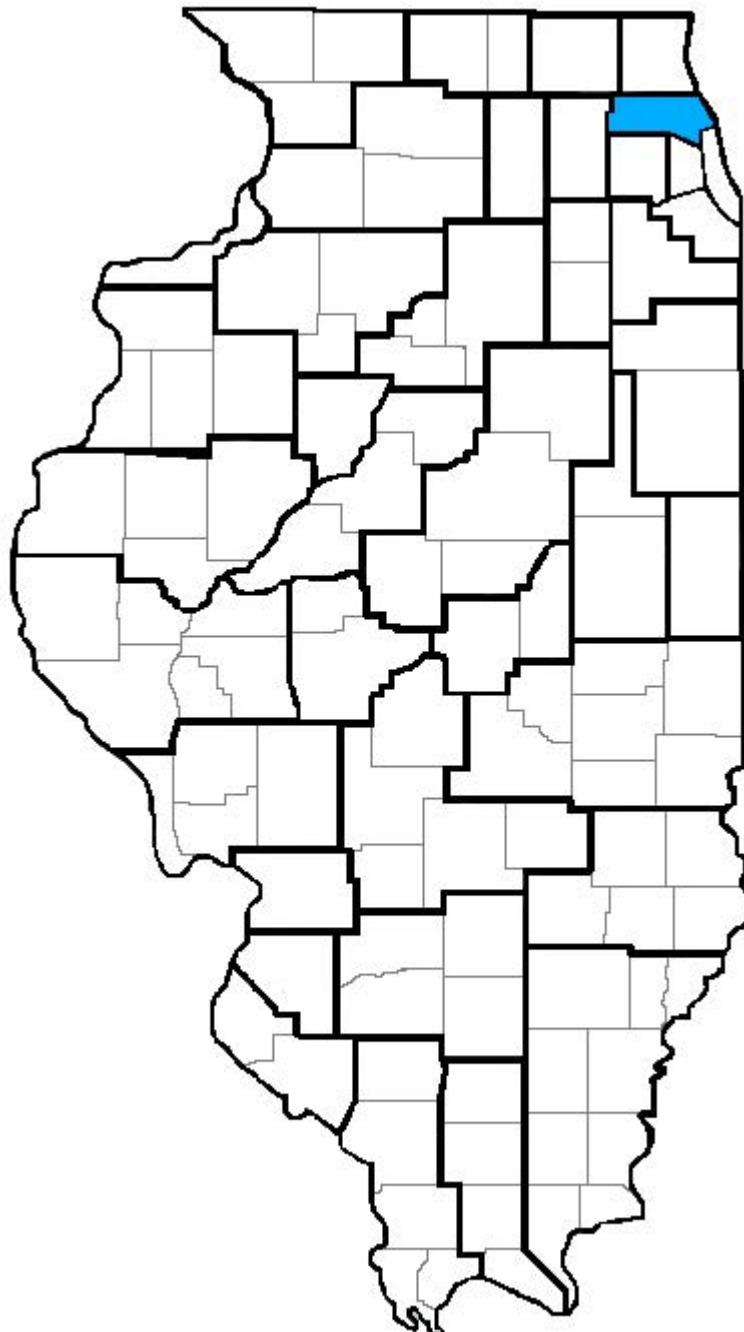
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Regional Strengths & Needs

The Action and Family Council members, along with the community members that participated in interviews, focus groups and/or meetings, shared several noteworthy strengths and needs.

Strengths

- Region 1-B-D has a variety of publicly funded ECEC programs.
- There are multiple Collaborations that foster partnerships among diverse stakeholders and support ongoing reflection and adaptation to meet the evolving needs of the communities they serve.
- Multiple stakeholders, including some elected officials, actively participate in Collaborations, initiatives, and meetings within the ECEC sector.
- Communities have access to free family events, including those planned by the park districts, libraries, and other community organizations.
- There are accessible and inclusive parks and play spaces for families with young children.
- Community libraries and ECEC programs partner and work collaboratively.
- There are early childhood educational opportunities and scholarships for the workforce.
- The Region boasts rich linguistic and cultural diversity, with a wide array of languages spoken (e.g., Skokie has 90+ languages).
- Supportive community members and organizations provide valuable assistance and resources throughout the Region.

Needs

- Affordable child care for all families with children under the age of six.
- Increase funding and slots for ECEC programs, particularly for the birth to three population and for all publicly funded programs.
- Improve workforce recruitment and retention of ECEC staff, particularly the recruitment of multilingual educators to meet the needs of English Language Learners (ELL) and therapeutic staff.
- Increase support, resources, and networking opportunities for Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) care.
- Mental health support/services for parents/caregivers and the workforce.
- Better access to developmental screenings for children not connected to ECEC programs.
- Dedicated therapist teams to serve children at each school.
- Expanded service delivery for children and families with developmental delays and disabilities.
- Increased transparency in policy and decision-making with families.
- Increased transparency for DCFS licensing requirements, policies, and procedures.
- Revision of licensing requirements to consider ECEC programs in non-traditional settings (e.g., nature-based preschools).
- Streamlined process for providers and families with applications, including but not limited to user-friendly, shorter, CCAP applications, and less paperwork for the Gateways credentials.
- Stronger data systems to better understand ECEC enrollment and capacity, ECEC participation of priority populations, and data specific to Region 1-B-D.
- Input from parents/caregivers to better understand their family ECEC needs.
- Additional Collaborations in more areas of the Region.
- Improved access to subsidized and affordable housing, and transportation to access ECEC programming.

Recommendations

The Region 1-B-D Councils discussed dozens of recommendations for systemic changes that could improve the lives of the families and children in the local communities. They understood, however, the necessity to prioritize those recommendations that would have the most profound impact on the greatest number of community members throughout the Region.

Local Recommendations

- Support family child care homes and increase access for all families.
- Implement initiatives that will help recruit new educators and therapists by:
 - Actively encouraging high school students to pursue careers in the ECEC field.
 - Developing mentoring programs designed to support new teachers.
 - Intentionally recruiting potential multilingual educators.
 - Creating a networking system to post jobs or resumes to connect workers and employers.
- Create path for information sharing with families, such as:
 - A comprehensive list of educational options for families.
 - A family and primary care friendly resource list of referrals that includes Early Intervention opportunities and locations.
 - Family and educator information events to build community, trust, and value of ECEC as well as parent/caregiver input.
- Help families make connections to community resources by linking:
 - Child care homes, centers, and families with intervention services in the community.
 - Families with educational videos and resources on developmental activities
- Support groups for new caregivers and parents.
- Build partnerships with health care providers such as developmental/mental health providers and local pediatricians. Increase access to early screening and resource sharing.
- Encourage conversations between ECEC providers and DCFS to establish channels of communication between ECEC programs in non-traditional settings to discuss licensing requirements that present a barrier to serving children in innovative ways and clarify regulations with providers to ensure that they can communicate clearly with families about policy change.

Systems Recommendations

- Raise the CCAP income eligibility to reflect the cost of living in the Region.
- Increase investment in ECEC programs and services from prenatal to eight years old.
- Increase funding and remove some of the hurdles for teachers to access Great Start funds.
- Increase wage supplements; provide compensation and benefits, including an educational forgiveness program for all working in the ECEC system; and provide mini grants to support classroom needs.
- Create a system for teachers to receive college credit for in-service hours/experience.

- Create pathways for certification of Early Childhood teachers for multilingual/early childhood special education.
- Expand the workforce who are qualified to complete medical diagnostics for referred children and advocate for nurse practitioners to be allowed on Medical Diagnostic Clinic teams.
- Increase the number of therapists to support Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education.
- Engage diverse voices in discussions and decision-making processes (families, community, organizations, legislators).
- Communicate and standardize expectations for Early Childhood Special Education, Preschool for All, and child care.
- Develop a user-friendly CCAP application.
- Revamp the Gateways credentials system to create a more streamlined and accessible process.

Regional Strengths & Needs

The Family Council, Action Council, and community members at large all expressed that Region 3 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

- Small community qualities.
 - Strong connections to each other and willingness to help.
 - Dedication to the community and advocating for its needs.
- Community resources and collaboration.
 - Stakeholders working with community members to provide family outreach.
 - Organizations providing resources.
 - When lacking resources, organizations do what they can with what they have been provided.
- Education and child care programs.
 - Teachers and staff are held in high regard.
 - On-site child care programs are in businesses (e.g., Effingham County).
 - Higher education institutions support the need for ECEC educators through grants and classes, along with community advisory panels to find out what schools and programs need from the graduates.

Needs

- Mental health and trauma-informed care training and professional development.
- Affordable child care.
- Higher standards of quality for programs including support to meet the needs of all children and programs that are more inclusive.
- Close the slot gap with additional programs including full-day and wrap-around care.
- Services to support children with special needs including Early Intervention providers and medical providers to serve rural areas.
- Collaboration among providers and organizations to promote system alignment and improvement with intake process, organization of resources, comprehensive data collection, and funding structure.

Recommendations

The recommendations of Region 3 will take collaboration between entities and stakeholders in community organizations, private businesses, and local and state government. It has been discussed that system alignment and growth would be an important starting point. This would include aligning intake processes with one Regional system, comprehensive data collection methods, and aligning funding structures.

- Provide mental health and trauma-informed training and professional development for the ECEC workforce. Head Start and PFAE programs have a great start with embedded Early Childhood Mental Health Consultants for both students and staff. Hire Early Childhood Mental Health Therapists as part of a county-wide resource for child care centers and family child care homes to contact when children need crisis intervention.
- Increase access to affordable child care. Many families that do not qualify for CCAP still cannot afford child care. Increase the number of programs that utilize CCAP along with user-friendly applications and higher income eligibility to include lower middle-income families with a co-pay.
- Create higher standards of quality for ECEC programs. This will include better compensation, benefits, and reimbursement for education after years of service for the workforce. This would also support teachers and staff, so they have more opportunities for career advancement and ensuring the field has more sustainable positions. Standardized quality control for both the ECEC workforce and grant opportunities would decrease inequities between programs and prevent hiring unqualified employees. All publicly funded grants should be needs-based.
- Fund additional slots that support inclusion and expand on services that offer alternative delivery models that overcome barriers for families (e.g., transportation, family child care homes, home visiting, and wrap around care.)
- Collaboration between programs/services and blending and braiding of funding to provide services and support to children with special needs including Early Intervention and medical providers in rural areas.

Region 4

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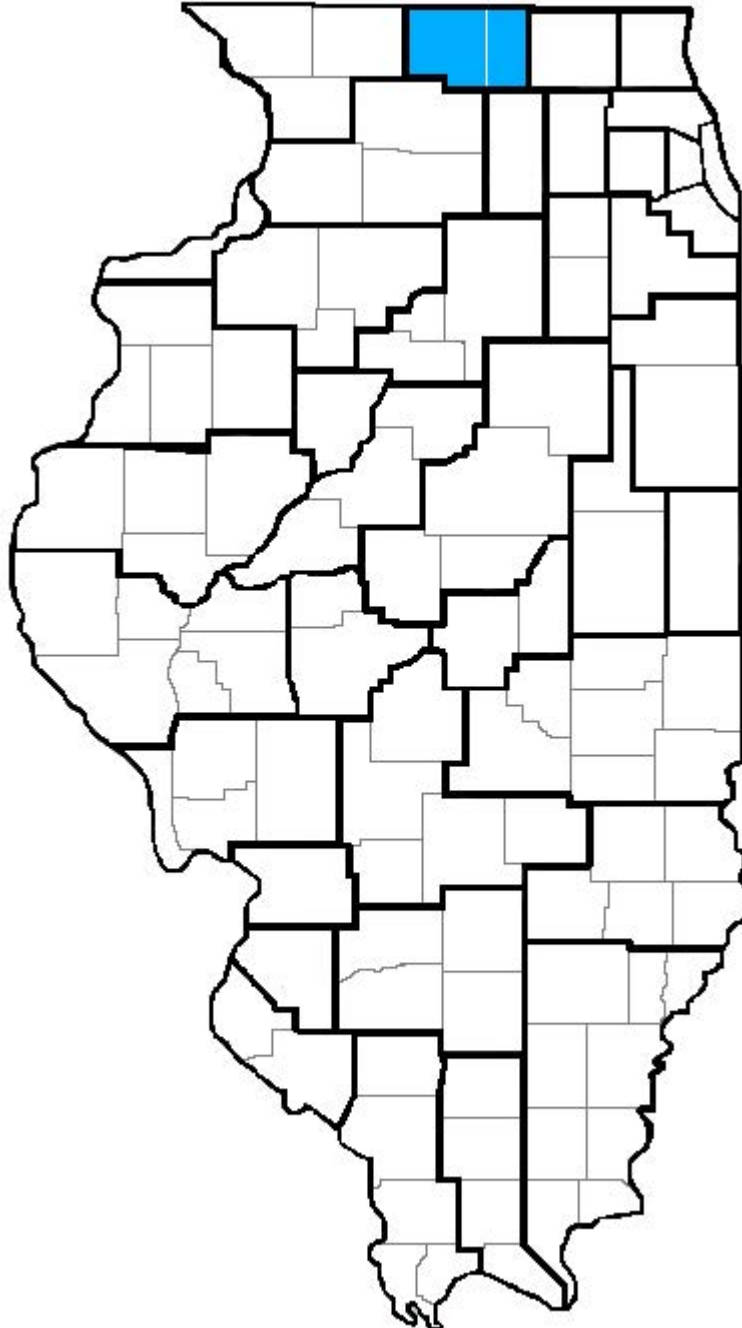
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Regional Strengths & Needs

It is understood that the most substantial and influential brain development period is during early childhood. These results can be measured against life outcomes for those who had or did not have a quality early learning foundation. As Professor James Heckman's research finds, "There is a 13% return on investment for comprehensive, high-quality, birth-to-five early education. These early experiences influence life outcomes such as health, crime, income, IQ, schooling, and the increase in a mother's income after returning to work due to child care."¹¹ Therefore, we must identify strengths, needs, and strategies to assure we maintain what is working and improve what is not. The following were identified by the Region as our collective strengths and needs:

Strengths

- The greatest strength of our Region is its people. We have exceptional and dedicated ECEC providers and families in the Region who are ready and willing to secure what is needed for the continued benefit of our children.
- The Region has established quality programs who are doing the work to support children and families. These ECEC stakeholders are collectively brainstorming solutions to ECEC issues and are actively participating to expand and share resources. Moreover, these deep-rooted programs and experienced ECEC leaders are poised to provide mentorships to new programs, as well as programs experiencing challenges.
- The Region's ECEC champions are capitalizing on the public's newly found interest and understanding of the significance of a child's early years. This momentum is significant and must be seized.

Needs

- The greatest need in the Region is workforce expansion and retention. ECEC programs and service providers are experiencing difficulties in executing their duties due to workforce shortages. As a result, many children are placed on waitlists or families are forgoing services altogether.
- The second greatest need is program expansion. There are not enough slots across the Region to absorb qualifying children and not enough program offerings that complement caregiver's schedules.
- The third greatest need is family and community support. That is, an increase in assistance, communication, and collaboration from service providers, organizations, funders, and businesses to provide a safety net of support to families. It is imperative that across all industries, we increase participation and ownership of our regional childhood outcomes.
- Lastly, there is a need to continue to cultivate accurate and available data. Although the information sources used in this report are rich in content, there are gaps in data that need to be addressed or shortcomings that must be acknowledged (e.g., double counted children and missing qualitative data from portions of the community).

Finally, to answer the question, "Do families have access to the ECEC services and programs they need and want in this Region?" The answer is simply some do, and some do not. ECEC access and distribution is inequitable and based on any combination of a family's resources, location, and priority designation. If we understand that Early Childhood experiences have a profound impact on a child's future, we must continue to assess evolving ECEC needs and obstacles. Through a collective impact structure, our networks of stakeholders can advance ECEC equity by learning together, aligning, and integrating actions to achieve systems level change.

¹¹<https://heckmanequation.org/resource/13-roi-toolbox/>

Recommendations

When establishing the community's ECEC recommendations, it was imperative to gather various community experiences, knowledge, and facts. The following recommendations are based on feedback from the Birth to Five Illinois Councils and community stakeholders at large. These recommendations are relevant to the current ECEC landscape and are presented in order of the most prevalent recommendation, workforce development, followed by program expansion, and family supports.

Workforce Development

It was determined that all types of ECEC providers (i.e., homes, center staff, Preschool for All, and Early Intervention) require workforce investments. All providers are experiencing some portion of a reduction in staff, turnover, burnout, or staffing issues due to qualification requirements. An overall under-staffed ECEC system leads to ECEC program closures, poorer quality programming, and an influx of children being placed on waitlists. To remedy the ripple effects of staffing issues, we must realign our recruitment and retention efforts with strategies that focus on education and compensation.

Educational Incentives

- Increase use and investments in scholarships like those offered through ECACE and Gateways.
- Develop and promote school district Grow Your Own Programs.
- Streamline university teacher pathway programs with opportunities to train on the job.
- Offer new solutions like built in learning time to complete Early Childhood coursework or professional development credentials during work hours.
- Increase diversity pool in education tracks and then ECEC leadership roles.

Compensation

- Increase pay for educators.
- Offer financial incentives to further education.
- Provide access to benefits (medical, dental, time off).

Program Expansion

It was determined that following workforce development, to better serve each child and family needs, programs must expand. Suggested forms of expansion include more child care options for families and more ECEC locations based on geographic and demographic need. Families report the largest obstacle in balancing life demands with child care choices are the limited options for their children. Additionally, the data shows areas of the Region have limited resources and would benefit from targeted expansion.

More Options

- More full-day programs.
- More infant/toddler care slots.
- More options for non-traditional care hours (i.e., nights and weekends).
- Creative alternatives to traditional centers (i.e., a drop-in model for families with fluctuating needs).

More Locations

- More licensed homes and centers.
- More Preschool for All programming.
- Expand programs in preschool deserts.
- Increase overall ECEC programming in Boone County.
- More infrastructure and Collaborations to support expansion.

Family Supports

Families report a need for increased support from various aspects of their community. Many find navigating the fragmented service delivery system difficult. The current structure is even more challenging for our priority populations. The following community supports would positively impact our families:

- Implement an integrated referral system to streamline services among ECEC providers and connect families with wrap-around services.
- Increase transportation options for all families who need it.
- Expand outreach and parent/caregiver education to hard-to-reach families on the importance of ECEC.
- Seek additional support from the business and economic development community to support families and advocate for ECEC. See the U.S. Chamber Employer Roadmap¹² to learn about options for supporting working parents with their childcare needs.

Although determining an overarching proposal to the child care crisis is arduous, it is important to know that every issue affecting ECEC progress is interwoven with the next. Thus, no recommendation is perfect or free from risks. However, a foundational plan, built by the community, is imperative. This Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment and recommendations will help guide decisions that best fit family needs. Finally, the foremost important need is funding, as none of the presented objectives are possible without a continued interest in our collective future and financial investment to improve it.

¹² https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/sites/default/files/ECE%20Employer%20Roadmap_March%202022.pdf

Region 8

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Regional Strengths & Needs

In gathering regional demographics and available data on our local ECEC system, reviewing that data with our local leaders and education and child care experts seated at our Action Council, and hearing firsthand testimony from our Family Council members and focus group and one-on-one interview participants, a collective list of regional ECEC strengths and needs have emerged.

Strengths

Though the area faces several economic and ECEC challenges, the Region is well-positioned to tackle many of those challenges as it possesses several strengths.

- Local ECEC professionals, child care providers, and educators cite the Region's secondary and upper-level education infrastructure as a strength in building an ECEC workforce for the future. Stephenson County's Career Tec and Jo Daviess and Carroll Counties' CTE Academy provide high school students with hands-on opportunities in the ECEC field and prepare them for entry-level employment at local child care centers. Both programs work seamlessly with Highland Community College, which offers post-high school training, certification, and an advanced degree in ECE. Though the number of students attending ECEC classes has increased over the last year, local ECEC educators say the ECEC education system in the Region has the capacity to take on more students.
- Local ECEC professionals in the Region also cite the Region's strong and knowledgeable child care and education leaders as a strength. They are proud of the growing collaborative effort that has strengthened the local ECEC system.
- Many parents, families, and caregivers interviewed pointed to the commitment the Region's communities have in supporting their children.

Needs

- **Growing and improving the ECEC workforce.** We know from our early childhood care providers and school administrators, as well as from early childhood educators and workforce training staff, there simply are not enough early childhood workers currently in the regional workforce to meet the current demand for child care and preschool services.
- **More training in providing care for emotionally and socially complex children is needed.** As the emotional and social needs of young children have increased and grown more complex over the past several years, child care providers and educators are concerned that not enough of the ECEC workforce has adequate training to best serve today's children.
- **Additional emotional support for ECEC workers is needed.** ECEC providers and educators also acknowledge that staffing shortages and the increased complexity of children have added workplace stress in an already stressful employment sector.
- **Increased availability of child care and preschool.** Slot gaps currently exist in our Preschool For All, Head Start, and child care programs. Reducing the slot gap so that preschool and child care services are available to all families who request or need them is paramount to strengthening Region 8's ECEC system.
- **An ECEC system that works for families.**
 - Wrap-around child care services for preschool and elementary school-age children.
 - Child care services that have expanded drop-off and pick-up hours, as well as child care services that can serve families and care providers who work on second and third shifts as well as summer hours when the children are out of school, but the parents are still working.

- o Address several “child care deserts” and work to develop more licensed child care centers and family homes that are conveniently located in both urban and rural communities where people live. Our Region also faces a shortage of providers for infants and toddlers. More infant care is desperately needed.

- **Capital development of more preschool classrooms and more child care centers is needed.** The Region notes that many of our licensed child care centers and public elementary schools that house most of our Preschool For All programs need more physical space if they are to expand the number of slots offered at their respective sites. School district consolidations, school building closings, as well as the loss of several licensed family child care homes during the COVID-19 pandemic have created an environment where space to provide child care services has become very limited.

All three counties that make up the Region have seen an increase in families with poverty-level incomes over the past ten years. With that increase has come a greater need for additional supplemental family support systems that are essential for families with children under the age of six.

- **Early childhood educators and providers called for support services for families with children between the age of three and five.** Though our Region recognizes the support systems available for families with infants and toddlers through three years old, support systems for families and caregivers with older children are just not readily available.
- **The Region needs a family-friendly public transportation system that takes child care into account.** Within the city of Freeport, transportation for families with children in child care can be a challenge. With a cost of \$5 per ride/stop, required reservations, and 24-hour notice for pick up and drop off, and limited morning and evening run times, a less expensive, more convenient, and family-friendly public transportation system is needed for families without automobiles of their own.

Recommendations

Both the Region 8 Action Council and Family Council identified three areas of need in our Region's ECEC system: growing and improving our local ECEC workforce, increasing available child care and preschool opportunities, and providing parents of young children greater support.

Growing & Improving the ECEC Workforce

- Improve the wages and benefits of ECEC workers by developing a concerted lobbying effort to advocate for the increase of wages and support for workers. This effort begins at home by making sure locally elected federal and state representatives understand the importance of a livable wage for ECEC workers, as it ultimately benefits the education of children and strengthens our Region socially and economically.
- Improve the education system that trains the ECEC workforce. Provide opportunities for ECEC workers to gain credentialing and certifications while working. Strengthening the Region's use of STAR NET for early childhood professional development and developing mentoring programs for ECEC students living in the Region could be beneficial.
- Improve the recruitment effort for additional ECEC workers. Create a comprehensive regional recruitment strategy for attracting local high school and college-age students, as well as young adults, into the ECEC career field. Develop strategies and execute recruitment tactics to increase the number of students enrolling in early childhood classes at the CTE Academy, CareerTec, and Highland Community College (HCC). Identify and track local high school and HCC graduates pursuing advanced degrees in early childhood education and recruit them to return to the Region upon receiving their undergraduate degree and teaching certification.

Increasing the Availability of Child Care & Preschool

- Develop new licensed child care centers in population centers that currently do not have one (Hanover, Warren, Stockton, Lena, Orangeville, Davis, Dakota, Shannon, Milledgeville, Chadwick, Mt. Carroll, and Savanna), and expand licensed care capacity in communities that need additional slots. Special attention and consideration for the creation of additional child care slots should be given to centers providing infant care, care for priority populations, and child care services for off-shift workers.
- Recruit new home-based child care providers through a collaborative effort with the Region's two Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (YWCA of Northwest Illinois and the 4C's). The Region has experienced its greatest loss of child care slots due to the closing of several licensed family child care homes over the past five years.
- Expand the Region's Preschool For All (PFA) program. With the very real possibility of universal preschool coming to Illinois, expansion is recommended. Developing additional PFA slots will require the recruitment of early childhood educators to our Region, working with local school superintendents and officials to identify and address current school facility space constraints, and executing a successful strategic preschool awareness campaign aimed at parents/caregivers with children under age two.

Supports for Families

- Launch additional efforts or new strategies for comprehensive and effective outreach and support for all parents, caregivers, and families with children birth to age five regardless of risk factors. Early Intervention services should be available to all, and the age eligibility extended to five years old.
- Provide additional resources for enhanced parent, caregiver, and family engagement and support through schools.
- Create opportunities for schools to engage and build bonds with their respective district's families at an earlier stage in child development.
- Fund additional Family Resource Coordinators (FRCs) in schools.
- Examine the current transportation system and the route, scheduling, and cost barriers associated with creating an improved and family-focused public transportation system to better support families with children enrolled in child care and preschool.

Region 9

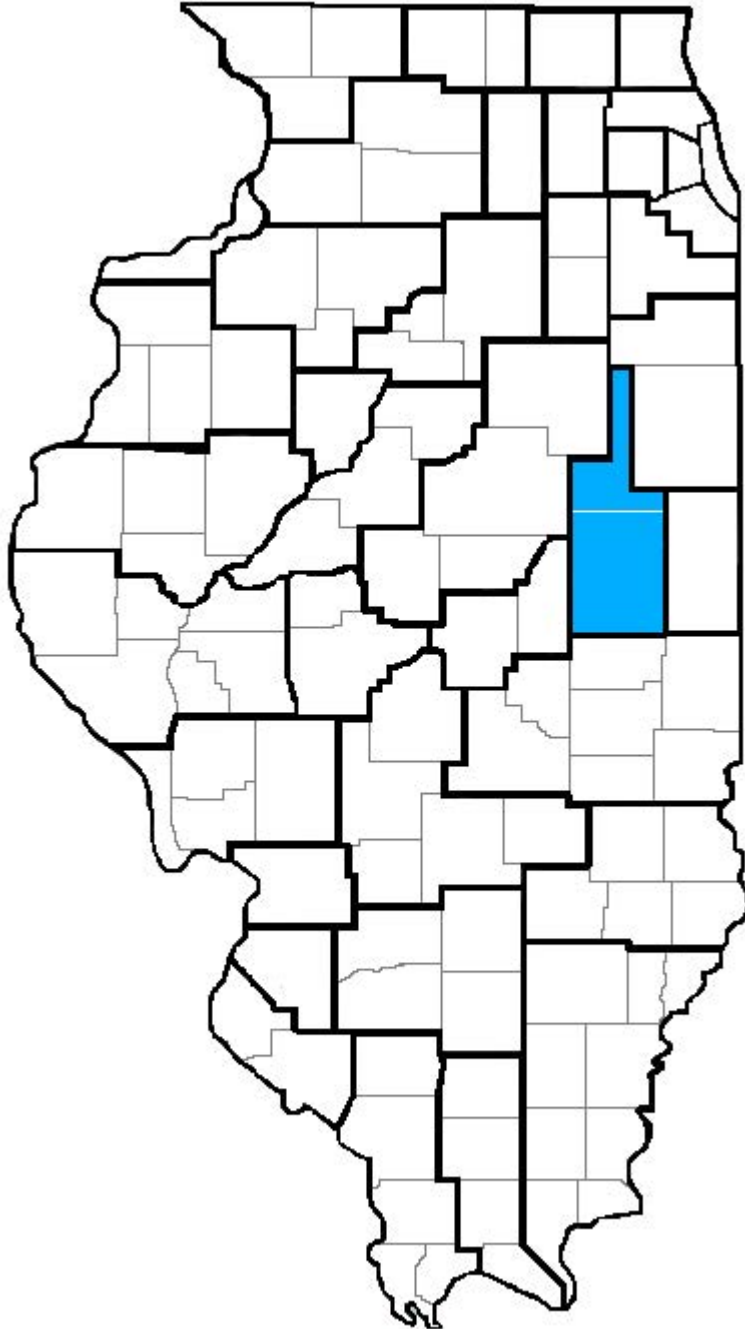
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Regional Strengths & Needs

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

Strengths

Early Childhood Services

- Two Head Start/Early Head Start agencies with a variety of program options including full-working-day classrooms for families who need child care services.
- Local CCR&R, connecting families to more than 600 licensed and license-exempt centers and family child care homes and supporting ECEC providers.
- Spanish language programs for families, such as the C-U Early play groups.
- Local groups such as the United Way and the Champaign County Home Visiting Consortium that are supporting families in becoming Kindergarten ready.
- The Kindergarten Readiness Goal Team, a collaborative effort to leverage member programs working together on Coordinated Intake, developmental screenings, parent education, and community awareness about early learning programs.
- Champaign and Ford Counties' LICs with Child Find, public awareness activities, and a network of Early Intervention providers.
- Brightpoint (formerly Children's Home and Aid), with pregnancy resources and doula services, child welfare services, and counseling programs.
- The Butterfly Project, an initiative through Brightpoint, specifically for children and families exposed to violence in Ford County.
- The Crisis Nursery, an emergency-based child care facility in Champaign County
- Easter Seals, an Early Intervention home visiting service in Ford County.
- Developmental Services Center, with case management, family support, and family development services for children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- Lighthouse Autism Center, with center-based applied behavior analysis therapy services to children diagnosed with Autism in Champaign County.

Health & Wellness

- Carle Hospital and Order of Saint Francis Hospital, with mobile units to administer preventative health services (i.e., immunizations, pre-screenings, physicals).
- Gibson Area Hospital, the only hospital in Ford County.
- Ford and Champaign Counties' Public Health Departments, with various community outreach activities such as community health events and resource fairs.
- Community Resource and Counseling Center, the only mental health services serving children and adults in Ford County.

Cultural, Linguistic, Racial & Ethnic Diversity

- The University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign, with the country's largest group of international students.
- Region 9's East Central location in the State, bringing in diverse job applicants from Eastern Illinois University, Southern Illinois University, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

Economy & Workforce

- Champaign County Regional Planning Commission (CCRPC), with its workforce. development program, mobile workforce center, Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, Homeless Prevention Rent Assistance, among other related programs offered to serve community members of the county.
- Parkland College's ready-to-work programs.
- Developmental Services Center, with residential and employment services for adults diagnosed with an intellectual or developmental disability.

Community Resources

- The Carter Foundation, a scholarship and programming foundation for youth, offers after-school academic assistance for children K-8th grade living in the Village of Rantoul in Champaign County.
- Chambana Moms Facebook page, advertising local support services in Champaign County.
- Libraries, in both rural and urban communities across the Region.
- Champaign Church of the Brethren, Community Service Center of Northern Champaign County, Cultivadores Pantry, Daily Bread Soup Kitchen, Faith Baptist Church and other churches, and local businesses offering food assistance in Champaign County.
- Gibson City food bank and Paxton food bank in Ford County.
- Local Park Districts in Champaign and Ford Counties.

Needs

Early Childhood Services

- Second and third-shift child care in multiple types of settings.
- Additional providers, especially physical therapists, for birth-to-three services.
- Additional infant and toddler child care slots, especially in rural areas of Region 9
- Affordable infant and toddler care.
- Affordable full-day child care for preschool-aged children.
- More ECEC therapists and specialists who speak a language other than English.
- More agencies that accept Medicaid so families can access therapy services, especially for children birth to age three.
- More affordable, higher quality, and easily accessible options for child care services
- More readily available information on the importance of quality Early Childhood. experiences for every child and Early Intervention for children with a delay/disability
- A larger pool of qualified ECEC workers.

Cultural, Linguistic, Racial & Ethnic Diversity

- More diverse workforce.
- Mental health services available in Spanish and other languages.
- More translators, specifically for French, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Q'anjob'al languages.

Health & Wellness

- Additional mental health services for children ages three to five.

Economy & Workforce

- Competitive wages and benefits for ECEC staff.
- Strategies to increase and sustain the ECEC candidate pool .
- Recruitment and retention of staff through incentives, raises, and professional development.
- Additional affordable housing.

Community Resources

- Additional public transportation services in Ford County and rural Champaign County.
- More widely available information about ECEC services with community outreach efforts.

Recommendations

After reviewing quantitative and qualitative data, as well as identifying strengths and needs for the Region, recommendations were developed in four areas: early childhood education & care services, cultural, linguistic, racial & ethnic diversity, health & wellness, and economy & ECEC workforce.

Early Childhood Education & Care Services

- Broaden and increase the availability of services with an emphasis on maintaining equitable options for marginalized groups, especially in Ford County and particularly for children birth to age three.
- Increase the capacity of family child care homes to provide 2nd and 3rd shift care.
- Campaign for employer participation in subsidizing a portion of the cost of its employees' 2nd and 3rd shift child care.
- Campaign for more private insurance companies to cover therapy services.

Cultural, Linguistic, Racial & Ethnic Diversity

- Intentional outreach to provide individuals with information about the need for diversity in the ECEC workforce.
- Develop more training and resources on DEI and cultural competencies for the ECEC workforce.
- Increase outreach strategies to marginalized populations to make services more readily accessible.
- Expand the pool of interpreters and translators who speak the language of families in the Region.

Health & Wellness

- Increase parent education on mental health to better support young children through use of various parent engagement strategies to encourage participation in these trainings.
- Increase accessibility and affordability of mental health services for families.

Economy & ECEC Workforce

- Use incentives, competitive wages, and professional development to recruit and retain ECEC workers.
- Advocate for policies that promote a work-life balance throughout the ECEC landscape of programs and service providers.
- Develop incentivizes to encourage individuals to obtain education or credentials in ECEC to fill staffing shortages.
- Increase the number of housing vouchers for Region 9 community members so parents/caregivers are better able to pay for child care.
- Convene stakeholders to strategize workforce solutions to increase the candidate pool of ECEC-trained individuals, including current employees adding to their qualifications.
- Convene stakeholders to create a Collaboration focused on providing public transit system in areas other than municipalities in Region 9.

Regional Strengths & Needs

Region 11 encompasses many strengths within the current ECEC system; however, there are opportunities for growth. Qualitative and quantitative data combined with perspectives from Family Council members, Action Council members, and community members have revealed many areas worth highlighting. Birth to Five Illinois recognizes that though each county within Region 11 has individual strengths and needs, the following encompass the entire Region.

Strengths

- The longevity and passion of current ECEC providers.
- Provider diversity is representative of the communities and children they serve.
- Preschool For All programs have a high utilization rate throughout the Region.
- There is collaboration between local community resources and providers.
- Many high-quality Prevention Initiative programs, including Birth to 3 (Coles County), Partnerships for Parenting (Edgar and Douglas Counties), and BabyTalk (Moultrie County).
- Coles County has a large number of ECEC programs, including Gold and Silver Quality-rated programs.
- There are numerous high school, college, and university educational programs for ECEC.

Needs

- More infant and toddler care slots.
- Public transportation for local programs.
- More full-day preschool opportunities.
- Hands-on and available mental health, social-emotional, and behavioral resources.
- Current and accurate licensing standards and policies for providers.
- Increased staff appreciation and support.
- Collaboration between local care providers and half-day preschool programs.
- Before and after school care in smaller rural school districts.
- Local and state support for Head Start programs.
- A comprehensive ECEC database with accurate and current data for all sectors.
- Information on ECEC programs provided earlier to families.
- More accessible opportunities to improve quality ratings and earn credentials for staff.
- Improved quality of programs across the Region.
- Increased amounts and access to grants for all ECEC providers.

Recommendations

Combining Region 11's strengths and the opportunities for growth, our Action and Family Council members have produced the following recommendations to improve the ECEC system in Region 11.

- Promote community creation of Family Child Care Homes specifically serving infants and toddlers by increasing accessibility and offering incentives at the state and local levels.
 - By providing easier opportunities to open and operate Family Child Care Homes, the number of available ECEC options and slots will increase.
- Significantly increase funding for public and school transportation, specifically targeting rural communities, to facilitate access to local programs and community resources.
 - By increasing financial resources, we can bridge transportation gaps and remove the barriers that hinder individuals in underserved communities from reaching essential destinations.
- Increase full-time preschool programming opportunities.
 - By offering more full-time preschool programs, we can support working families by removing the barrier of having to find multiple ECEC providers to care for their children during a single workday.
- Increase awareness, accessibility, and the amount of mental health, social-emotional, and behavioral coaches for ECEC programs and schools.
 - By providing easier access to mental health, social-emotional, and behavioral coaches, ECEC staff will have increased opportunities to build their skills toolbox and feel supported in moments of high-stress.
- Construct reasonable adjustments and clarification to the Department of Children and Family Services' standards and policies based on common issues with Illinois ECEC providers.
 - By revising and clarifying Licensing Standards for Day Care Homes and Day Care Centers, current and future providers will be able to effectively and safely operate and create programs.
- Expand support programs and develop continuation incentives for current ECEC staff.
 - By actively supporting current ECEC staff, we increase the retention rates.
- Facilitate collaboration between ECEC providers and programs, specifically half-day programs.
 - This vital support aims to promote community unification and support for families. By offering solutions for full-day care, families are able to utilize local PFA Programs (Project H.E.L.P.).
- Expand and fund before- and after-school care opportunities for smaller, rural school districts.
 - Specific counties like Cumberland, Clark, Shelby, Edgar, and Douglas have community resources available to host before- and after- school care options specifically in smaller school districts.
- Increase state and local support for Head Start and Early Head Start programs.
 - By providing state and local recognition, funding, and staff incentives, federally funded Head Start and Early Head Start programs can be better utilized by our communities.
- The State should implement a comprehensive framework to establish an ECEC system that ensures coordination and tracking of current and accurate data across various funding sources, including slots and waitlists.
 - By implementing this framework, we can simplify data management, promote data transparency, and enhance the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the ECEC system.

- Expansion of ECEC program outreach to begin earlier including prenatal healthcare visits and postpartum care.
 - An increase in early outreach and marketing of ECEC programs can benefit families new to the area and with children with disabilities.
 - By providing easier access to ECEC information, families can make informed decisions and have access to resources to better support their children's development and the entire family's well-being.
- Make quality improvement and staff credentials easier to obtain for non-state funded programs.
 - By creating this comprehensive framework, we empower educators to enhance their skills, deepen their expertise, and thrive in their professional journey.
- Increase quality improvement opportunities for current ECEC providers.
 - By providing more opportunities to improve quality in current ECEC providers, we can ensure that every child receives quality care and an evidence-based education.
- Create a grant and funding opportunity clearinghouse specific to ECEC educators and providers.
 - This centralized platform could serve as a reliable hub where vital information regarding grants and funding can be readily accessed and exchanged, enabling providers to find and prepare grant proposals efficiently.

Region 12

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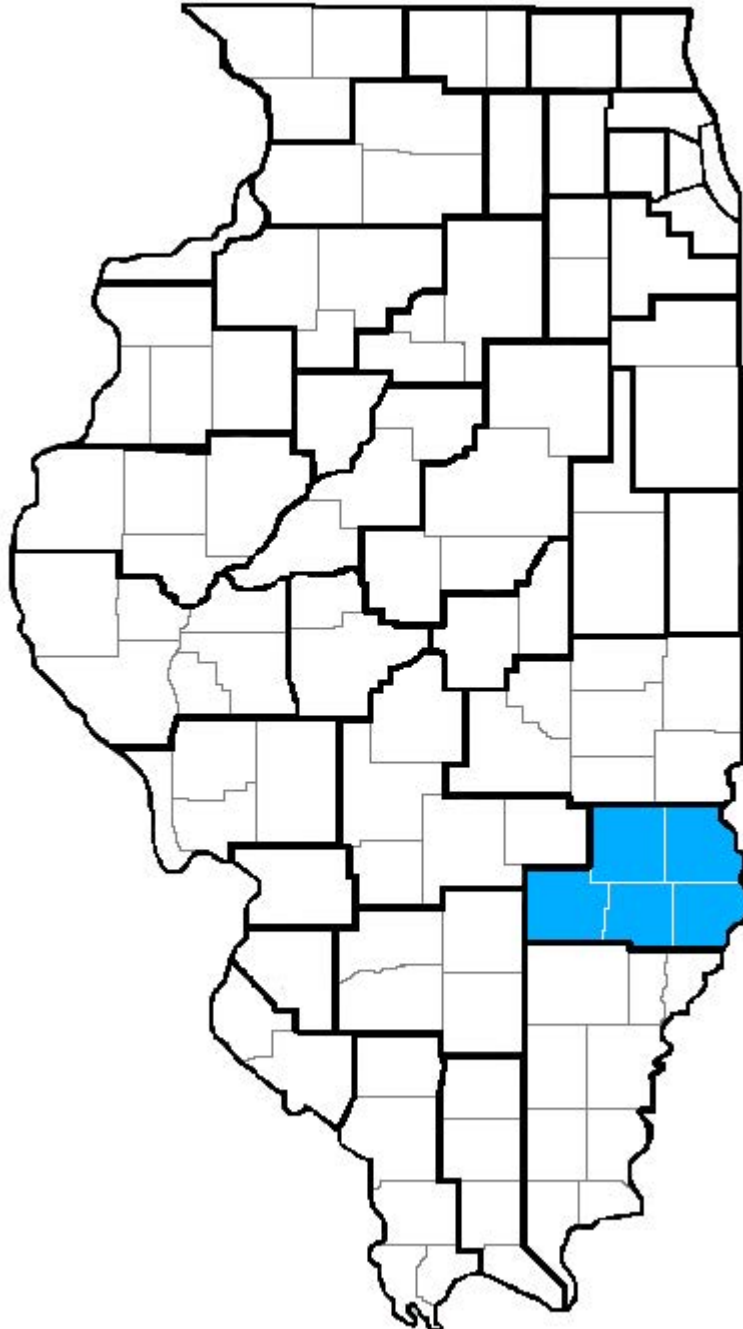
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Regional Strengths & Needs

The Family Council, Action Council, and community members at large all expressed that Region 12 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

- There is a sense of community, where neighbors, friends, and family come together to support each other, celebrate successes, and overcome challenges.
- Communities are growing, introducing new employment opportunities, and creating a more diverse population.
- Eligible three- to five-year-old children have access to publicly funded preschool.
- Existing ECEC programs are inviting, welcoming spaces where children receive quality educational experiences from dedicated staff who continue seeking ways to better serve children and families.
- High schools and community colleges recognize and support the need for a more robust ECEC workforce.
- Local agencies and support organizations actively seek ways to break down barriers for children and families.
- The community is beginning to recognize and support the need for mental health services for all ages.

Needs

- Affordable and accessible child care, particularly serving nontraditional schedules.
- Publicly funded home visiting or center-based opportunities for children under age three.
- Higher wages, benefits, and lower staff-to-child ratios to encourage staff retention and entice new staff to enter the field.
- Accessible special education, including mental health services, for all eligible children.
- Increased understanding of child development from families, medical providers, social service providers, and the community.
- Increased diversity of staff, including cultural, linguistic, and racial representation.
- Expanded pediatric medical care, especially for children with medically complex needs.

Recommendations

The Region 12 Councils discussed dozens of recommendations for systemic changes that could improve the lives of the families and children in the local communities. They understood, however, the necessity to prioritize those recommendations that would have the most profound impact on the greatest number of community members throughout the Region.

- Improved access, awareness, and availability of mental health and special education services, and specialized care for children with complex medical conditions.
 - Federal- and state-level support: Streamlined certification processes and funding appropriate to accommodate the number of children eligible for services; increased funding in publicly funded programs to allow for additional staff; increased funding for professional development for staff of publicly funded programs; development of educational opportunities for families and medical care providers.
 - Local-level support: Programs and agencies will be intentional to promote increased awareness of available services and providers and a better understanding of referral processes; home districts will provide special education services for students whose families choose not to accept out-of-district Early Childhood Special Education placement.
- Increased access and availability of varied ECEC services and programming, including child care, home visiting, play groups, and community activities.
 - Federal- and state-level support: Improved ability to provide publicly funded opportunities for all eligible children and families; increased CCAP reimbursement for all eligible children and expanded income guidelines to accommodate more families; incentives for creating a more diverse workforce.
 - Local-level support: Existing providers will be encouraged and supported in expanding offerings and made aware of grants and other funding opportunities; potential new providers, especially those from underrepresented populations, will be encouraged and supported in obtaining needed information and referrals and made aware of grants and other funding opportunities; agencies and organizations supporting families will aid in sharing other resources available to families.
- Fair pay and benefits for providers.
 - Federal- and state-level support: Subsidized income, in alignment with public school staff salaries for similar educational attainment and experience, for providers to ensure a living wage.
 - Local-level support: Coordinated intake available to all families; community partners understand and communicate information about programs and services available; agencies and service providers will refer to any program fitting a family's needs; and programs will reach out to other agencies and providers to share information.



Crafts at Kids Kingdom Family Night in Oblong

- Increased access for providers, families, and medical professionals to training regarding child development, advocacy, trauma-informed care, and other relevant topics. Increased access to college-level courses for current and prospective providers.
 - Federal- and state-level support: Increased scholarship opportunities for early childhood (EC) students; strengthened EC programs in community colleges and universities; increased funding for professional development of staff within publicly funded programs; development of educational opportunities for families, private providers, and medical professionals.
 - Local-level support: CCR&Rs provide combined educational experiences for providers and families; providers can support one another in providing educational opportunities and experiences to staff, families, medical providers and community members; agencies and organizations that support families can partner to provide educational opportunities for providers, families, medical professionals and the community.

Region 13

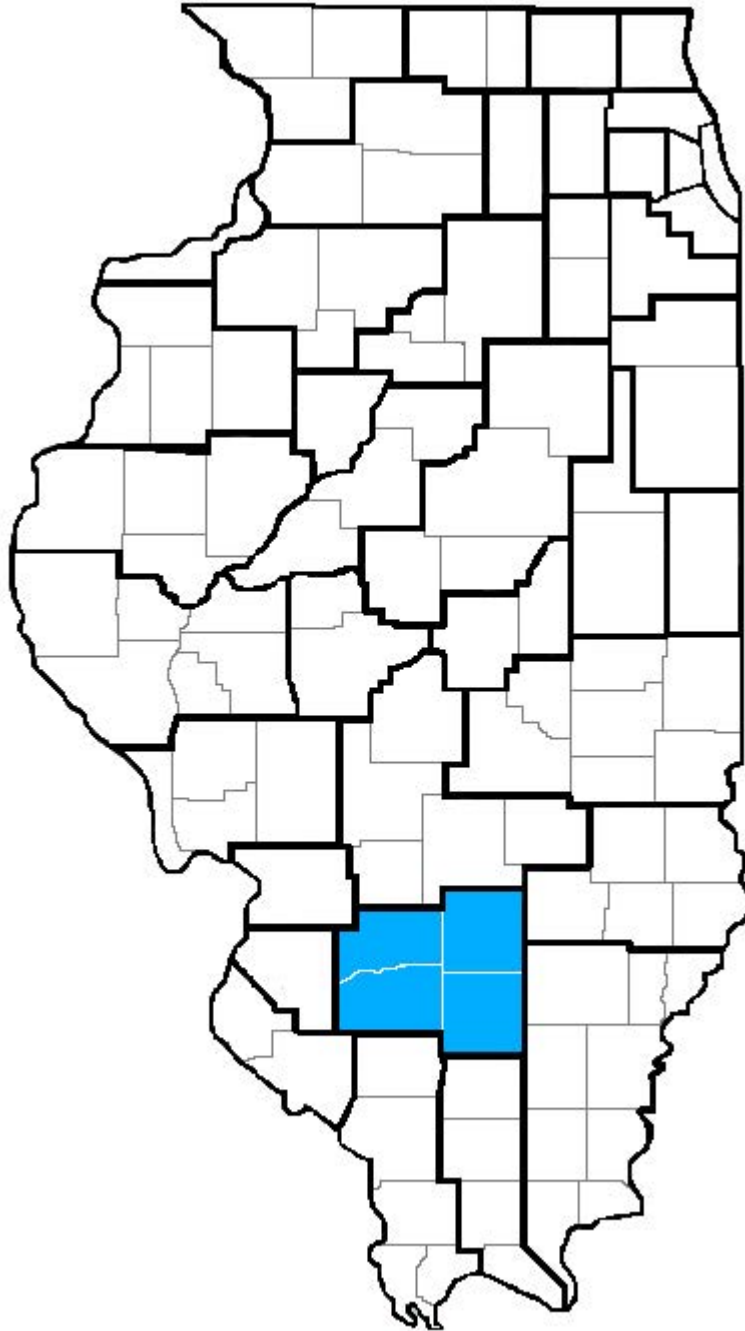
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Regional Strengths & Needs

The Family Council, Action Council, and community members at large all expressed that Region 13 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

- In Region 13, there is a strong desire to create collaboration and provide resources to meet the needs of the families who live here.
- This Region has a strong preschool presence. There are high-quality programs and half-day slots available in most of the communities in this Region.
- Several programs and providers in the Region have achieved a Circle of Quality award through ExceleRate Illinois, and many programs in the Region have obtained the highest rating of Gold Circle of Quality.
- Many of the providers, teachers, staff, and administrators report that they enjoy the work that they do, which is reflected in the loving and caring atmosphere they provide to the families and children in their care.

Needs

Access to Programs/Slots

- Funded transportation to and from publicly funded ECEC programs.
- Additional slots for full day preschool programming, including Preschool For All, Preschool For All Expansion, or Head Start.
- Expansion of birth to three home visiting services across all four counties in the Region.
- Affordable and accessible child care throughout the Region, including evening and weekend care to improve access for families who work nontraditional hours.

Mental Health/Behavioral Health

- High-quality family counseling and mental health services, including behavior support and services for children under age five in all four counties.
- On-site mental health services and support for both students and staff; provide professional development and training for teachers and staff on mental/behavioral health.

Family & Community Supports & Services

- Expanded community services that are more local and easier to access in every county in the Region.
- A family navigation system to ease the enrollment processes and to help families find programs and services.
- Increased information sharing with families about programs and services that are currently available in this Region and/or under-utilized.

Workforce

- Increased wages and/or improved benefits for ECEC teachers and staff provide adequate com-compensation for current staff in the field and entice others to join the profession.
- Increased pathways to certification/credentialing to entice more people to enter the ECEC field.
- Improved longevity and reduced turnover in the current workforce.

Recommendations

Through the process of gathering information, analyzing data, and listening to the stories and concerns from Council members, parents, caregivers, families, and ECEC providers in these communities, recommendations to address the Early Childhood needs within Region 13 have been clearly identified. The work being done on the regional level should be expanded locally to share information, educate community members on local needs, and engage community partners in roles and sectors outside of the ECEC field.

Workforce

A strong and qualified workforce is necessary to move many of the Region's recommendations forward. We recommend that steps be taken at the state and local level to continue to make improvements in the workforce crisis that many ECEC programs are facing.

- The State continues to increase its resources aimed at recruiting and retaining an adequate workforce by increasing pathways to certification and credentialing and expanding funding to improve the wages and benefits of the ECEC workforce.
- Locally, efforts are needed to increase quality by promoting and sharing information about the State's current workforce initiatives, educate the public about the need for more teachers, and advocate for increased public dollars that support adequate compensation.
- Locally, the Region's high schools should continue to work with local colleges and universities to add or expand on the dual credit opportunities in Early Childhood Education and Child Development.
- Locally, to increase longevity and reduce turnover in the current workforce, employers need to create better working conditions by increasing professional development and training, especially in the areas of mental health and social emotional development and provide necessary re-sources and support for teachers and staff in the field.
- At the state and local level, a campaign to change the narrative surrounding the ECEC field is needed. This could be accomplished by highlighting qualified and caring members of the ECEC workforce at every level on social media, newsletters, and other outlets where information is shared to improve the public perspective on the ECEC profession, as well as highlight the importance of the ECEC profession as "the workforce behind the workforce".

Access to Publicly Funded Programs

Expand access to current publicly funded programs, specifically through the addition of full-day classrooms, providing transportation for students, and expanding birth to three programs.

- School districts, the Regional Office of Education, and community-based organizations should apply for additional slots for full-day Preschool For All, Preschool For All Expansion, or Head Start classrooms.
- Advocate for funded transportation at the state level and expanded funding to school districts and grant-funded programs so the rising costs affiliated with transportation in rural areas can be offset.
- Expanding birth to three services in the entire Region, as there are currently only 100 slots for birth to three services across all four counties.

Available & Affordable Child Care

Expand licensed child care options across the Region, specifically for infant and toddler care, and explore ways to improve the affordability of child care for all families.

- Explore ways to add additional licensed child care slots across the Region, especially in rural areas and areas where licensed child care does not currently exist.
- Explore ways to add care during nontraditional hours for the multitude of families who are employed in shift work positions.
- Increase utilization of the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) by families. Expand on the CCR&R's current efforts to promote the CCAP program by partnering with community-based organizations and the newly formed Regional Office of Education #13 Early Childhood Collaboration to distribute promotional materials, share information, and educate families, community stakeholders, and employers about the program, its eligibility criteria, and the changing policies that make CCAP more accessible to families.
- Continue the work to decouple private pay rates from CCAP rates (Illinois Department of Human Services).

Regional Collaboration

Continue funding the growth and development of the newly recognized Early Childhood Collaboration, the Regional Office of Education #13 Early Childhood Collaboration, to support its efforts to become a central navigation system for families and providers, while developing shared values and buy-in from community partners and organizations.

- It is recommended that the Regional Office of Education #13 Early Childhood Collaboration continue its work to become a Coordinated Intake and family navigation system. The Collaboration should work with local ECEC providers and programs, as well as a wide variety of community partners, to break down the siloed programs and services often seen in this Region.
- Local support should be given to promote the mission and goals of the Collaboration to families and community stakeholders through the distribution of materials and information to educate families and community members about the work the Collaboration plans to carry out.

Mental Health Supports and Services

Improve access to high-quality mental health supports and services for parents, caregivers, children, and ECEC staff to counteract the rise in mental health and social emotional challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and other societal changes.

- Provide mental health and trauma-informed training and professional development for all ECEC teachers and staff members with embedded Early Childhood Mental Health consultants for students and staff in every school district and ECEC program across the Region.
- Local providers should work to expand access to high-quality family counseling and mental health services in all four counties in the Region.
- Local providers should work to expand their services to include behavioral support and services for children under age five across the Region.

Region 16

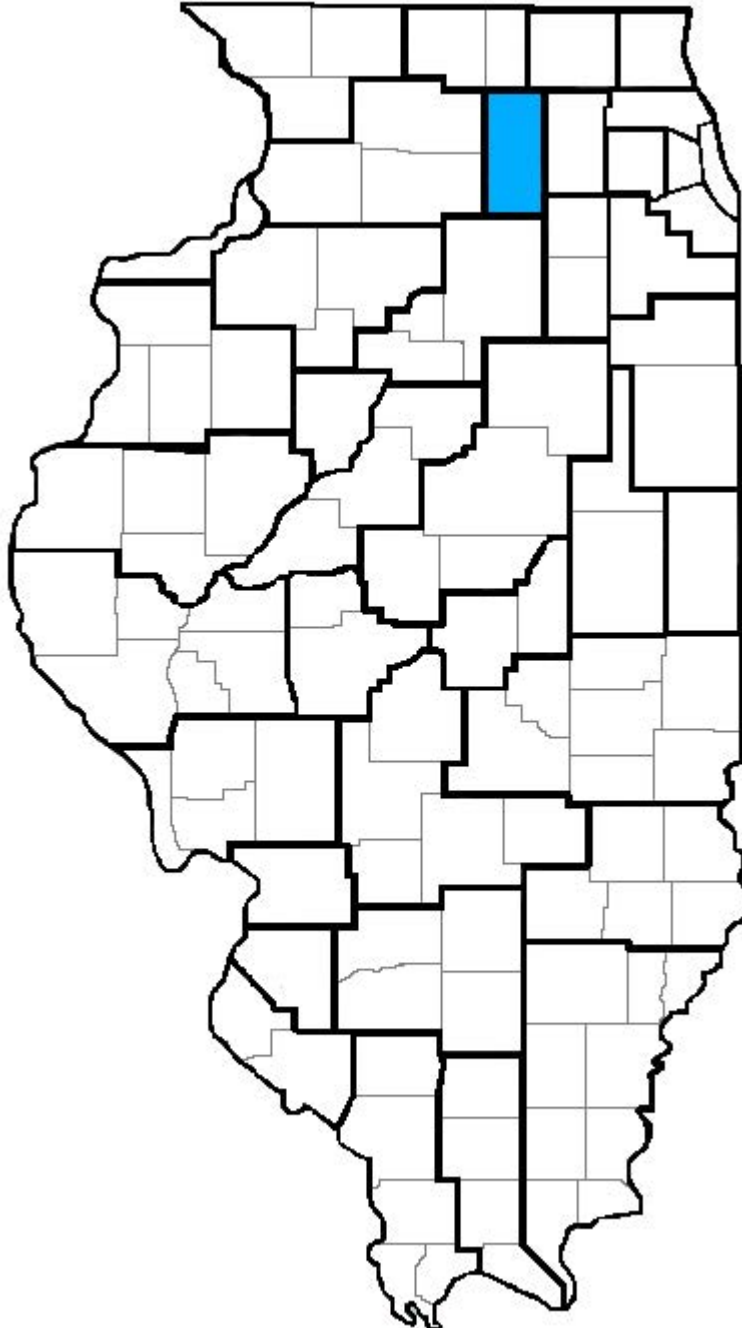
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Regional Strengths & Needs

Region 16 Strengths

Quality Programs and Services:

- Several licensed child care centers and publicly funded programs with Gold Circle of Quality Excellence rating and/or NAEYC accreditation.
- Preschool For All Expansion and Head Start programs that offer full-day publicly funded programs.
- School district preschool, including publicly funded and blended programs.
- Home visiting programs that support parents/caregivers as teachers.
- Early Intervention services.
- Basics DeKalb County Toddler Garden programming and Basics DeKalb County Parent Playgroups.
- Public library story programs for young children.

Resources and Supports for Families:

- Coordinated Community Child Care (4-C) referrals for child care and CCAP application support.
- Basics Insights text program that supports parents/caregivers as teachers.

Resources and Supports for ECEC Professionals:

- 4-C support to become licensed as a family child care provider.
- 4-C communities of practice and professional learning for ECEC professionals.
- ECACE grants that fund 4-C, Kishwaukee Community College, and NIU to recruit, mentor, and support ECEC professionals to attain higher credentials and degrees.
- ROE support for Region 16 school districts to adopt more play-based curricula for early elementary grades, which is a developmentally appropriate practice and allows for smoother transitions for students.

Regional Collaboration:

- DeKalb County Collaborative for Young Children and DeKalb County Regional Office of Education as the backbone agency.
- IRIS as a regional referral system.
- The vision for the Birth to 8 Mental Health Coalition.
- The alignment and communication between Region 16 school districts, the ROE, higher education, and 4-C around the development of the ECEC workforce.
- The partnership between the ROE and Region 16 high schools' ECEC-focused Educator Rising program, Pathways to Play.

Region 16 Needs

Child Care Affordability & Accessibility:

- More affordable and publicly funded child care slots in rural and population-dense areas.
- Transportation provided by providers/programs.
- Less restrictive income levels for CCAP.
- Additional slots to serve infants, toddlers, and overnight shifts.
- More infant/toddler mental health professionals.
- Wrap-around and/or integrated services that address the social-emotional, behavioral, and therapy needs of children.
- More bilingual ECEC programs.
- Additional programs for children with disabilities, including shorter waiting list for EI.
- Lower qualifying thresholds to access EI, especially for social-emotional health.
- Resources to increase family/caregiver awareness of 4-C, CCAP, home visiting programs, child development/milestones, and EI.

Support for ECEC Professionals:

- Public funds to pay ECEC workers competitive wages without increasing costs for families.
- Social-emotional support and other benefits for staff.
- Workforce pipeline development and investment.
- Increased recognition of ECEC professionals as educators and professionals in their field to combat the stigma of ECEC professionals as “babysitters”.

Recommendations

As the needs for ECEC in Region 16 were identified, recommendations began to emerge. The recommendations were developed to consider State responsibilities and regional responsibilities. The consensus among both the Family Council and Action Council was enrollment cannot be increased unless both cost and availability are addressed together. Affordable and available ECEC slots for families and competitive pay for ECEC professionals directly correlate. The Region 16 Family and Action Councils put forth the following seven recommendations.

Recommendation 1

- State: Subsidize child care for all families based on a flat percentage of household income over the next three years, starting with families with the lowest incomes.
- Regional: Encourage regional ECEC providers to assess and increase their CCAP utilization over the next year.

Recommendation 2

- State: Provide funding to pay ECEC professionals working in private and publicly funded programs a wage regionally comparable and competitive to their school-based counterparts without raising costs for families over the next three years.
- Regional: Explore ways to braid public funding with ECEC programs to regionally subsidize ECEC salaries over the next two years.

Recommendation 3

- State: Provide level, non-competitive, grant funding for publicly funded ECEC programs that are based on community needs in the next five years and continue to fund expanded and new publicly funded ECEC programs including PI, PFA/PFA-E, EHS, HS, and CCAP annually.
- Region: Explore the feasibility of regional organizations to respond to RFPs and NOFOs for publicly funded ECEC programs over the next six to twelve months and support the implementation of new or expanded publicly funded programs in FY 24 through FY 26.

Recommendation 4

- State: Expand infrastructure to support greater ECEC workforce pipeline development, including the ECACE grant and Educator Rising programs, and incentivize entering the ECEC field over the next five years.
- Region: Support ongoing regional alignment of ECEC from birth to third grade and support ongoing regional efforts to increase the local ECEC workforce pipeline, including Pathways to Play.

Recommendation 5

- State: Require all child care centers and schools that receive public dollars to adhere to the tenets of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for all children, beginning at birth. Additionally, these programs should adhere to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Developmentally Appropriate Practices to ensure an inclusive, culturally responsive classroom environment for all children. Provide funding to support staff development and make structural and programmatic changes over the next three years.

- Region: Support the Birth to 8 Mental Health Coalition to conduct a stakeholder analysis and develop an implementation plan to address children’s social-emotional, behavioral health, and ECEC inclusion needs over the next year. Deliver ongoing professional development through multiple channels about inclusive and culturally responsive practices starting in FY 24.

Recommendation 6

- State: Become aware of, and support, regional community saturation efforts like Basics Illinois.
- Region: Continue implementing Basics DeKalb County across the Region.

Recommendation 7

- State: Provide funding to encourage care for non-traditional hours and/or transportation.
- Region: Explore drop-in care options/models for neighborhoods in which it would be the most useful/ utilized over the next year.

The recommendations formed by the Region 16 Family and Action Council are based on the lived experiences of families and providers in DeKalb County and the known data. The Councils endeavored to engage families in communities impacted most by systemic racism and oppression, as well as those defined as being in priority populations. Additionally, each recommendation correlates to identified needs. Region 16 stakeholders uphold that ECEC must continue to be a priority within DeKalb County and the state of Illinois if we are to be the best state to raise young children.

Regional Strengths & Needs

The Family Council, Action Council, and community members at large all expressed that Region 17 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

Region 17 is a diverse area in central Illinois. Families who would like more amenities choose to live in a mid-sized city like Bloomington or Normal in McLean County. Others may choose small town life in Pontiac, Clinton, and Lincoln in Livingston, DeWitt, and Logan Counties, respectively. Still, others choose to live in the many small villages or unincorporated areas in more rural areas located throughout small farming communities in all four counties.

For the early childhood landscape, the strengths lie in the relationships built between parents and their child's teacher, family child care provider, therapist, or home visitor. There are 20 Preschool for All and two Preschool for All Expansion sites throughout the Region. Early Head Start programs exist in four locations and every county has at least one Head Start. Licensed child care centers and licensed family child care homes are primarily located in McLean County due to the density of the population. Another strength in Region 17 is the existence of the All Our Kids (AOK) Network which provides coordination and collaboration between many social service agencies and schools to meet the needs of families with young children.

The Action Council and the Family Council discussed many issues during the last few months. After examining demographics, priority populations, ECEC programs, workforce, Collaborations, and family/caregiver engagement within Region 17, the Councils arrived at five Need Statements and 11 Recommendations.

Needs

1. Address the shortage of a well-trained and well-compensated workforce.
2. Increase the number of Spanish speakers in the workforce, e.g., classroom staff, home visitors, developmental screening staff, and therapists.
3. Expand birth to five programming and child care, especially in rural areas.
4. Create additional affordable child care options for families.
5. Promote local and regional awareness of programs and resources for families.

Recommendations

1. Address the shortage of a well-trained and well-compensated workforce:
 - Ensure that salaries and benefits reflect the educational and training achievements of ECEC staff and are competitive with non-ECEC fields to attract more individuals to the ECEC field.
 - Urge the appropriate public bodies and officials to expand the Career and Technical Education Pathway training opportunities to bring high school students into the ECEC field.
 - Advocate to the appropriate public bodies and officials to create better alignment between qualifications required by child care licensing standards and qualifications required by state and federal ECEC funders.
2. Increase number of Spanish speakers in the workforce, e.g., classroom staff, home visitors, developmental screening staff, therapists:
 - Recruit Spanish speaking high school students, specifically those earning the Illinois State Seal of Biliteracy, to the ECEC workforce.
 - Encourage the appropriate public bodies and officials to develop Career and Technical Education Pathways for high school students to increase the number of Spanish speaking ECEC staff.
3. Expand birth to five programming, transportation, and child care, especially in rural areas:
 - Encourage state legislators and congressional leaders to increase publicly funded resources and programming by utilizing the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding 2021 report.
 - Develop recruitment plan for family/group child care home providers in rural areas.
 - Address the lack of transportation to and from a child's program/programs.
4. Create additional affordable child care options for families.
 - Re-examine income limits for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) to make child care affordable for more families and keep families on CCAP longer. This would allow people with income over 225% Federal Poverty Level (FPL) to qualify and prevents a sudden loss of CCAP benefits due to increased stability of family income.
5. Promote local and regional awareness of already existing programs and resources for families.
 - Broaden public awareness of publicly funded state and federally funded ECEC programs, services, and resources.
 - Increase collaborative efforts such as the AOK Networks into every county.

Region 19

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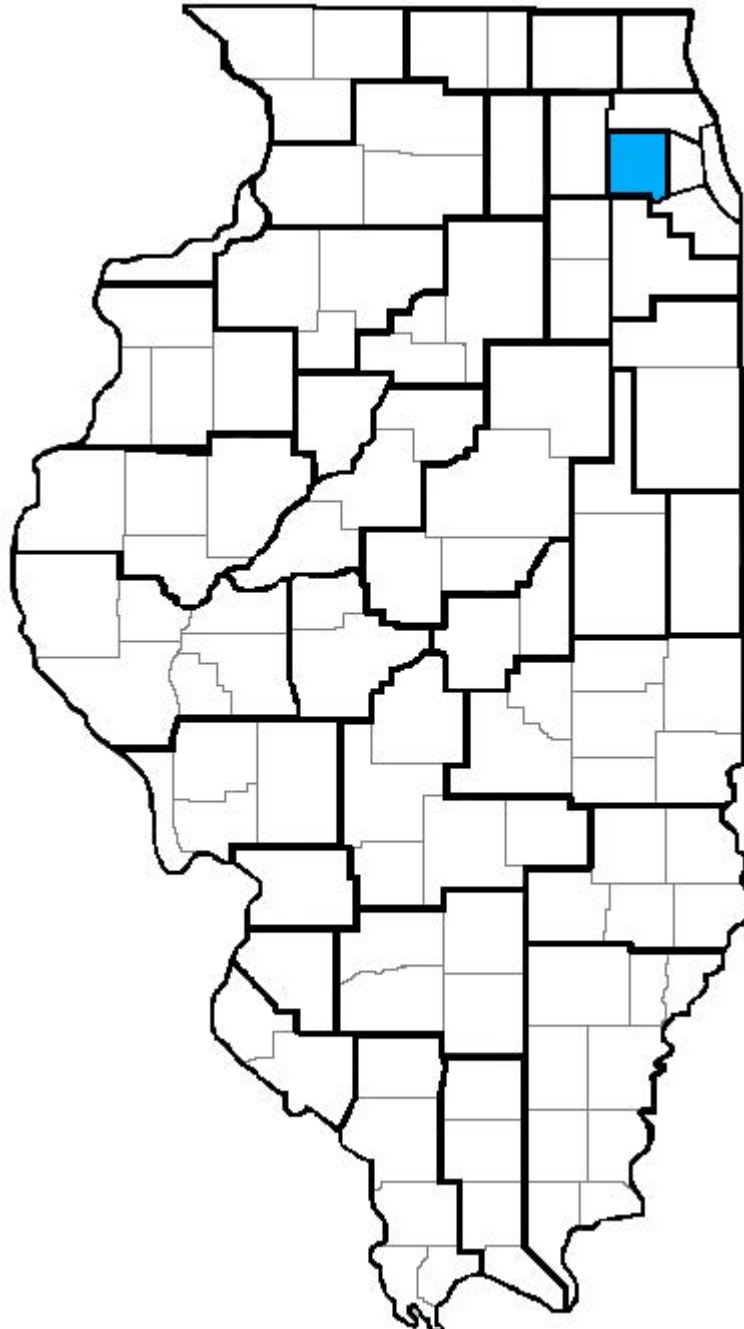
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Regional Strengths and Needs

Based on the available data, conversations with community stakeholders, and in-depth discussions with families, it is apparent that Region 19 is at the forefront of providing ECEC services to the young children and families living within DuPage County. The ability for the community to come together and show their support for the ECEC system makes it a desirable place to live in the state of Illinois. However, even with the abundance of strong attributes, there are plenty of opportunities for continued improvement. Although great care is implemented in connecting families with support, until all children, regardless of their circumstances, can equitably access ECEC opportunities, the work is not complete.

Strength: Region 19 is home to a plethora of service organizations working together to connect families with an abundance of resources.

Need: Increased access to ECEC services and assistance for children and families who are just beyond the threshold of qualifying criteria.

As a community rich in civil engagement, an emphasis has been placed on those priority populations that are most in need of services. The needs of those that miss qualifying for assistance by a small margin also need to be considered. For example, to be considered for Early Intervention services a child must demonstrate, at minimum, a 30% delay. Those that fall just short are still experiencing challenges in reaching their full development potential. Yet they are left to sort it out on their own. Much in the same way, programs that use Federal Poverty Level (FPL) indicators do not take into consideration the cost of living, leaving families struggling to gain access to ECEC services. Even those families that are considered to be making a living wage make compromises and sacrifices in order to pay for child care.

Strength: Social service organizations, school districts, and early childhood programs have been resourceful when blending funding sources to support ECEC work throughout the Region.

Need: Federal and state funding policies that are easy to navigate, align to ensure a continuum of care, and take into account additional qualifying factors, such as the unique characteristics within each community.

Educare in West Chicago is an example of what happens when dedicated professionals come together to make change happen. Through hard work they have been able to blend funding from programs such as, but not limited to PFA, Head Start, and CCAP. As a result, Educare is able to provide critical services to almost 200 children in what would otherwise be considered a child care desert. Although they have been able to ensure high-quality, dual language programs with low teacher-to-student ratios, it is a constant struggle to juggle the differing funding streams. State and federal funding opportunities are complicated webs woven together using differing qualifications for not only the organizations seeking grants, but also the families in need of services. For those programs that are already struggling, the idea of trying to manage that system is daunting and most avoid it all together.

Strength: The Region 19 ECEC landscape prides itself on providing opportunities for parents and caregivers to be involved in their child[ren]'s experiences. From parent councils to special family events, caregivers have ample opportunity to participate.

Need: Authentic parent/caregiver engagement that respects and appreciates the uniqueness of each family, with special considerations for culture, language, ethnicity, education level, ability, socioeconomic status, and the like.

For almost 60 years, the Hobson school in Naperville has operated a preschool program rooted in parent participation and engagement. As a one-of-a-kind parent co-op, Hobson school operates a parent advisory board and requires each family to take an active role in not only their child's education, but also the program operations. While not every program can operate in this manner, the lessons learned from this set-up can help ensure that families feel welcomed and included. Whether programs knowingly or unknowingly create barriers for families, fear and mistrust have become an important factor for many parents and caregivers considering child care.

Strength: As a Region with families from all over the world, early childhood programs and services recognize the need for comprehensive language support, and many have implemented them to improve communication and service coordination.

Need: Improved language supports specific to Spanish-speaking populations and the addition of resources to assist the wide array of other non-native English-speaking families.

As can be expected, moving to a new country can cause confusion and fear as families navigate different environmental and cultural differences. The Glenbard home visiting system does their best to help immigrant and refugee families adjust to these new expectations using visual representations and easy-to-understand references such as Raising Young Children in a New Country: Supporting Early Learning and Healthy Development for more comprehensive communication, some programs have employed bilingual staff or utilized the Language Access Resource Center out of the DuPage Federation on Human Services Reform. However, not all programs can access bilingual support. And even when translations are available, they often are too formalized and difficult to understand.

Strength: Region 19 has one of the most robust collaborative landscapes within the state of Illinois, with 12 established Early Childhood Collaborations. Through this work, hundreds of young children have received developmental screenings, publicly funded slots have increased, and more children have been set up for success.

Need: Technical assistance to uphold existing Collaborations and investments to establish new collaborations.

The Region 19 Early Childhood Collaborative landscape would not be what it is without investments from local philanthropical agencies such as the DuPage Foundation. Their appreciation for the importance of building a supportive network and subsequent financial contributions have been instrumental in laying the foundation for community engagement in ECEC. However, as the field of early childhood continues to advance and encounter new challenges, existing Collaborations require opportunities for technical assistance and guidance beyond what networking meetings can provide. Through these opportunities and additional investments from entities such as local school districts, the collaborative system within Region 19 can thrive and expand.

Strength: Top rated school districts and a vast array of child care programs, including licensed child care centers, family child care, and publicly funded preschools.

Need: Increased access to publicly funded programs, recognizing inconvenient schedules, the lack of transportation, and disqualifying criteria that separate families.

Led by the same passionate and knowledgeable District Superintendent for 30 years, the DuPage Regional Office of Education (ROE) has dedicated itself to supporting the youngest learners as they enter the school system for the first time. With programs such as the Teachers as Parents and Preschool for All, the educational foundation has been strengthened to ensure school success. Nonetheless, if not a stay-at-home parent or one with a flexible work schedule the ability to physically get your child to a publicly funded program is a burden in itself. Accommodations need to be made to alleviate the task of having to find alternative care when only half-day options are available, transportation is lacking, and siblings are not allowed to attend the same program.

Strength: An ECEC workforce that is well educated and demographically representative of the birth to five population.

Need: An appreciation for the value of the ECEC workforce that provides equitable wages, mental health support, and obtainable professional development. This includes intentional solutions to address workforce shortages and retain qualified staff.

The local Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agency, facilitated through the YWCA of Metropolitan Chicago, has recognized the need for ECEC workforce interventions and has implemented innovative solutions to not only retain child care providers but recruit them as well. With specialized staff who can provide on-site support and professional development opportunities, the CCR&R serves as a resource hub for the child care community. Yet, even with this dedicated support, many ECEC staff continue to be overwhelmed and underpaid. Without additional interventions to alleviate classroom challenges and an increase in pay and benefits, the field will be unable to sustain itself much longer.

“It’s such a circular problem – paying workers more makes programs more expensive which then limits access.”

- Community Member

Strength: Region 19 is an affluent community with many residents able to secure private insurance, allowing for a comprehensive system of both public and private specialized services.

Need: A system that supports children from varying levels of family income, development, trauma, and medical complexities through inclusive and adaptive environments.

Easterseals DuPage and Fox Valley is one of the few programs within Region 19 that offers inclusive child care options that support children of differing developmental and physical needs. Their Lily Garden Child Care Center employs a team of specialists and therapists to support the whole child and their family while engaging in a supportive and educational environment. However, many private child care programs lack the resources to employ specialized staff or make environmental accommodations. A lack of appropriate training/skill-building and fiscal support make it almost impossible for child care programs to enroll children that require additional support.

Strength: A collective of families that are resilient and resourceful when faced with adversity. The communities encompass parents and caregivers that are fierce advocates for their children.

Need: Consumer education that empowers families to acquire the necessary knowledge regarding their options and the ability to navigate the ECEC system.

Through a joint effort between multiple school districts and community stakeholders, Glenbard School District 87 offers weekly opportunities for parents, caregivers, students, and professionals to engage in learning opportunities. The Glenbard Parent Series (GPS): Navigating Healthy Families seeks to empower individuals to “collaborate, communicate, embrace diversity, create and think critically”⁶. Although presentations focus on varying age groups, GPS includes guest speakers who specialize in ECEC. This and a multitude of other resources are key pieces to helping parents and caregivers understand the many facets of the ECEC system. Yet, despite these efforts many families are left to sort through professional verbiage and at times an overload of misinformation.

Recommendations

The work to address the varied needs of Region 19 is vast, but as a community collective they are achievable. While, as a community member said, we live in a society where “there are always people in the system looking for a reason to say ‘no’”, DuPage community organizations and the boots-on-the-ground individuals are committed to finding the “yes.” Based on feedback from families and community stakeholders, Region 19 recommends the following to ensure equitable access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services:

- Increased access to ECEC services and assistance for children and families who are just beyond the threshold of qualifying criteria.
 - Early Intervention services for children birth to age three who demonstrate a developmental delay below the required 30%.
 - A tiered approach to publicly funded program qualification criteria for families and individuals that accounts for outlying factors such as cost of living and gross versus net income.
 - Implement marketing and support strategies to recruit new child care providers and staff, with a focus on stay-at-home parent populations.
 - Expand grant opportunities to support capital investments for both new and existing private early child care centers and homes, regardless of profit status and CCAP, participation to build capacity.
 - Increase monetary incentives for program CCAP participation and implement improved payment processing systems.
- Federal and state funding policies that are easy to navigate, align to ensure a continuum of care, and take into account additional qualifying factors, such as the unique characteristics within each community.
 - Restructured state funding that incorporates region-specific considerations based on actual numbers rather than population percentages.
 - Increased ability for cities and/or zip codes with multiple school districts to coordinate publicly funded services to ensure equal opportunities are available to all residents, regardless of qualifying demographics (e.g., if one school district qualifies for services, they are automatically applicable to any other districts within the same community).
 - State supports to manage braided funding opportunities ensuring that local organizations have consistent, long-term funding.
- Authentic parent/caregiver engagement that respects and appreciates the uniqueness of each family, with special considerations for culture, language, ethnicity, education level, ability, socioeconomic status, and the like.
 - Professional development for ECEC professionals to increase awareness and knowledge regarding working with families from all different backgrounds with an emphasis on embracing diversity, authentic engagement, and implicit bias.
 - Regulatory policies that require all early childhood programs and services to develop and implement equity, diversity, and inclusion plans that include a system for reporting incidents and subsequent corrective interventions.

- Improved language supports specific to Spanish-speaking populations and the addition of resources to assist the wide array of other non-native English-speaking families.
 - Hire and retain bilingual staff within all early childhood programs and services.
 - Offer audible communication services in addition to written materials (e.g., voice recordings of newsletters).
 - Create and maintain state portals and resources in multiple languages, not just English and Spanish.
- Technical assistance to uphold existing Collaborations and investments to establish new Collaborations.
 - Create a coordinated system to collect, house, and disseminate quantitative data between Region 19 Early Childhood Collaborations and networks.
 - Develop a system of reflective practice that incorporates technical assistance for new and existing Collaborations.
 - Organized alignment tools to prevent the duplication of services and define/distinguish the roles of local organizations, especially those that cover multiple regions.
- Increased access to publicly funded programs, recognizing inconvenient schedules, the lack of transportation, and disqualifying criteria that separates families.
 - Expand Home Visiting services to ages three to five years old.
 - Adapt qualifying criteria for publicly funded programs to allow all siblings under one household to participate in services if one child qualifies based on individual circumstances.
 - Create and expand transportation to and from publicly funded programs.
 - Expand half-day programming to accommodate the needs of working families.
- An appreciation for the value of the ECEC workforce that provides equitable wages, mental health support, and obtainable professional development. Intentional solutions to address workforce shortages and retain qualified staff.
 - Embed reflective supervision practices into all aspects of ECEC, with opportunities to engage in mental health and well-being supports.
 - Expand teaching staff regulatory qualifications across all environments to give credit for proven competencies and work experience.
 - Proactively address staffing transition plans at an organizational level to ensure a continuum of care, including the development of region-specific substitute staffing pools.
 - Increased state funding to support educational advancement and compensation for the early childhood workforce.

- A system that supports children from varying levels of development, trauma, and medical complexities through inclusive and adaptive environments.
 - Universal developmental screenings for all children birth to age five, implemented in the child’s native language.
 - Expand current early childhood mental health supports, including the employment of additional Infant/Toddler Mental Health Specialists.
 - Financial support for existing child care programs to support inclusive environments through physical environment accommodations, the purchase of appropriate classroom materials, and compensation for specialized teaching staff.
 - Professional development for ECEC professionals to increase awareness and knowledge regarding working with children from varying levels of development, trauma, and medical complexities.



The system needs to adapt to the needs of families and logistical barriers should not be a reason a child cannot access needed services.

- Community Member



- Consumer education that empowers families to acquire the necessary knowledge regarding their options and the ability to navigate the ECEC system.
 - Region-wide and community-specific parent support and play groups that are accessible to all families. Present opportunities in a manner that engages caregivers in their own environments and is communicated in a manner that is in line with their level of understanding and engagement.
 - Offer formal orientation practices to all families entering ECEC programs for the first time and at all stages of transition. Present resources that are easy to understand, available in multiple languages, and include detailed information regarding parental rights.
 - Engage the healthcare field to ensure consistent messaging and increase partnerships between early childhood professionals and pediatricians.

Region 20

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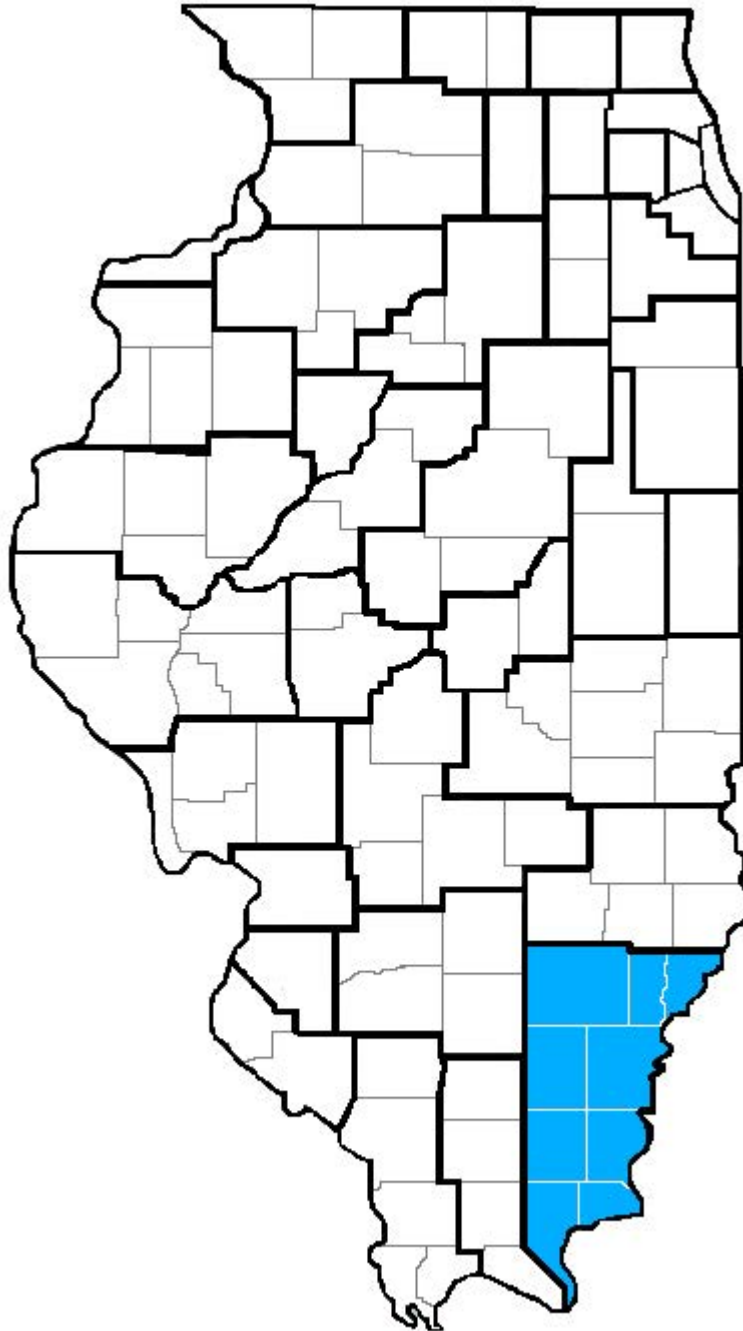
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Regional Strengths and Needs

Region 20 understands that enrollment in high-quality ECEC services can result in improved child development and outcomes that benefit school readiness. Region 20 has worked together to share the strengths and needs of every aspect of ECEC in Region 20 and through strategic collaboration and collective insights, have concluded the following.

Strengths

- The greatest strength in the Region is strong community support in all nine counties and the willingness of community members to come together to share resources and insights to meet the ECEC needs of children and families.
- Council members from Region 20's Action and Family Councils expressed satisfaction with the quality of ECEC programs in the Region.
- There are a variety of ECEC programs and services in the Region including: licensed child care centers, licensed family child care, group homes, license-exempt child care, Preschool for All, Preschool for All Expansion, Preventative Initiative, Head Start, Early Head Start, Early Intervention, and Early Childhood Special Education services.
- Head Start/Early Head Start is available in all nine counties in the Region. Transportation to and from this program is provided in several counties.
- All counties in Region 20 offer Preschool For All/Preschool For All Expansion programs. These programs are offered at no cost to eligible families and caregivers.
- The Southern Illinois Coalition for Children and Families (SIFCC) is a cross-sector Collaboration of agencies and individuals dedicated to working together to improve the quality of life for young children and their families across southern Illinois. Through collaborative efforts, this coalition has developed an infrastructure that promotes better child outcomes, offers resources, and provides strong family support at the local level in Hamilton, White, Saline, Gallatin, Pope, and Hardin Counties.
- In Edwards and Wabash Counties, the All Our Kids Network supports collaboration across service sectors to achieve greater results for young children. Their mission is to engage a diverse group of people who care about the health and well-being of children and families, and they work with providers to support and encourage parents/caregivers to engage as their child's "first teachers."
- The Southern Illinois Early Childhood Action Team (SIECAT) is a strong membership group housed in Wayne County. Their mission is to promote, support, and enhance the quality of ECEC for children and families in Southern Illinois.
- There are several programs that foster higher education opportunities for ECEC professionals and prospective ECEC career seekers (for example, the Gateway Scholarship Program, Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity Scholarship, CCR&R/Project Child training, Illinois Trainer Network, and Strategy to Attract and Retain Teachers).

Needs

- Each child needs to have access to quality education and care services and support.
- We must address the decrease in the availability of services and professionals in Early Intervention services in Region 20 brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech language therapy.
- Early childhood educators in the Region need wages equal to their K-12 counterparts, along with benefits like health insurance, retirement, and paid time off.
- Families/caregivers need more information on resources and available programs in the Region.
- Working families need more access to full-day, state-funded programs.
- Families need more education regarding eligibility and easier access to the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP).
- Early childhood caregivers, educators, and families have expressed the need for mental health services, professionals, and resources for children and families, as well as more available mental health, social-emotional, and trauma-informed practices in the classroom, especially in the post-COVID 19 pandemic era.
- There is an extreme need for dental services in this area. Currently, there are no dental providers who accept Medicaid in any of the nine counties in Region 20.
- Child care providers and early education providers and administrators have expressed the need for building and construction grants in Region 20.
- Due to the rural location of Region 20 and the limited availability of public transportation, there is an overarching need for transportation resources, including both personal transportation and transportation to and from ECEC programs and support services.

Recommendations

The Region 20 Councils discussed dozens of recommendations for systemic changes that could improve the lives of the families and children in the local communities. They understood, however, the necessity to prioritize those recommendations that would have the most profound impact on the greatest number of community members throughout the Region.

- Available funding needs to follow each child from birth so children can receive quality education and care services and support, no matter their location or income level, and so all children are able to receive comprehensive services to enhance Kindergarten readiness and future success.
- Incentives should be developed to attract Early Intervention professionals. Processes could be streamlined to make the most of the professional's billable hours while working with high caseloads. Families need more access to Early Intervention services, such as occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech/language therapy, and an increase in the number of professionals to serve children from birth to age three.
- A centralized resource for families to gain awareness of the available programs and resources in the Region to increase usage of available programs. Locally, this initiative could be partially accomplished by utilizing Local Collaborations to provide education for parents/caregivers on all ECEC programs through offering meetings, education, training, and support.
- Every child needs the opportunity to access quality education and care services and support regardless of the income level of the family. Increasing the Federal Poverty Level from 200% to 400% would create more eligibility for the CCAP program and therefore qualify more families/caregivers to receive ECEC services for their children.
- Change CCAP policy to uncouple private pay rates from CCAP rates. Due to the economy in Region 20, to stay in business it is necessary for more programs to accept CCAP. Per policy, the provider may not charge the State more than its private pay parents. As CCAP rates are raised, programs must also raise the private pay rates to an equal amount, forcing many caregivers to find alternative arrangements that are affordable.
- Increase the usage for CCAP by educating and promoting CCAP to families/caregivers and by streamlining and simplifying the CCAP application process.
- To retain current teachers and attract more teachers in early childhood education, a boost in state funding is desirable to increase salaries and benefits so employees are making a salary commensurate with other teachers and educators who work with children over the age of five.
- Funds need to be available to increase the mental health services, professionals, and resources for children and families.
- Programs need to be developed to entice pediatric dentists to accept Medicaid in the Region. Policy change would be recommended to increase reimbursement rates for services provided and to expedite payments to providers. Another option would be for the State to create a new program with a prepaid dental card separate from existing insurance plans that would pay each provider directly.
- To expand their ability to accept more children engaged and enrolled in ECEC services and maximize the availability of child care slots across the Region, funding should be prioritized for building grants and building expansion projects in Region 20 for community-based programs, as well as for-profit and non-profit organizations, such as schools. Region 20 has not been awarded any recent construction grants.
- Provide public transportation funding to increase routes throughout the Region.

Region 21

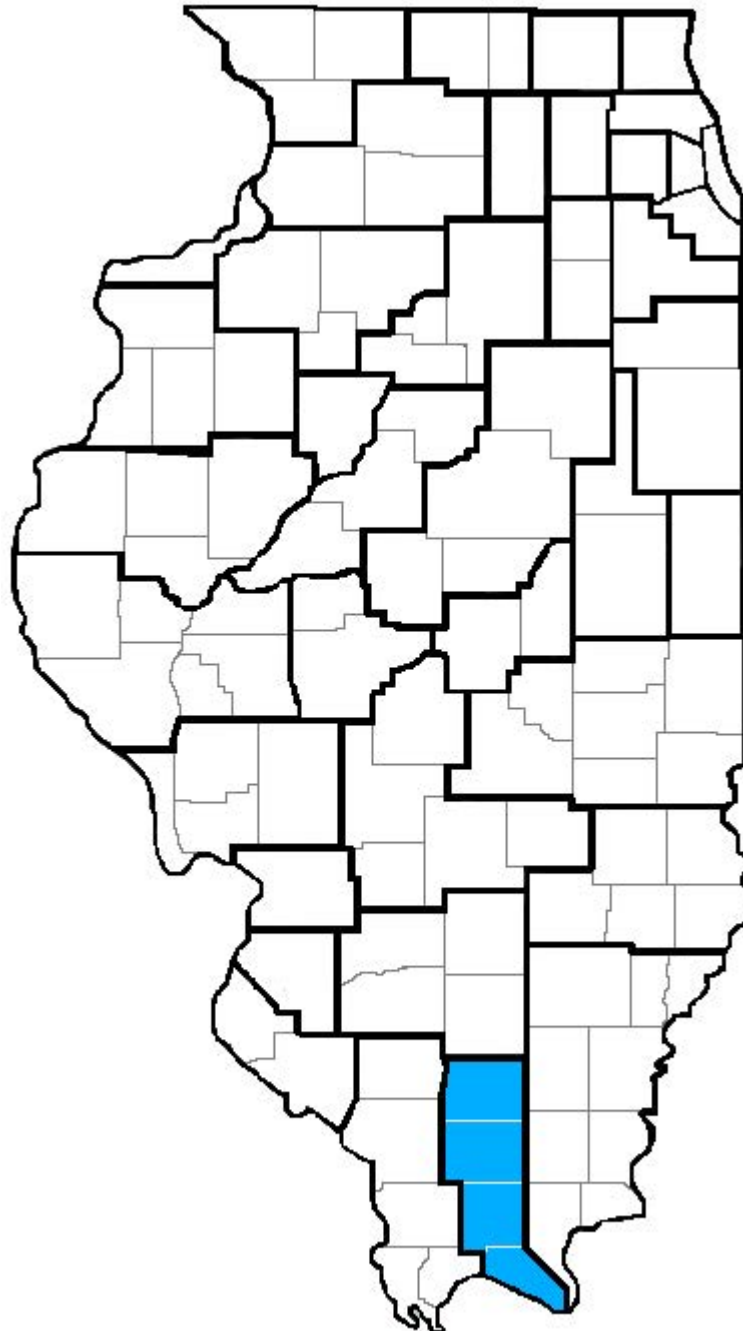
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Regional Strengths and Needs

We know the importance of the early years and the promise that high-quality Early Childhood Care and Education gives to all children. Together, we shared strengths, needs and strategies on the ECEC system in Region 21. Collective insights identified the following key themes and lessons:

Strengths

- The greatest strength in our Region is the people and their relationships with one another. We are committed to building a Regional infrastructure and desire to collaborate and share resources to meet the needs of children and families in early learning.
- The leadership of experienced ECEC Administrators in this Region has helped move programs and initiatives forward, even during the pandemic, which helped mitigate the negative effects of staff turnover and the workforce shortage.
- Although there is not enough care, there are a variety of ECEC options for parents/caregivers to choose from throughout the Region.
- The large number of state funded pre-K and Prevention Initiative programs in the school districts demonstrates the understanding Superintendents have about the importance of Early Childhood services and their role in school readiness.
- Head Start/Early Head Start programs are in the communities with the highest concentration of poverty-level income.
- There is a strong commitment from the Region's higher education institutions to the ECEC workforce, as evidenced by SIU's Grow Your Own Program and their participation in the ECACE Scholarship.
- Publicly funded programs are provided to families at no cost. Children attending these programs can participate in special education services as part of their school day and in the school in which they receive services.
- Professionals are offered a variety of low cost/no cost professional development opportunities.
- ECEC professionals are actively utilizing a variety of technical assistance and professional development opportunities, participating in local, Regional, and statewide offerings, which demonstrates a commitment to high-quality programming.
- The Southern Illinois Coalition for Children and Families (SIFCC) has developed a strong and effective infrastructure that helps connect and coordinate services, maximizing the Region's current resources and promoting better child outcomes and strong family support. This group provides leadership and support to other collective impact initiatives, addressing issues that are best addressed at the local level by helping lay a solid foundation for this work.
- The Johnson County Cabinet for Children and Youth (JCCCY) is a community wide- collective impact emerging Collaboration designed to help children and their families reach their fullest potential.

Needs

- Funding needs to follow the child so that children can receive the same services and support, no matter the location.
- Families need more information about CCAP, including family and provider eligibility.
- Parent/caregivers need more information on the available resources in Region 21.
- To make informed decisions, the Region's leaders need accessibility to a centralized source for data.
- A universal collection of key data elements, such as housing insecurity, is needed.
- Early Childhood educators in the Region need competitive, livable wages along with benefits (health, retirement, paid time off, holiday pay).
- Innovative new approaches to funding have the potential to support adequate compensation for the entire field, not just some sectors.
- Working families need more access to full day state funded programs.
- There is an overarching need for transportation, including both personal transportation and transportation to and from ECEC programs and support services.
- More support and/or resources for all ECEC programs to address Early Childhood mental health and behavior issues.
- Because of the economy of this Region, to stay in business it is a necessity that most programs accept CCAP. Per policy, the provider may not charge the State more than its private pay parents. As CCAP rates are raised, providers must also raise the private pay rates to an equal amount, forcing many caregivers to find alternative arrangements that are more affordable. We need a policy that does not cause a disruption of care, both for the child and their family.

Recommendations

Through the process of gathering family opinions and engaging local stakeholders, we have identified recommendations to address the Early Childhood needs within Region 21. These recommendations are based on input we received from families, community members, and business stakeholders who are living in and using the ECEC system in our Region.

Overarching Recommendations

- If we want to create an equitable system based on data, the State should prioritize its data collecting efforts, including what data elements are collected across programs, and creating a centralized and accessible repository for all data collected.
- We recommend locally that we host town halls to share and educate community members on local needs and to expand this knowledge and these conversations to partner organizations outside of ECEC.

Access

- Birth to Three services need to be expanded in the entire Region. No county in the Region meets service needs for more than 29% of its children. The county with the least number of services is Johnson.
- The expansion of pre-K services should include not only more slots, but also expand some part day programs to full day programs to meet the needs of families.
- Transportation is a continuous need. Continue to elevate transportation and explore different ways of access for families. We encourage the State to explore alternative delivery models to get services to families to meet these needs.
- Special services and supports for diagnosed and suspected disabilities/conditions should be provided in all early childhood settings.

Affordability

- Increase the utilization of CCAP. Locally, we will expand on our CCR&R's current efforts to promote CCAP by partnering to distribute promotional materials; share information; and educate families, community stakeholders, and employers about the program, its eligibility criteria, and the changing policies that make the program more accessible to families.
- We encourage IDHS to continue to decouple private pay rates with CCAP rates.
- Child care assistance for children in foster care should be funded by IDHS and included in the regular CCAP program in an effort to streamline funding.

Quality

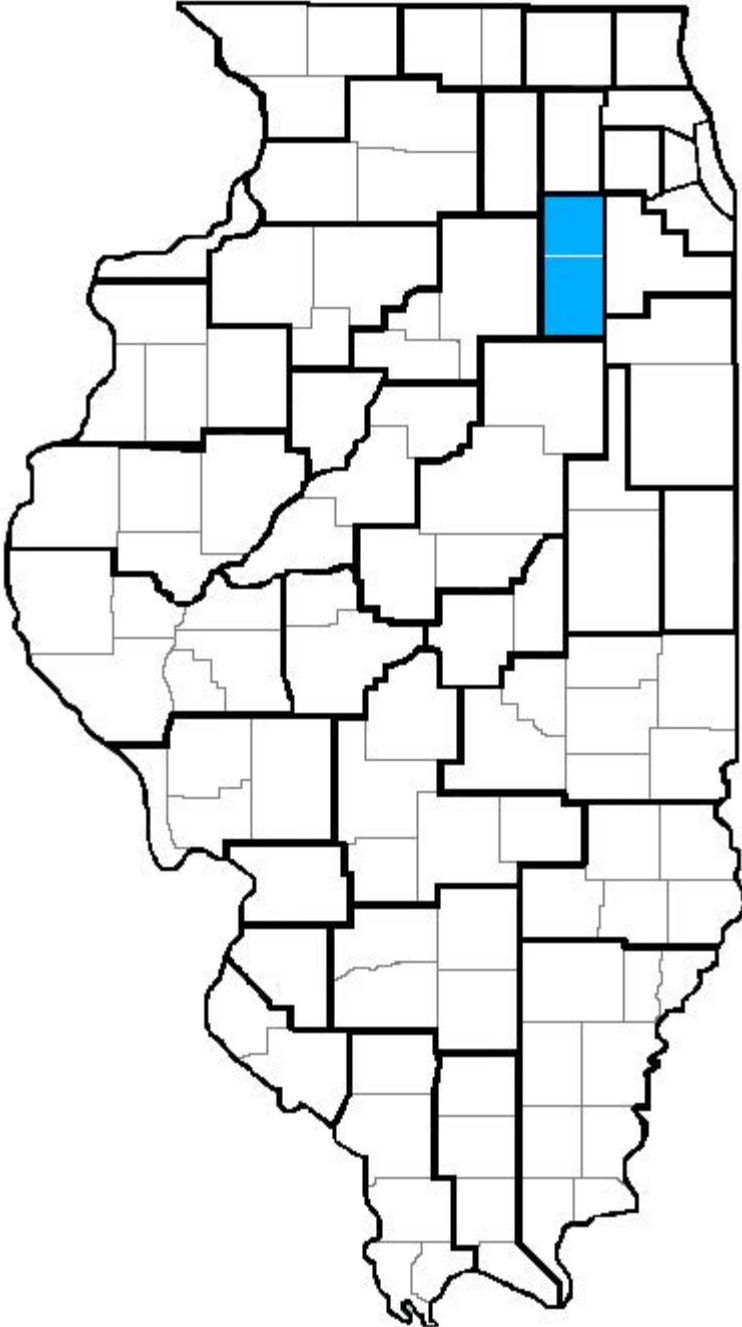
- As a Region, we recommend the State continues to increase its resources aimed at recruiting and retaining an adequate workforce.
- We recommend locally that we work to increase quality by promoting and sharing information about the State's current workforce initiatives, educate the public about the need for more teachers, and advocate for increased public dollars that support adequate compensation.

- We recommend continued funding and technical assistance support for local and Regional Collaborations (SICCF, JCCCY) so they can progress their transformative work, leading cross-sector initiatives that maximize resources, reduce duplication of services, and enhance child and family outcomes.
- In state contracts (Quality Contracts, pre-K, etc.), we encourage the State to explore funding mechanisms/ levels that allow programs to have smaller student/teacher ratios to provide better learning experiences for children and experience stronger relationships with caregivers. During the pandemic, program administrators reported smaller ratios and better behaviors.
- All programs should receive equitable funding, resources, and support to serve the special needs of children.

Region 24

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Regional Strengths & Needs

Throughout the Region, the community has echoed many of the same key themes related to the Early Childhood landscape. There are several strengths and needs that have been identified. Key themes illuminated in focus groups, interviews, and follow-up conversations with many community members:

- **Lack of Awareness:** Community members are not connected to many of the social services in the area due to unclear or complex processes.
- **Workforce Shortage:** There is a slot gap being caused by a teacher shortage that is forcing child care centers to place children on waitlists. Even worse, some centers must close their doors because they cannot find teachers.
- **Income Barriers:** Income qualifications for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) are unrealistic given the cost of living. Families find it nearly impossible to afford child care because they do not meet the income criteria for CCAP.
- **Special Education Services:** There is a need to provide families with more hands-on support through the intake process of attaining an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), 504 Plan, speech or occupational services, or any services related to special education.

Strengths

- In Kendall County, there are a variety of privately-operated child care programs to choose from.
- There are private schools that provide full-day preschool for children ages three to five.
- There are many services for children and families, such as Early Intervention screenings and services; home visiting; Preschool for All programs; Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program; CCAP; and many other valuable resources.
- Success with obtaining the proper services for their child after they have been diagnosed with a learning disability.
- The community, parents, and caregivers have displayed eagerness and dedication in creating a home-to-school connection through family involvement and family engagement.

Needs

- Extensive training for ECEC providers so they can work with children with special needs and behavioral needs.
- More Early Childhood Community Collaborations that work in partnership to support each other and serve the families in the community better.
- A data-collecting system that is county specific and provides a basis for equitable funding.
- Clear, concise, and understandable language regarding how children qualify for Early Intervention services.
- A timelier process for child care assistance programs to address long wait times to receive approval or denial letters that disrupts families' work schedules and extends financial strain.
- Workforce recruitment and retention.
- Transportation to and from half-day programs.
- Affordable child care.
- Improvements in the evaluation process for special education services.

As we strive to reimagine the ECEC system, the goal is to ensure needs are addressed to create an equitable system for all regardless of race, gender, ethnic background, and social class.

Recommendations

For ten months, Region 24's Action and Family Councils have met twice per month for four hours. The Action Council and Family Council will support local Collaborations through the Region's Implementation Plan. Recommendations for each subsection are as follows:

ECEC Programs and Services

- Survey families to uncover barriers to enrollment in ECEC program and services.
- Increase the number of child care facilities (especially in Grundy County), including those providing full-day programs and care for children ages birth through three.
- Expand transportation services to and from half-day programs to accommodate all families in need and fund transportation for all students who qualify for services.
- Create a multi-tiered approach to educate community members on the importance of ECEC.
- Host mandatory family engagement meetings that accommodate family's schedules.
- Provide funding/incentives for ECEC programs to operate during non-traditional hours.

Workforce Recruitment and Retention

- Educate secondary education students and school district administrators on the importance of ECEC through workshops and embed ECE into high school curriculum.
- Change student-teacher ratios in privately-operated child care programs when there is a child with a diagnosis that needs increased educator attention.
- Increase pay and provide on-site mentorship to educators.
- Increase the minimum degree required for lead teachers to an associate degree.
- Require continuing education in the form of college credits for professional development to ensure quality of content.
- Educate owners of privately-operated child care centers on best practices
- No-cost child care for teachers currently employed in ECEC programs.

Region 26

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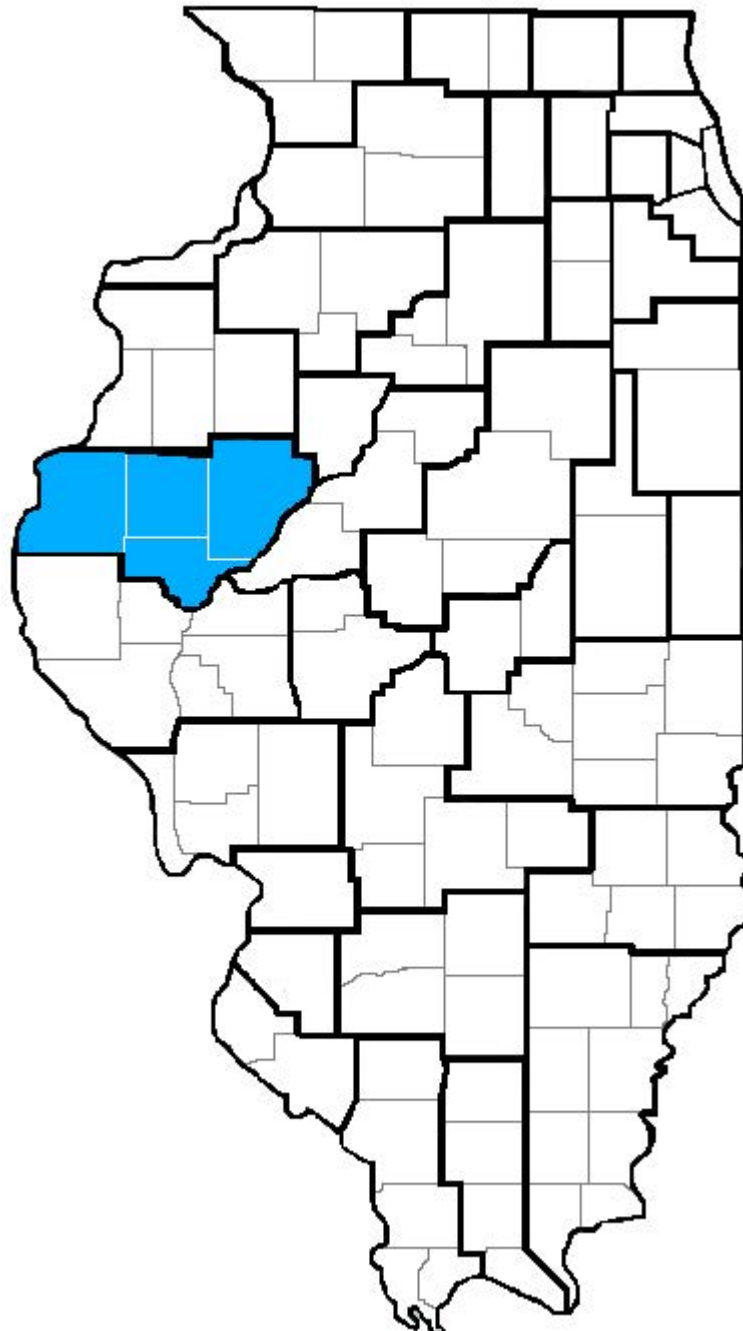
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Regional Strengths & Needs

Families face obstacles that are systemic and not solvable by any one thing. Income level, access to information and prevalence of resource deserts, and community culture all affect a family's access to the support they need. Repeated throughout interviews and discussion was a term those outside the Region may not be familiar with, *Forgottonia*. Most referred to the term to describe aspects of Region 26 including rural isolation, lack of infrastructure and funding, and stagnant economies, along with independence and deep connections to the Region.

Strengths

- Agencies and businesses work together to help the community. New Collaborations have been created, such as the ROE26 IRIS Collaboration. Libraries are an asset to families in Region 26.
- Rushville in Schuyler County has a strong community commitment to the arts and family-friendly recreation with its pool, fitness center, and performing arts center.
- Hancock County has a strong group of dedicated home providers even with the decline over the last several years.
- McDonough County enthusiastically supports small businesses and higher education and has an engaged network of agencies involved in supporting the community.
- Fulton County has made great strides in making outdoor recreation and tourism a priority along with Canton Park District and YMCA programs that give children of the community something to do to keep them active.

Needs

There is room for these supports to be expanded and further publicized for families to access them better, but as one community member stated, "One entity can't do it alone."

1. Greater access to child care and special needs services.
 - a. Many families need services closer to home and more timely appointments.
 - b. Providers need support and resources to collaborate in providing screening and referrals for children with special needs to offer a continuum of quality care and education.
 - c. There is a need for child care that accommodates children with special needs, as well as more trained staff.
2. More available child care slots for children aged birth to age two.
 - a. Families need flexible hours of operation, part-time care, and after 6:00p.m. child care.
 - b. There is a need for affordable child care spots for children under age three, possibly provided by conveniently located home providers. Staffing ratios are lower for this age group, creating a need for more providers.
 - c. The workforce needs better pay, a clear education pathway, and available course work.
3. Improved Community Support.
 - a. Parents and caregivers need a more central location to obtain information and better publicity of opportunities for them.
 - b. There is a need to build on existing support for parents and caregivers, including networking opportunities to reduce rural isolation.
 - c. Increase entrepreneurial opportunities to stimulate economic growth.

4. Improved efficiency and clearer regulations for providers and staff.

- a. Reduced wait time for home providers awaiting licensing and reimbursement to avoid an interruption in income.
- b. Families need simple paperwork and clear information to apply for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP).
- c. Providers need the staff hiring process to be faster and qualifications to be aligned between child care and school districts.

5. Transportation: Closer access to services.

- a. Families need affordable child care options closer to home.
- b. There is a need for support for home providers to increase the number of spots in small towns.

Recommendations

The Region 26 Councils discussed dozens of recommendations for systemic changes that could improve the lives of the families and children in the local communities. They understood, however, the necessity to prioritize those recommendations that would have the most profound impact on the greatest number of community members throughout the Region.

1. The Region should increase its adaptive and therapeutic services by forming a local group of health providers, school districts, and private companies to ensure needs are being met.
 - a. Provide services in small towns on a regular, rotating basis for appointments closer to home.
 - b. Provide screenings and referrals at child care locations.
 - c. Incorporate case management and referrals into children's doctor appointments.
2. The Region should offer more child care slots for children birth to age two. The lack of workforce is the major challenge in adding more child care slots. Helping providers know about funding opportunities and helping local colleges develop and implement a pathway to improve the workforce for providers in the area is critical.
 - a. Help local colleges develop and implement a pathway to increase the workforce in the area.
 - b. Offer high school courses on child development with the possibility of certification.
 - c. Provide information and assistance regarding funding opportunities and wage supplements for current and potential providers.
 - d. Improve hours of operation and acceptance of part-time care.
 - e. Increase the pay for child care workers.
3. The Region should provide a concerted information and educational campaign for parents and caregivers around developmental milestones for the first three years and publicize existing programs, streamline information between families and providers, and increase community connections.
 - a. Provide and publicize resources for parents/caregivers.
 - b. Support and publicize the launch of an Integrated Intake and Referral System (IRIS).
4. The Region can improve efficiency and provide clearer regulations to parents, providers, and staff, ensuring qualifications between ECEC and intersecting agencies align and are transferable.
 - a. Simplify and align DCFS requirements for early childhood educators with school districts.
 - b. Expedite licensing process for home providers and hiring process for child care workers.
 - c. Streamline paperwork and information regarding CCAP for families.
5. The Region could decrease driving times and reduce wait lists by advocating for more licensed family child care homes. Licensed providers closer to home reduce travel time.
 - a. Increase the number of family child care providers in rural areas.
 - b. Provide local courses and support for getting started as a new provider.
 - c. Investigate funding solutions to keep costs for parents and caregivers low.

Region 28

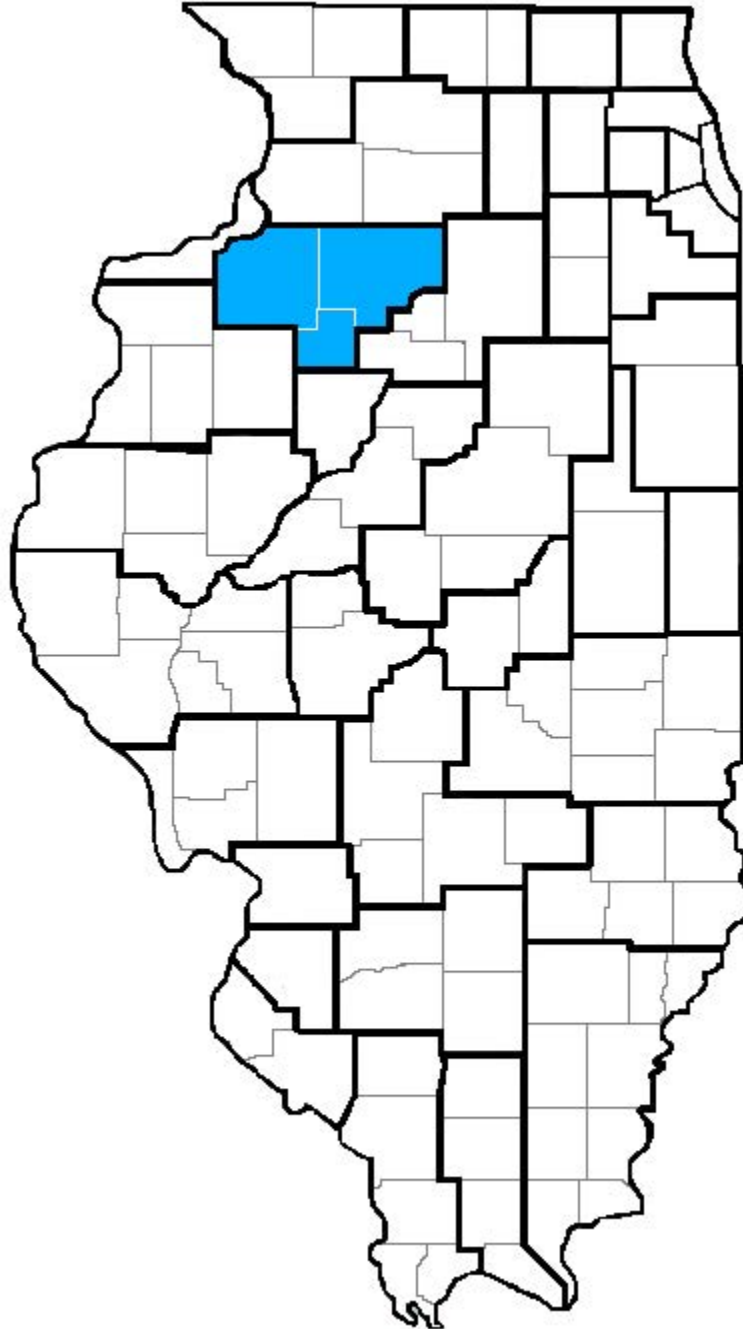
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Regional Strengths & Needs

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

Specific strengths Region 28 of ECEC services include:

- Discussions are occurring on how districts can expand Preschool For All services, and Early Head Start is actively seeking partners to expand programming to the Region.
- Innovative higher education and credentialing cohorts have been implemented to combat Early Care and Education workforce shortages.
- Many libraries in Region 28 have implemented weekly story hours that provide Kindergarten readiness activities for children not enrolled in preschool programming.
- Home visiting services in the Region provide educational support and connect families with community services.

The families of Region 28 lack access to:

- Affordable, full-day child care options for working parents and caregivers.
- Local Maternal and Child Health services.
- Early Intervention services where families live.
- Child Welfare programs to prevent child abuse.
- Public transportation.
- Housing Support services.
- Fresh meat, fruits, and vegetables.
- High-speed, reliable internet.

Recommendations

After reviewing quantitative and qualitative data, as well as identifying strengths and needs for the Region, recommendations were developed in three main areas: systems building, collaboration, and marketing.

Systems Building (State Level Recommendations)

- Actively and routinely seek parent and care provider's input from across the State on the barriers exist and exclude participation in current programming, such as the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), Preschool For All, and Early Intervention. Needs and barriers differ across communities, blanket stipulations and procedures enacted for one population can create unintentional barriers for another.
- Consider the needs of all members of the early care and education workforce. Current Early Childhood scholarships and workforce recruitment initiatives are only for staff that work in licensed Early Childhood programs or district sponsored preschool classrooms. All members who comprise the early care and education workforce should be considered for workforce recruitment and retention initiatives.
- Offer incentives or priority consideration for child care programming, internet, transportation, food, and housing initiatives that intend on providing services in underrepresented communities across the State.

Collaboration (Community Level Recommendations)

- Utilize libraries as community "hubs" for educational and resident support services. In addition to story hours that focus on Kindergarten readiness skills for children that are not enrolled in preschool programming, libraries could serve as a space to provide access to early intervention services, educational workshops, and a community-based location for social service agency office hours.
- Create Regional Medical Access Centers in Bureau, Henry, and Stark counties. Medical Access Centers can be staffed with Nurse Practitioners and Midwives in Illinois under the supervision of a neighboring hospital. Less expensive than traditional physician staffed medical services, Regional Medical Access Centers would create access to more medical services in underserved rural communities.
- Encourage collaboration to provide full day or wrap around child care services. Some school districts have collaborated with other entities like Head Start to provide full day services for families. The district provides Preschool For All services in the morning, and qualifying children are picked up by and transported to Head Start for afternoon programming. Additionally, some districts are hiring licensed preschool teachers that, rather than having in-district classrooms, provide the Preschool For All Programming in community child care centers and churches.
- Include high school Child Development Associate (CDA) courses as an option for students enrolling in Career and Technical Education coursework. Thereby, allowing high school students who are interested in becoming teachers to attain entry-level child care center positions upon high school graduation, and enabling the future teachers to qualify for scholarships designed to support the Early Care and Education workforce, like the Gateways and ECACE scholarships.

Marketing (Agency Level Recommendations)

- Promote ECEC services in an equitable and accessible manner to residents in rural communities.
- Create mentoring opportunities within agencies to boost potential employees for positions.

Region 30

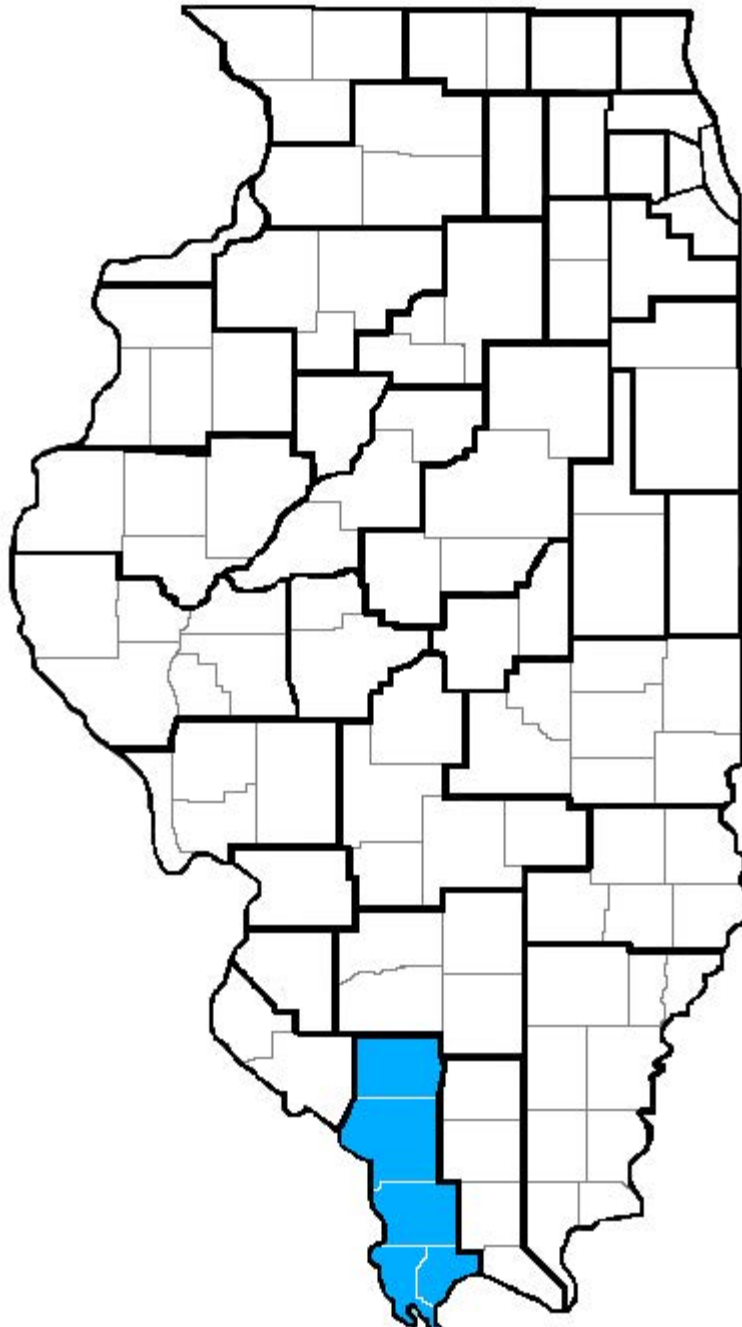
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Regional Strengths & Needs

Family and community members in Region 30 see the same needs in the ECEC system, which revolve around affordability, accessibility, and quality of care. Child care is expensive, and many working families are just above the eligibility guidelines. Child care is hard to find and lacks quality in many instances.

The local needs families are facing based on our collective impact efforts are listed below:

Needs

- More resources for families with a child with a disability.
- Assistance navigating different ECEC resources.
- Available and affordable child care options within the community with a high quality of care.
- Transportation assistance for parents/caregivers getting to and from child care facilities.
- Consider changing the independent contractor work status of ECEC providers (e.g., speech, hearing/vision, occupational therapists) as well as looking for ways to incentivize them to provide care in rural areas.
- Target funding to decrease slot gaps in service for children birth to age two.
- Increase funding to help support the ECEC workforce.
- Support programs for single parents/caregivers and streamline the application process for various programs.

Strengths

- The Policy Council for Southern Illinois University (SIU) will be opening various classrooms for children birth to age three in August 2023.
- Our community members are willing to work together to improve ECEC services in the Region via our Action and Family Councils.
- Diverse population across the Region.
- Educational institutions with established working relationships.
- Legislators are accessible to their constituents.
- Passionate ECEC professionals.
- Existing Early Childhood Collaborations.
- The Southern Illinois Coalition for Children and Families is actively working on regional issues.

Recommendations

The following are prioritized recommendations from the Action Council, Family Council, and community members for how to address the identified needs of Region 30.

- Elevate the needs of young children and families in regional planning and conversations regarding the Region's transportation infrastructure. Improve leaders' and planners' awareness of the ECEC access needs of families and encourage the inclusion of funding for transportation.
- Support regional efforts to create a comprehensive and readily available online resource directory and referral platform. Explore alternative mechanisms to better connect families with resources, such as family navigators or a mobile resource bus.
- Increase efforts to expand licensed family child care networks that include a diversified workforce and supply funding, technical assistance, and support to get them established in smaller rural communities offering more choices to families.
- Increase staffing, training, and equipment for programs to provide care and education for children with diagnosed or suspected disabilities.
- The State should continue to invest in initiatives such as wage supplements, scholarships, and incentives to recruit and retain an abundant early childhood workforce.

Region 31

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Regional Strengths & Needs

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

Strengths

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

Needs

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

Recommendations

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

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

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

Region 32

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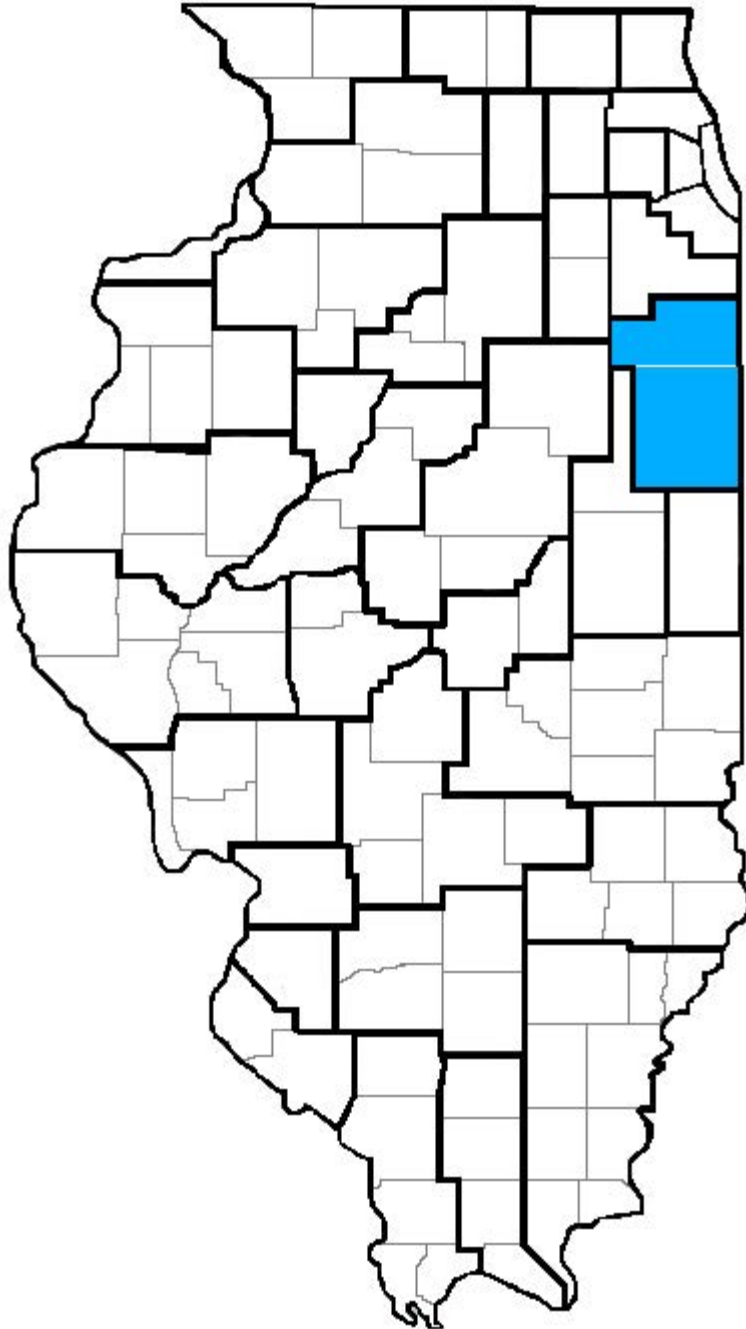
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Regional Strengths & Needs

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

Strengths

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

Needs

Quality Workforce, Recruitment, and Retainment in ECEC

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

Centralized Community Network for Information, Referrals, and Resources

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Recommendations

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

Quality Workforce, Recruitment, and Retainment in ECEC

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

Centralized Community Network for Information, Referrals, and Resources

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Region 33

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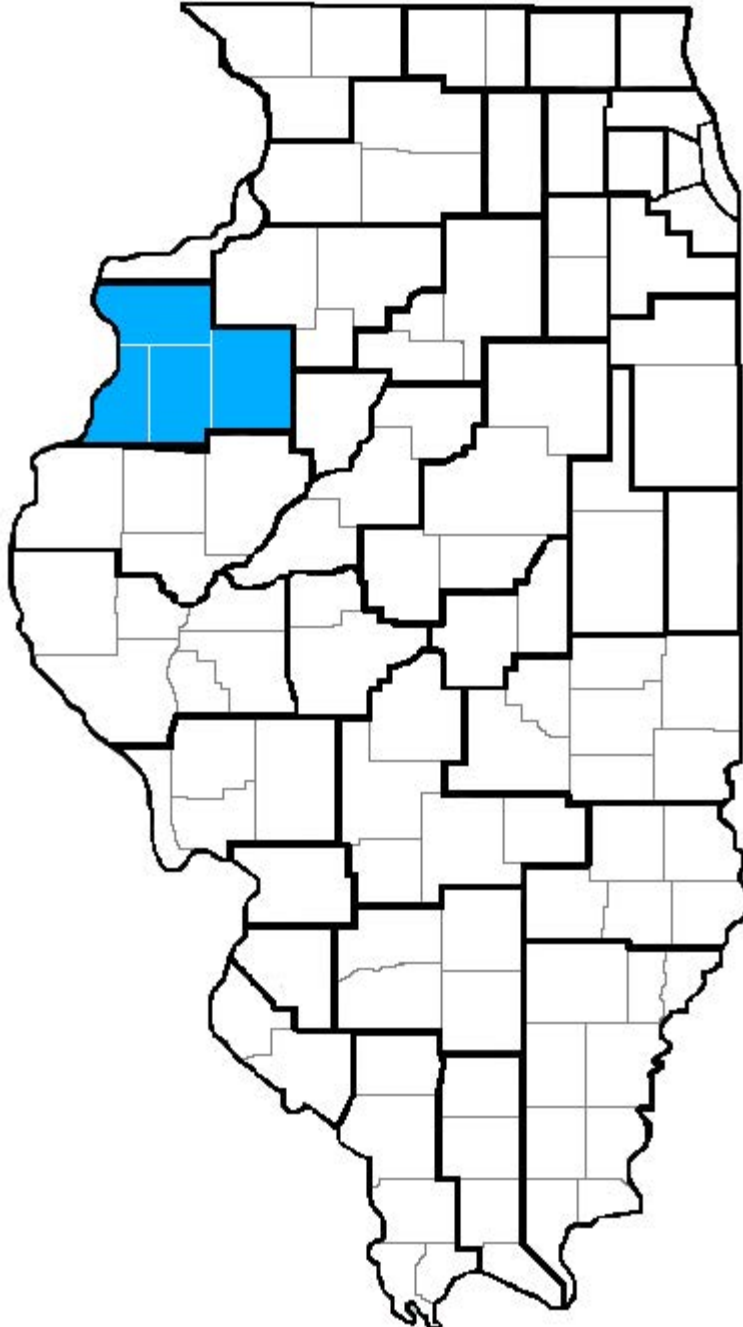
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Regional Strengths & Needs

The Family Council, Action Council, community members, The Village, and Birth to Five Illinois expressed that Region 33 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 of the Region

- Regional Office of Education 33 has strengthened and expanded ECEC programming.
- The ECEC professional community works well together and communicates regularly.
- Community members, including families, business owners, community leaders, school officials, and elected officials, among others, share a common vision that child success should not be determined by race, gender, religion, income, or zip code and understand the need for achieving an improved ECEC climate.
- The Region's ECEC community has taken the initiative to expand, improve, and collaborate to increase the opportunities for children and families. They value Birth to Five Illinois' initiative that honors decision-making at the local level. Community members appreciate that Birth to Five Illinois recognizes communities have unique needs and challenges and allows for the sharing of solutions "across" Regions where applicable, but not as a universal "fix" for all situations. Region 33 has historically elevated family and provider voice and honors the partnership with Birth to Five Illinois in this important work.

Needs of the Region

- Continue to perform outreach to populations experiencing marginalization.
- "Hold harmless" funding and policy extended to ECEC Collaborations like the K-12 funding model.
- More capacity, especially for infant/toddler care.
- More workers, especially director-qualified level employees.
- More home-based providers, especially in rural areas like Henderson and Mercer Counties.
- Employee retention to encourage healthy relationships between providers and families.
- Government oversight that fosters increased ECEC programming opportunities.
- Improved ECEC system that decreases stress on families, providers, resources, facilities, and employers outside of ECEC.

Families and Community Leaders cite several concurrent causes of the employee shortage:

- The amount of education required does not justify the wages earned.
 - » Licensing for preschool teachers requires a bachelor's degree.
 - » ECEC centers require an associate degree.
- Child care settings typically pay minimum wage with no benefits.
- There are many jobs available with few qualified applicants.
- The birth to age three group of children is more expensive to serve and requires a lower provider/child ratio.
- Child care is so expensive for families that staying home to care for children may be a more fiscally responsible decision than working.
- Area colleges do not offer ECEC education programs due to low enrollment.
 - » Low enrollment caused by low wages after graduation.
 - » Graduates can make more in entry level non-ECEC fields.

Needs of Families

- Affordable child care options.
- Family income eligibility adjustment to allow families more access to ECEC services.
- Home providers that accept State aid.
- Culturally responsive child care options that value language, food, and customs.
- Choice among a variety of learning style/teaching philosophies.
- Child care for immigrants attending ELL classes.
- Increased capacity for “ELL for adults,” family literacy, and citizenship programs.
 - Existing programs:
 - » Are operating at capacity.
 - » Need more instructional levels, beginners through advanced skill levels.
 - » Need child care options for class times.
 - » Need ELL teachers to offer more levels and increase capacity for participants.
 - » Need funds to increase offerings.
- More local medical providers for children.
- Insurance programs that allow local medical personnel in preferred provider status.
- Special needs services within the Region.
- Transportation, especially in rural areas.
- Build trust with educational institutions, especially in marginalized communities.
- Universal source for providers, resources, and information (i.e., 411).
- Real-time “open seat” information based on age, service, location.

Needs of Providers

- Consistent monitoring practices by DCFS and the Fire Marshall for center and home-based providers.
- Uniform interpretation of policy monitoring within DCFS and the Fire Marshall.
 - Two different inspections from two different people/entities can yield two different outcomes and create barriers for the programs within those facilities.
- Expedited fingerprinting/background checks from Illinois State Police.
 - Currently taking six to eight weeks after hiring to allow employees to start work.
- Shorter time (currently two months to two years) required to achieve licensure.
- More reliable funding sources.
- Lower cost for CPR and First Aid training.
- Supplemented costs for facility upgrades.
- More accommodating timelines for structural remodeling compliance.
- Consolidation/elimination of redundant/contradictory policies between child and family-serving state agencies.
- More applicants for open positions.
- More workers at all levels in ECEC, but especially infant/toddler care.
- Universal, efficient data collection methods.
- Real-time, complete IECAM and IDHS data, especially for priority populations.
- Local college Early Childhood licensure options.
- Translated documentation from governing agencies for training and compliance (e.g., first aid/CPR/food program).
- Gain the trust of families, especially from minoritized communities.
- Unlicensed provider information sharing between DCFS and Home Child Care Network to facilitate supports for home-based child care providers.

Recommendations

Region

- Continue to increase awareness and value for early childhood development among all stake-holders through ongoing marketing and communication.
- Continue to prioritize building relationships with marginalized/minoritized populations.
- Continue efforts to recruit, train, and license a diverse ECEC workforce.
- Restart ECEC coursework and child care in area colleges and high schools.
- Extend Grow Your Own ECEC educational programming in area high schools to include:
 - Recruitment.
 - Dual credit programming in collaboration with area colleges.
 - Scholarships requiring five years of employment service in regional ECEC.
- Continue to support home-based providers through information and resources.
- Continue “wrap around” support of families through:
 - Parenting classes.
 - ELL for adults with multiple skill levels.
 - Recruiting ELL teachers and increasing availability and levels of courses.
 - Citizenship programs.
 - Economic classes.
 - Provided child care during classes.
- Increase child care providers for non-traditional work hours and adult growth opportunities.
- Simplify access for families by creating a universal resource for information and communication (e.g., 411 and “BabyHelp.com” - fictitious example).
- Explore public/private “matching fund” model to subsidize wages.
- Improve transportation options in populated and rural areas by:
 - Fostering flexibility in bus routing.
 - Partnering with rural agencies to share transportation.

State

- Honor the 2019 Early Childhood Funding Commission Recommendations.
- Create or assign a single agency for ECEC coordination that facilitates:
 - Funding.
 - Policy.
 - Monitoring.
 - Compliance, including facilities.
 - Training.
 - Licensure.
 - Translation.
 - Information.
- Extend “hold harmless” funding and policy to ECEC Collaborations, similar to K-12 Evidence Based Funding Model.
- Standardize policy, monitoring, compliance, training, inspection, accountability, requirements, and licensure throughout ECEC without creating new obstacles.
- Expedite translation of documents, training, licensing, or allow for regional translation.
- Eliminate barriers for non-English speaking communities.
- Expedite fingerprinting and background checks.
- Continue to support regional autonomy.
- Honor existing Collaborations and encourage continued growth.
- Move away from competitive grant-based funding model.
- Adopt one income eligibility threshold across all programs.
- Explore funding sources that benefit directly from high quality Early Childhood development:
 - Employers who utilize employees that are parents or caregivers.
 - Employers who utilize well trained and educated employees.
- Encourage non-ECEC employers/businesses/manufacturers to:
 - Partner with organizations like “Ready Nation” and “Better Together”.
 - Provide in-house/onsite child care for their employees.
 - Pay onsite ECEC employees on the same salary scale as existing non-ECEC employees to eliminate pay disparities and attract the most qualified ECEC staff.
 - » Rationale: employers would potentially gain:
 - Employee retention.
 - Employee loyalty.
 - More applicants for open positions.
 - Employee peace of mind- knowing their children are near while they are working.

Region 34

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Regional Strengths & Needs

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

Strengths

- Family voice is prioritized as evidenced by the Birth to Five Illinois Action and Family Councils.
- There are additional opportunities for ongoing education (including YWCA Metropolitan Chicago, College of Lake County, Illinois Gateway Registry, and Erikson Institute).
- Organizations and the Regional Office of Education (ROE) collaborate and work together.
- There is a strong partnership between the ROE, iGrow Lake County/Lake County Health Department, and Birth to Five Illinois.
- Families are provided resources and services through hospitals and pediatricians starting at birth (via the ROE).
- The Round Lake Kindergarten Readiness Committee serves as a good model of innovation in ECEC.
- Coordinated Intake is provided by the health department.
- There is some diversity among child Care providers that represents the children/community served.
- The Lake County Foundation provides opportunities, investment, and support for ECEC expansion of programs in Lake County.
- Region 34 has a wide range of ECEC program options (center based, home based, half-day programs, full-day programs, licensed child care, and family child care centers).

Needs

- Attract and retain ECEC workforce (by providing competitive salaries, increasing benefits, balancing staff-child ratios, and creating a pool of substitute teachers).
- Provide night and weekend care.
- Increase awareness of continuing education opportunities, including faith-based programs.
- Create more child care slots in all programs all over the county.
- Improve trust and culturally responsive care so that all families are comfortable leaving their children with providers of different backgrounds.
- Address the high cost of child care.
- Hire more multilingual and multicultural staff and provide forms, applications, resources, and services in families' native languages.
- Provide more access to technology and technological education.
- Increase services for children with disabilities and special needs.
- Simplify the CCAP process.

Recommendations

After reviewing quantitative and qualitative data, as well as identifying strengths and needs for the Region, recommendations were developed in three main areas: programming, workforce, and support programs. Priority geographic areas within the Region were also identified.

Programming

- Provide specialized programs and services that cater to the unique needs of children, such as therapy services, personalized learning plans, and inclusive classrooms. Offer more full-day options and summer programs that include additional supports and services.
- Increase child care slots across all publicly funded program options: Early Head Start, Head Start, Prevention Initiative, Early Intervention, Preschool For All, and Preschool for All Expansion.
- Increase child care slots across all child care centers and home-based program options: licensed child care centers, license-exempt child care centers, and family child care homes.
- Increase the CCAP eligibility to 250% or higher to support families surviving on low incomes.
- Offer programs during non-traditional hours, such as night, weekend, and “drop-in programs” where parents can drop off children with irregular schedules.
- Create a centralized hub for resources and services.
- Provide night and weekend care.

Workforce

- Provide competitive salaries, benefits, and retirement packages for early education teachers and child care providers.
- Create/expand shared resources where providers can come together and receive “group rates” for health insurance, dental insurance, vision retirement, more paid time off and retirement.
- Provide opportunities for advancement; early education teachers should have opportunities for advancement and career growth.
- Address burnout and stress. Provide support and resources to help teachers manage stress, such as mental health services and wellness programs.
- Build partnerships between local organizations and universities and colleges to help create a pipeline of qualified early education teachers.
- Promote high school internships in the ECEC field.

Support Programs

- Provide access to prenatal care, including home visiting programs (such as doulas and Early Intervention) and mental health services. Offer nutrition classes and parenting education to support healthy pregnancies and healthy babies.
- Increase the number of providers that speak Spanish to better serve Spanish-speaking families.
- Provide financial literacy classes and assistance with accessing public benefits such as SNAP and WIC.
- Offer mental health services and case management to help parents/caregivers navigate their child(ren)'s needs and access to resources.
- Offer parenting education and support groups for underage parents. Provide access to affordable child care and flexible scheduling options to accommodate their school schedules.
- Offer programs that allow for regular communication and visitation for children with parents who are incarcerated. Provide support services to help children cope with separation and maintain their relationship with their parents/caregivers who are incarcerated.

Priority Areas

- Waukegan
- Round Lake Area
- Zion
- Mundelein
- Highwood
- Fox Lake

Region 35

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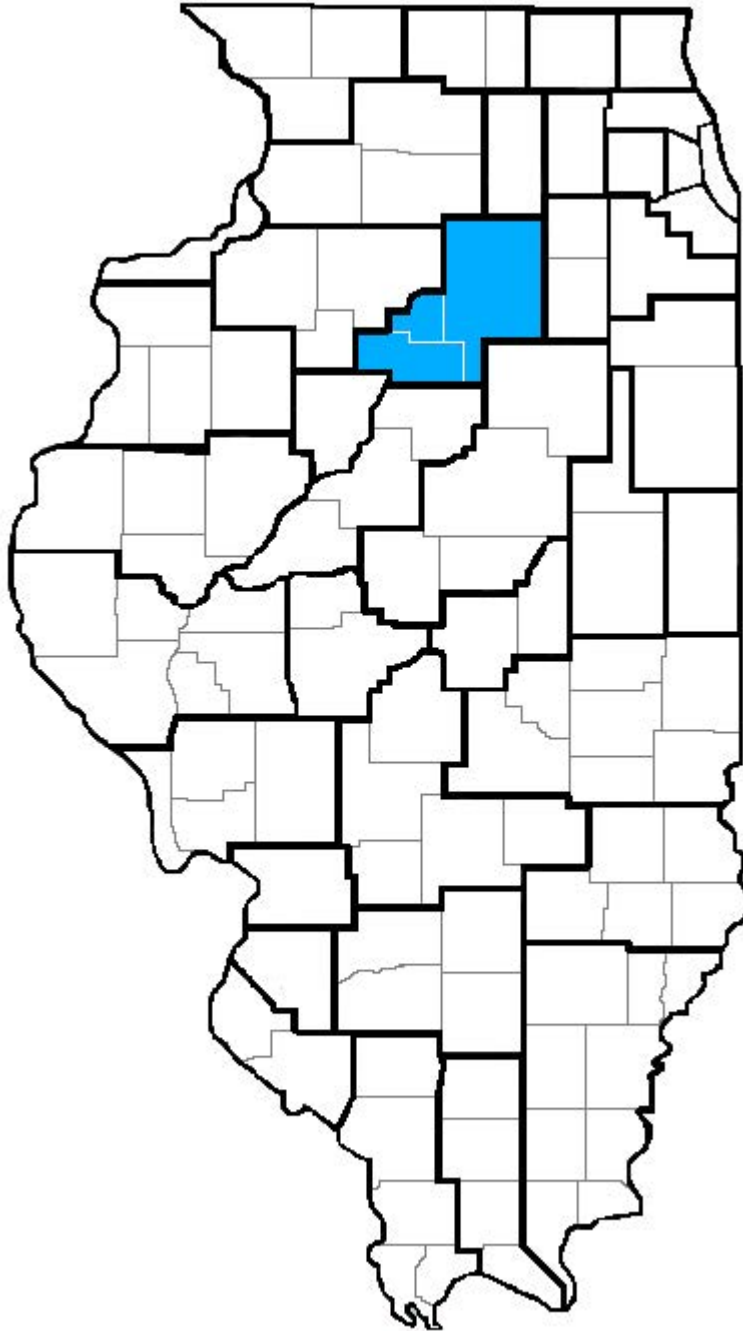
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Regional Strengths and Needs

Strengths

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

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

Needs

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

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

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

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

Recommendations

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

Increased access to ECEC.

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

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

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

Develop a structured screening system.

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

Recruit and retain the ECEC workforce.

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

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

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

Region 39

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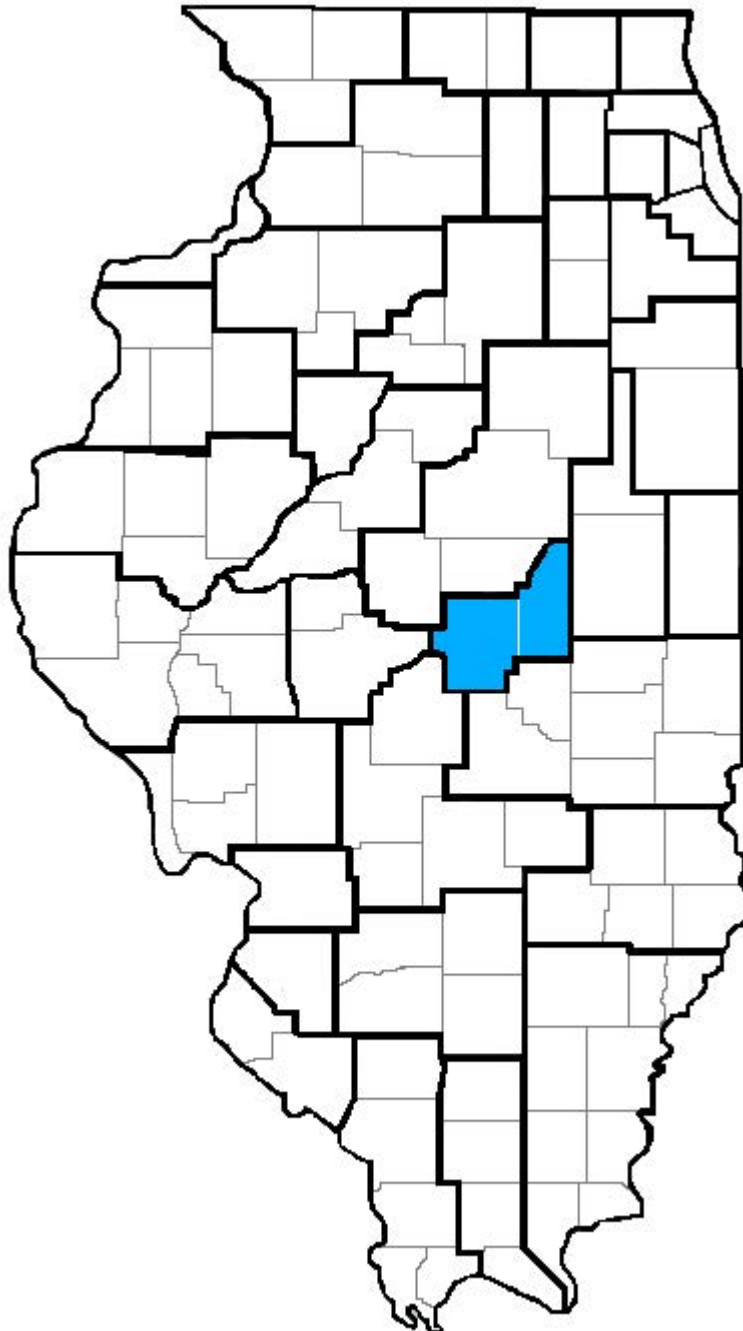
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Regional Strengths & Needs

The Family Council, Action Council, and community members at large all expressed that Region 39 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

- All school districts, except for two, have a Preschool for All (PFA) program. There is a Head Start program in both counties. Macon County has three home visiting programs for children ages zero to two years old and one that visits children from zero- to five-year-old. There are 249 family child care slots available in Region 39 for children ages zero to five years old.
- Decatur boasts a cost-effective bus transportation system within the city, making it an affordable mode of transportation for families residing in the area.
- The Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) is available to provide financial assistance for families utilizing child care. It will pay for up to three months of child care while a caregiver looks for work.
- Area high schools currently have a bridge program with Richland Community College (RCC) in which students can work in ECEC centers while participating in dual credit courses at RCC and their home high school.
- The State has many supports for ECEC staff, such as free trainings, financial assistance programs for ECE higher education, and Great Start Wage Supplement for financial compensation.
- Workforce Investment Solutions in Decatur will pay for Child Development Associates (CDA) credentials and books. Richland Community College will transfer a CDA credential into six ECE credit hours.
- Heritage Behavioral Center has a grant to provide training and implementation of the Integrated Referral and Intake System (IRIS) system.
- Macon County has a resource guide that updated county services in the spring of 2023. Macon and Piatt Counties have a 211-resource phone line to provide information for community members on all the resources available to them.
- The Community of Care Campus serves as a centralized hub that houses a wide array of easily accessible resources, conveniently located within the Decatur bus routes, ensuring convenient access for individuals in the community.
- Community Health Center in the center of Decatur on Community of Care Campus and has the Healthy Steps program that provides child development, health, and safety information to families at well-child visits.

Needs

1. Equitable access to high-quality ECEC programs and services.

- The existing ECEC system fails to promote equitable access and outcomes for all children, including children of color, children in DCFS foster care system, and children living in households with poverty-level income.
- Families that require ECEC services outside the traditional workday have few options, specifically families that work second or third shift.

- There is a shortage of publicly funded and privately funded ECEC slots for children ages birth to five years old. There are 9,034 children ages five and under but only 3,894 ECEC slots in the Region.
 - The cost of child care is prohibitively expensive for some families (\$740/month median per child) and families report lengthy waitlists.
 - Public transportation routes do not correspond to ECEC program locations, provide efficient services, nor offer convenient schedules.
 - The CCAP application and review process is cumbersome and slow – applications must be submitted by email or fax, and the turnaround times reportedly vary from one week to two months.
 - ECEC programs and centers are reluctant to accept children with DCFS vouchers due to payment delays and/or never receiving payment for services rendered.
 - Some providers report DCFS Licensing Representatives inconsistently apply licensing regulations, which discourages family child care providers from pursuing licensure.
2. A comprehensive and sustainable strategy to attract, support, and retain a high-quality and racially diverse ECEC workforce.
- Recruitment:
 - As a field, ECEC fails to attract adequate numbers of aspiring staff to enroll in preparation and credentialing programs.
 - Preparation:
 - Region 39 lacks local and easily accessible ECEC preparation and credentialing programs, specifically programs that offer an associate or bachelor's degree.
 - Financial assistance offerings are inadequate compared to tuition costs and ECEC staff wages.
 - ECEC staff are not adequately supported to address children's social and emotional needs, as well as responses to trauma.
 - Hiring and Onboarding:
 - DCFS severely limits the days that new ECEC staff can be fingerprinted, offering services only on Fridays.
 - DCFS regulations restrict the pool of potential ECEC teachers by requiring teachers to be at least 19 years of age before leading a classroom. Yet, many aspiring ECEC teachers are not yet 19 years of age when they graduate high school.
 - Current state regulations do not allow newly hired ECEC staff to train inside ECEC buildings until background checks have cleared. Background checks can sometimes take more than one month to process.
 - Mentoring and Induction:
 - Newly credentialed ECEC staff working in private programs lack access to formal mentoring and induction programs.
 - Education and Professional Development:
 - Women of color report not feeling supported to pursue higher education coursework that will advance their professional growth and development.
 - ECEC staff are not sufficiently trained to support children's social and emotional development needs.
 - Family child care providers and private center ECEC staff are ill-equipped to provide families with the array of supports and services they need.

- Compensation:
 - ECEC staff are not paid a professional wage, which discourages new talent from entering the field and veteran staff from continuing to build their career in the profession.
 - Retention:
 - ECEC staff report feeling burned out and unsupported, causing them to leave the profession in search of more satisfying and financially rewarding careers.
3. Resources for parents and caregivers to help them advocate for their children's needs and/or inform them about ECEC programs, services, and resources.
- Parents and families report a lack of awareness of existing child development benchmarks, ECEC programs and community resources.
 - Region 39 needs additional home visitors/parent educators to support families with children ages three-five years old.
4. An increase in Early Intervention services and screenings; the current backlog prevents children from receiving essential support.
- There is a shortage of service coordinators and therapists to serve children who qualify for Early Intervention (EI).
 - There are a limited number of screening opportunities for children aged from birth to five years old.
 - Children referred to EI and who qualify for an IFSP are not guaranteed therapy and are sometimes placed on a lengthy waiting list.
5. New, reliable data that is not outdated and data systems that are integrated. Current data systems limit interagency collaboration and data-informed decision-making.
- Existing ECEC data are stale and do not reflect current program status, ECEC service offerings and children's needs.
 - Inadequate access to current and relevant data prevents ECEC agencies, programs, and services from making data-informed, aligned, and timely decisions.
 - A siloed intake system prevents ECEC agencies, programs, and services from efficiently identifying and accessing resources for children and families.

Recommendations

The Region 39 Councils discussed dozens of recommendations for systemic changes that could improve the lives of the families and children in the local communities. They understood, however, the necessity to prioritize those recommendations that would have the most profound impact on the greatest number of community members throughout the Region.

1. Design and implement an ECEC system that centers equity and facilitates access to high-quality ECEC programs and services for all children and families throughout Region 39.
 - Leverage State funding to create ECEC programming, specifically in Monticello (Special Education) and Decatur (Early Intervention, PI, PFA, and PFAE).
 - Decatur Public Transit (DPT) should add or readjust routes to better serve ECEC center locations and schedules. DPT is currently auditing their bus routes, times, and system.
 - The State should increase the amount of CCAP (Child Care Assistance Program) payments for second/third shift care more than payment for first shift care to provide an incentive for providers to increase second/third shift slots.
 - The State should improve its system for CCAP and DCFS payments and ease the application process. The State should provide an online portal that families and providers can use for paperwork. The State should improve the DCFS payments approval process to decrease wait time for payments. This will increase the number of programs willing to accept DCFS payment vouchers for children in DCFS care and thereby increase the number of families willing to foster children that are not old enough to be enrolled in public school.
 - Create a tax credit for families with children to assist in making child care affordable.
 - Local creation of a Child Care Directors' Meeting and a Family Child Care Provider support group to share information and create connections.
 - Expand training for DCFS licensing representatives.
2. Strengthen the ECEC workforce by fostering a culture of respect for ECEC staff; offering easily accessible, affordable, and high-quality training, credentialing and professional development opportunities; and paying professional wages.
 - Significantly increase the Great Start Wage Supplement amounts, ensuring that ECEC professionals receive compensation commensurate with their professionalism and expertise.
 - Provide pathways for parent/caregivers and high school students to enter the ECEC workforce.
 - Expand Richland Community College's ECE classes into an ECE associate degree.
 - Provide more hands-on techniques in higher education courses and local training for those working with children with challenging behavior and trauma.
 - Expand grants for ECE degrees, such as the Navigator Scholarship, and update eligibility for the Navigator Scholarship to lessen the cost burden for some teachers.
 - Expand the days/time ECE staff can go for fingerprinting beyond only Fridays, improve the background clearance process to lessen the wait time for clearance, and update the system to allow fax/email forms instead of paper copies only.
 - Lower the required age for lead teachers to 18 years old.
 - Expand coaching/ mentoring programs for private ECEC programs.

- Encourage shared trainings among local ECEC programs.
 - Recognize the crucial role of long-term staff in maintaining continuity and quality in ECEC programs by implementing retention bonuses as an initiative to incentivize and reward the commitment of experienced professionals within the field.
3. Develop effective methods to communicate with all families and build awareness of community programs and ECEC services, as well as expand existing programs to meet families' needs.
- Address the urgent need for a crisis nursery in Decatur, both locally and statewide. Allocate financing to support the establishment of this vital resource, ensuring that families facing crisis situations have access to immediate and specialized care for their children.
 - Expand Home Visiting programs for 3–5-year-olds in Macon County to provide support for children that were unable to obtain a center-based preschool slot.
 - Increase funding to provide State-funded home visitors with a professional wage to attract/retain staff.
 - Increase support for families in private programming; share information about community resources.
4. Expand the pool of Early Intervention service providers and professionals, as well as programming to effectively serve more children.
- Increase EI funding to retain and attract service coordinators, EI support professionals, social workers, and developmental pediatricians.
 - Acknowledge the statewide shortage of therapists in specific regions where their presence is greatly needed by taking proactive measures to assist with recruitment efforts, aiming to attract qualified therapists to the field and address the critical gap in services in those underserved areas.
 - Expand State funding for assistance in credentialing and billing process for therapists. Provide statewide trainings for therapists (specifically on how to do virtual visits).
 - Allocate State funding to provide Prevention Initiative funding to Baby TALK in Macon County to add a third Early Intervention classroom This would create up to sixteen slots (eight in morning and eight in afternoon) for children to receive Early Intervention therapy in a center-based setting.
5. Create a data infrastructure and system to ensure ECEC decisions are informed by accurate data and provide equitable access to ECEC services for all children and families.
- Leverage Heritage Behavioral Center's grant funding to expand the use of Integrated Referral and Intake System (IRIS) in the community.
 - Administer the Kindergarten Individual Development Survey (KIDS) in ECEC preschool programs to assess needs and share information with the school district that is receiving each child.
 - Create a better mechanism to improve the State's comprehensive data collection system to include dual funded slots, all license-exempt slots, Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) Special Education preschool slots.

Region 40

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Regional Strengths & Needs

The Family Council, Action Council, and community members at large all expressed Region 40 has many strengths in the current ECEC system. While praising existing programs, they also acknowledged that there were areas in which ECEC may be more accessible and equitable to families and where it may provide better support to providers.

Strengths

- ECEC staff are enthusiastic about their work and able to share resources.
- Two new centers, one in Greenfield and one in Jerseyville, have applied for licensing with DCFS.
- Library offerings target early childhood educational programs, such as Move and Groove music time, weekly story times with engagement activities, and summer programs.
- Tracy Family Foundation provides grant funding for Greene and Calhoun Counties to support ECEC Collaborations and programs.
- Health departments are communicating across the Region.
- Blackburn College, a four-year college in our Region, is offering the accelerated Teacher Licensure Program in Macoupin County.
- Lewis and Clark Community College is offering an early childhood development program that includes a class to assist graduated students in navigating the business side of child care.
- The PI, PFA, and PFA-E programs within our public-school districts are providing continuity so we know the children receiving services and who will be coming into the program.
- Child care center and preschool programs are being fully utilized.
- The Region is starting to recognize and support the need for mental health services for all ages.

Needs

- More accessible and affordable child care for all families.
- Affordable and viable transportation for ECEC programs.
- Local specialized services, such as therapists and mental health providers, to meet the needs of children, families, and providers.
- Readily available ECEC mental health services for children, families, and providers.
- ECEC system and programs that are easy to navigate.

Recommendations

The Region 40 Councils discussed dozens of recommendations for systemic changes that could improve the lives of the families and children in the local communities. They understood, however, the necessity to prioritize those recommendations that would have the most profound impact on the greatest number of community members throughout the Region.

- Form a way to attract, prepare, support, and retain staff in the ECEC workforce.
- Secure accessible, affordable, and viable transportation for all children in public and private programs. Transportation should include services outside of the ECEC sector, such as to doctor appointments, therapies, court hearings, etc.
- Access to local specialized services. Children that have been identified or need to be identified by professionals for specialized services should have access to affordable services within their community.
- Region 40 should have early childhood mental health counselors and consultants readily available for both children and families.
- Encourage the small Local Community Collaborations to branch out and form whole region Collaboration. The Collaborations would have an intentional focus on promoting increased awareness of the positive impact of ECEC programs, as well as available programs and services.

Region 41

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Regional Strengths & Needs



Region 41 Councils collaborated to identify strengths and needs of the community.

Strengths

The type of ECEC programming available in Region 41 varies across settings and is staffed and led by dedicated individuals:

- Local library workers collaborate to provide programming for families.
- An active Early Childhood Forum and newly formed Collaboration, Madison County Alliance for Children & Families, meets monthly.
- Several agencies provide resources to families, such as water, power, food, clothing, and household items.
- Active Chambers of Commerce support local businesses.
- Agencies have taken part in innovative work with the use of federal relief funds (e.g., ESSER and ARPA), including a mobile health unit, resource areas, and new positions to serve priority populations.
- Programs are successfully working together to help children learn in inclusive environments while providing the hours of care that families need.
- Higher education institutions provide Early Childhood education.
- Some home visiting Collaboration members use a coordinated referral database.

Needs

There are many barriers to quality and equitable ECEC in Region 41, including:

- People
 - Insufficient number of teachers, support staff, and specialists.
 - Limited professional development opportunities for caregivers and staff.
 - Limited ongoing support for providers and families.
 - Lack of parent-to-parent support.
 - No convenient way to gather perspectives of all community members.
 - Not enough service providers (i.e., speech and physical therapists) in classrooms.
- Programming
 - Lack of publicly funded center-based child care, especially for children aged two and under.
 - Excessive wait times for disability screenings and diagnoses.
 - Insufficient ECEC slots to support all eligible children who choose it.
 - Limited before and after school care options.
 - Limited comprehensive services and transportation.
 - Insufficient number of developmental screening opportunities.
 - Intake and referral processes are out of sync with one another.
 - Lack of a central resource and referral system.
 - Different enrollment forms and requirements for each agency create a burden on potential enrollees.
 - Families are not aware of existing community resources.
- Funding:
 - Overall lack of local and philanthropic investments.
 - Few providers accept CCAP funding.
 - Limited CCAP eligibility.
 - Inequitable pay and lack of benefits for licensed and license-exempt teaching staff.

Recommendations

There are some changes that need to take place and some opportunities that Region 41 can take advantage of to better support our youngest learners and their families during the most critical time in their development. The current system is limiting access, causing families to turn away from ECEC; this same system is causing providers to leave the profession.

To better promote quality and equitable ECEC programming in Region 41, there are several improvements that should be made:

- People
 - Increase number of teachers, support staff, and specialists.
 - Increase professional development opportunities for caregivers and staff.
 - Provide ongoing coaching support for providers and families.
 - Develop a network of parent leaders, advocates, and mentors.
 - Create a community council representing all community voices.
 - Provide more specialized care providers (i.e., speech and physical therapists) in classrooms.
- Programming
 - Create more publicly funded center-based programming for all ages (particularly in rural areas) for children, especially for children ages birth through two.
 - Improve speed of disability diagnosis and screenings.
 - Add more ECEC slots so all children can attend a program if the family chooses.
 - Create more before and after school care options.
 - Develop comprehensive, wrap-around services, including before and after care and transportation.
 - Hold community-wide developmental screenings and enrollment events.
 - Coordinate intake and referral.
 - Develop a central resource and referral system.
 - Examine enrollment forms to identify consistencies with a goal toward streamlining parent paperwork requirements.
 - Increase provider support for completing paperwork.
 - Improve promotion of community resources.
- Funding
 - Encourage investment by local funders and philanthropic investors.
 - Encourage more providers to accept CCAP funding.
 - Expand CCAP eligibility.
 - Provide ECEC staff with equitable pay and benefits that include medical, sick time, vacation time, retirement, and FMLA (Family and Medical Leave Act).

Region 44

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Regional Strengths & Needs

The Regional Strengths and Needs were developed by the Action and Family Councils. They were also based on community input shared via surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Although there are some needs that are state level, we maintained a list that was focused solely on Region 44.

Strengths

- Providers are dedicated to their work and want what is best for the children.
- The workforce is collaborative and sits on different councils.
- Scholarships and grants are available for professional development training.
- Agencies in the Region actively try to seek out grant opportunities and collaborate to find funding sources.
- Agencies within the Region are constantly updating their services to fit the needs of the community and offer a variety of resources for families within the various ECEC programs.
- Agencies work together to create relationships in the community and with organizations to ensure accurate referrals.
- The Region has a county-wide Home Visiting program within the Child and Family Connections (CFC).
- In Early Intervention (EI), the service coordinators go above and beyond by sitting in on Individual Education Plan (IEP) and transition meetings.
- Participants in the Region's Directors Association learn and build off each other's knowledge and experience; seasoned directors assist the newer directors.
- The local community college offers the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) Scholarship, and the CCR&R has Higher Education Navigators who will provide personalized assistance with the ECACE scholarship.

Needs

- Community education on the ECEC field, which would include qualifications needed, what providers do daily, and the importance of ECEC.
- Central Hub to connect families to the ECEC services within the Region.
- Respite care to relieve stress on parents/caregivers.
- Strengthened ECEC workforce.
 - o Stabilize the industry by recognizing it as a profession.
 - o Value ECEC professionals and their physical and mental health needs.
 - o Support for ECEC professionals handling different challenges with families and children.
 - o Provide a living wage with benefits and make it sustainable.
 - o Provide work/life balance.

“ I think we have some very good centers in McHenry County. We have good teachers, very good directors, and we have a stellar resource and referral agency. Those are definitely some positives.
-Assistant Director in the Community ”

- Child care availability across the Region.
 - Dedicated operational funding for ECEC programs.
 - Providers who will take infants sooner than six weeks of age for families that do not have the option to stay home.
 - Pre-K programs that are accessible to all children with a full-day option.
 - More in-home ECEC services.
 - Non-traditional hours for child care.
 - Transportation for ECEC programs.
- More services for children who need therapy because of emotional challenges.
- A lower ratio in classrooms to better support children's challenging behavior.
- More therapists who will travel to the more rural parts of the Region.
- More doctor referrals for children whose parents or caregivers feel they need additional services.

“

“What we need is to set a bar of what ECEC should look like and the expectations. It's been around for 50-60 years, and no one has taken the time to figure out what it should look like and how to make it so it's not funded by the parents.

-CCR&R Staff

”

Recommendations

This Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment has brought attention to several recommendations that are needed in the Region for change to happen in ECEC. These recommendations will build and sustain a strong ECEC workforce and in turn, more families will then be able to utilize ECEC services. The recommendations are not written in order of importance, as they are all considered crucial to the Region's community, family, and current ECEC professionals.

Provide ongoing education on the importance of ECEC programs.

- Including information: for the community, families, and the current and potential ECEC workforce; on the different ECEC sectors and what each offers the child in terms of development; on when a child may need and/or qualify for other services and how to find support groups so families do not feel overwhelmed or alone. The goal of this recommendation is for people to know why the different ECEC programs are vital to our community and the economy and to draw more potential workers into this important field of work.

“

We need to take into consideration that a lot of parents don't want to test because they don't want it to come back that something is off. They don't necessarily want a diagnosis because if they don't have a diagnosis then everything is fine. I think we need to do a better job letting families know that it's okay, it's not something you did.

- Parent

”

Create a hub to connect families to their specific ECEC needs in the Region.

- The hub would include Coordinated Intake with a caseworker for families. A current organization that would be willing to (with funding) could take on this responsibility. The role of the caseworker would be to speak to a family that calls or makes an appointment, ask questions, help identify their ECEC needs, and match them with services. The case worker could help the family make the appointments with the agencies or fill out paperwork needed to receive services. For those families that would like to know about services but do not want caseworker support, it was suggested that a directory of all the ECEC services in the Region be created and handed out to all agencies, pediatricians, and obstetricians for distribution from their offices. Taking this one step further, a website could also be created for families to answer questions and get a list of potential ECEC resources.

“

Recently I saw something online and it was a questionnaire about your face, to figure out what make-up you need. Maybe create a website like this where we would have all the resources available. People would put in the needs they have, for example transportation. Not the same needs apply to everybody. Maybe somebody needs transportation, others need speech therapy. Maybe we have a website that would refer them to all the ECEC options.

- Parent

”

Encourage ECEC workforce development with direct pipelines to become a qualified teacher or director, along with incentives to continue education, and more regulations on salaries and benefits.

- Right now, there are scholarships that offer low- or no-cost education in ECEC, but there is little incentive for ECEC professionals to continue their higher education or stay in the field when they finish their education. It is recommended that there be a base salary based on position, experience, and education and have automatic salary increases when a higher level of education is obtained, which would create more individuals qualified as directors while also giving the ECEC workforce an incentive to continue their education and stay in the field. Additional incentives could be provided for those that are multilingual or willing to take the necessary classes to become proficient in another language. It is also recommended that anyone who receives the ECACE scholarship should be required to make a commitment to work in the ECEC field for a certain amount of time.

“ There needs to be a commitment to stay in the field if we give them the free education. Different pipelines, too. Different ways for you to become qualified for different positions through high school, community college, and internships. But internships are hard if you can't pay them or give them some kind of compensation. They aren't going to want to do that for free.

-ECEC Professional

”

Create transportation and full day options within the publicly funded programs.

- In the Region there is limited public transportation. You must call for a taxi, Uber, or Pace bus if you do not have your own transportation. The publicly funded programs do not offer busing services, and the ones that do offer limited busing within their district. If there was dedicated transportation funding for any child that attends a publicly funded ECEC program for which they qualify, families would not have to take transportation into consideration when deciding to accept the services. Currently, families may choose to deny the services because of an inability to transport their child back and forth, or because they need a full-day program and have no transportation to transition the child to/from one program to the next.

Incentives for child care programs to be open non-traditional days and hours.

- Parents and caregivers have spoken up that not everyone works a 'typical' Monday-Friday daytime schedule. There are many careers out there that need evenings, nights, weekends, or rotating schedules. Many businesses offer employees a different pay scale for working those non-traditional hours, and it is recommended that there be incentives and funding for child care programs to offer extended availability to accommodate these needs. Programs should receive a monetary incentive as well as a different pay scale for the ECEC professionals who work these hours.

“ We had a mom at the office that waited over an hour for a ride home from Pace.

-Agency Staff

”

“ I've talked to other parents or have seen on social media 'does anybody want to watch my kid?' I want to be the person that says, 'you can look here' but you then see they need wonky hours, and you know they have been down that road and there is nothing out there.

-Parent

”

Provide services for children within the ECEC classroom who require extra support due to developmental delays and/or behavior challenges.

- Both the children and their teachers need additional support. Additional funding for child care providers to have extra trained support staff would greatly benefit the family, children, and teachers.

Funding for building costs and upkeep that will not affect the ECEC program's budgets.

- Currently each ECEC program is in their own budget silo. According to some professionals in the field, if an unexpected cost arises (for example a roof repair), the program must cut costs in other ways. They may not be able to order art or classroom supplies for a period or choose another cost-cutting method to make sure they stay within their budget; this all affects the children and the professionals who serve them. This funding could also be used to upgrade the ECEC program with new software. It is also recommended that there be consistency in reporting for all ECEC programs to show where the funded money is going in order to hold all child care operators and agencies accountable.

“With our agency, you get a group of funds you get every year, and you divvy it up for what you could potentially get and then see how much for building costs to divvy toward. There is only so much you get and what if A/C unit goes out or roof needs to be replaced? That takes away from salary increases for your people.

-Agency Supervisor”

Region 45

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Regional Strengths & Needs

Region 45 Strengths

- The Birth to Three program in Randolph County provides comprehensive education and unwavering support to parents and caregivers, empowering them with the knowledge and resources necessary for nurturing their children's growth and development.
- The informal Collaboration in Randolph County is a cohesive and dynamic network that unites individuals, organizations, and local leaders who share a deep passion for advancing the Early Childhood Education and Care community.
- In our Region, numerous local organizations diligently strive to proactively tackle disparities, foster inclusivity, and bolster the overall well-being of priority populations.
- Randolph County proudly provides a robust and all-encompassing resource guide that serves as an invaluable tool for residents. This comprehensive guide encompasses an extensive array of resources and services available within our community, facilitating easy access for individuals to find and access the precise support they require.
- The community and local organizations form a steadfast support system, wholeheartedly rallying around individuals and families during times of need.
- Publicly funded programs in Randolph County go beyond providing a nurturing environment for children; they actively foster early literacy, socialization, and school readiness. These comprehensive programs are designed to cultivate a solid foundation in early learning, developing essential social skills, and equipping children with the tools and knowledge needed to excel academically as they transition into formal schooling.
- Our Region takes immense pride in its commitment to providing accessible, family-oriented events that warmly embrace all members of the community. These inclusive gatherings serve as powerful catalysts for fostering a sense of unity, deepening community bonds, and celebrating the diverse fabric of our Region.

Region 45 Local Needs

- Families residing in Monroe County requested a **comprehensive tool that can serve as a go-to resource** and provide them with quick access to a plethora of programs and services in the domains of health care, transportation, Early Childhood Education and Care, and community-based organizations.
- **Improve parental engagement and support caregiver involvement** in the development of young children by promoting awareness of the multitude of opportunities, resources, and programs available to them.
- To ensure optimal efficiency and effective communication between providers, it is imperative to implement a **more streamlined referral process**.
- Maximize the growth and development of young children by advocating for and advancing the provision of **high-quality Early Childhood Education and Care**, while fostering productive stakeholder relationships and promoting seamless coordination across the entire Region.

Region 45 State Needs

- Enhance access and communication within all Early Childhood Education and Care settings with efforts to minimize language barriers.
- Improve public transportation infrastructure to increase accessibility to promote equity, ensuring that all families, regardless of their socioeconomic status or location, have opportunities to access the resources necessary for the well-being and development of their children.
- Implement an advanced data collection mechanism that guarantees comprehensive, precise, and pertinent information is acquired, which will provide imperative insights to enhance Early Childhood Education and Care programs.
- Establish alliances and implementing a proactive framework between caregivers, early learning providers, and other key stakeholders that would significantly enhance the support available for children with disabilities and behavioral and mental health needs.
- Efforts must be made to eliminate the hindrances that impede the availability and accessibility of child care centers in Randolph County's underserved areas.
- Make applications readily available and equipped to cater to diverse languages and abilities.
- Enhance access to the Home Visiting and Prevention Initiative, extending it to children beyond the age of three who are eligible. This expansion aims to offer alternatives for families who do not meet the criteria for state services.
- Improve access to publicly funded half-day and full-day preschool programs to meet the growing demand for ECEC.
- Considering the critical role played by specialized professionals in providing quality care to children, it is essential to address the shortage of health experts in the Region to ensure that the health needs of the community are adequately met, and no child is deprived of necessary medical attention and treatment.
- Prioritize equitable professional preparation, recruitment, and career pathways that ensure equal access to career opportunities for everyone.

Recommendations

- Develop a Monroe County Resource Guide that becomes the cornerstone of the community's well-being and connectivity.
 - This comprehensive guide will meticulously compile and consistently update essential information, enabling individuals and families to access accurate and up-to-date resources.
 - By providing a centralized and reliable source of information, the guide empowers community members to make informed decisions and access the support they need with the appropriate resources and services available to them.
- Promote systematic inclusion of families in Early Childhood Education and Care activities and programs through meaningful involvement in planning, development, and evaluation processes.
 - This can be achieved by leveraging parent engagement, providing comprehensive training, offering continuous support, and conducting effective outreach initiatives.
 - By actively involving families at every stage, we empower them to contribute their unique perspectives, insights, and experiences, ultimately fostering a collaborative approach that enhances the overall quality and effectiveness of early childhood initiatives.
- Create a centralized platform that fosters connectivity and seamless information sharing among providers, resulting in enhanced coordination and communication among professionals.
 - By adopting this integrated approach, unnecessary delays and duplications of efforts can be eliminated, while the potential for errors in the referral process can be significantly reduced.
 - This centralized platform serves as a reliable hub where vital information can be readily accessed and exchanged, enabling providers to collaborate effectively, streamline workflows, and ultimately deliver more efficient and effective services.
- Promote and facilitate the development of robust relationships among stakeholders in Early Childhood Education and Care, fostering shared understandings of best practices, identifying challenges and solutions, exchanging resources and knowledge, and nurturing continuous communication between families, professionals, and educators.
 - By encouraging these strong partnerships, we create a collaborative ecosystem where stakeholders can collectively work towards improving the quality of early childhood experiences.
- Enhance accessibility and inclusivity by offering comprehensive language support to Spanish-speaking families and children, including the provision of qualified translators/interpreters and culturally responsive providers.
 - This vital support aims to eliminate barriers that have previously hindered their full participation in existing programs and provides equitable access to opportunities.
- Significantly increase funding for public transportation and mobility options, specifically targeting communities lacking such resources, to facilitate seamless access to high-quality centers, medical facilities, and specialized service providers.
 - By allocating additional resources, we can bridge transportation gaps and remove the barriers that hinder individuals from underserved communities from reaching essential destinations.

- The state should implement a comprehensive framework to establish a unified Early Childhood Education and Care system that ensures seamless coordination and tracking of aggregated data across various funding sources, including dual funded slots, license-exempt slots, preschool slots, priority populations, screening methods, results, and waitlists.
 - By implementing this framework, we can effectively streamline data management, promote data transparency, and enhance the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the ECEC system.
 - This unified system will facilitate evidence-based decision-making, identify areas for improvement, and ensure equitable access to quality ECEC for all children, regardless of their backgrounds or circumstances.
- Forge strong partnerships and foster a supportive network that brings together families, ECEC providers, and other stakeholders to champion the well-being of children with disabilities and behavioral support needs.
 - By prioritizing staff development and cultivating a culture of developmentally appropriate practices, we can ensure that every child receives personalized attention and interventions that are specifically tailored to their unique needs.
- Heighten awareness and enhance accessibility to address the demand for child care centers in Chester, Coulterville, Sparta, and Evansville.
 - This proactive approach ensures that families in these areas have convenient and readily available options for child care, expanded access to high-quality services, and economic productivity of families.
- Revise and enhance application processes for programs like publicly funded housing, Child Care Assistance Program, Individual Education Plans, and Social Security, by developing simplified applications that utilize clear, user-friendly language and offer alternative formats to accommodate diverse abilities and languages.
 - By implementing these improvements, we can ensure that the application process is accessible and inclusive, allowing individuals from various backgrounds and with different abilities to navigate the process with ease.
- Secure enough funding to expand existing programs such as Home Visiting and Prevention Initiative and establish new ones that cater to children beyond three.
 - This proactive approach ensures early identification of developmental challenges, providing comprehensive care, education, and support for children of all ages, enabling prompt and targeted intervention.
- Devote efforts to support parents and caregivers by establishing a mixed delivery system that encompasses both half-day and full-day publicly funded preschool programs.
 - This comprehensive approach aims to promote equity and provide opportunities for all young children, irrespective of their backgrounds or circumstances.
 - By offering a range of program options, we ensure that families have access to high-quality ECEC that aligns with their needs and preferences.
 - This commitment to equity and opportunity fosters an inclusive society where every child can thrive, laying the groundwork for lifelong learning and success.

- Enhance accessibility to medical and specialized pediatric providers, prioritizing comprehensive care and support for all individuals, including those facing financial constraints and relying on state insurance, as well as individuals with mental health and developmental needs.
 - By improving access to these vital services, we ensure that no one is left behind, regardless of their financial circumstances or healthcare requirements.
- Establish a well-defined and achievable career pathway that encompasses professional development opportunities, robust mentoring programs, and impactful leadership development initiatives, all designed to actively support the growth and advancement of early childhood educators.
 - By creating this comprehensive framework, we empower educators to enhance their skills, deepen their expertise, and thrive in their professional journey.

Region 47

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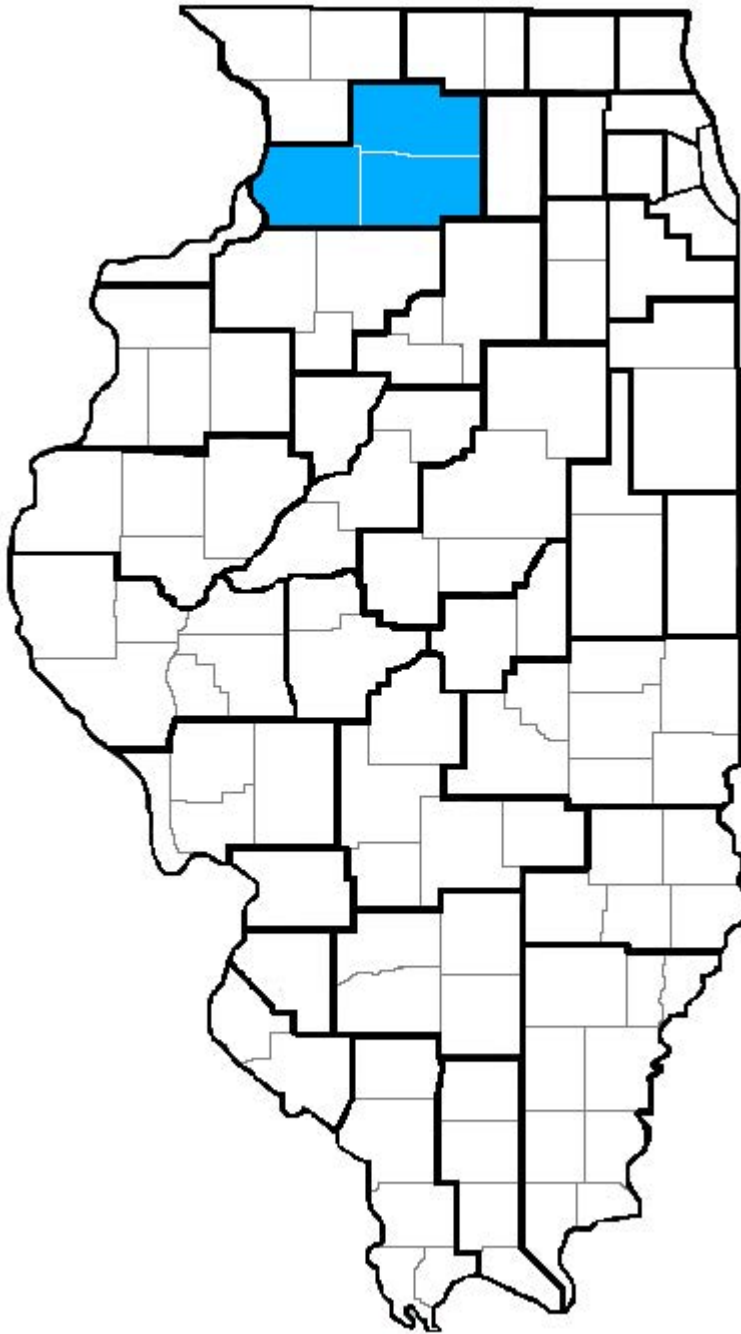
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Regional Strengths & Needs

Strengths

Region 47 has a history of prioritizing ECEC, which naturally alludes to its many strengths. The Region also continuously strives for collective impact and works to collaborate with multiple stakeholder groups to ensure ECEC is prioritized. The community's summarized and prioritized list of strengths includes:

- Partnerships within the communities that have a shared commitment to improving ECEC. This strong sense of community includes multi-stakeholder collaboration, which also includes participants outside of the ECEC field.
- A well-developed ECEC expansion plan, stemming from the Community-Based Planning for Expansion Project, that includes additional supports needed for providers and parents/caregivers.
- The Regional Office of Education, which chairs the Sauk Valley STARS Early Childhood Collaboration, has a dedicated team that works to grow Early Childhood by building community partnerships, providing quality improvement supports, and educating and informing the community.
- Multiple stakeholders who are willing and able to acquire grant funds that have allowed for marketing ECEC programs, Coordinated Intake, and family and community engagement. The outcomes of these grants have demonstrated how a community can succeed when they have a well-developed plan along with the resources and funding needed to execute it.
- Quality ECEC programs for families who are eligible and able to access publicly funded slots.

Needs

Region 47 has demonstrated strength in recognizing the needs of the ECEC system. As established in this report, there are several areas where improvements can be made, including those that are currently underway through the Community-Based Planning for Expansion Project. The community's summarized and prioritized list of needs includes:

- Increasing ECEC program slots with birth to three-year-old programming as a priority. This would allow for equitable access for all families in the Region who wish to enroll their children.
- Increasing affordable, quality child care or extended day options in the Region that allow for equitable access and parent choice for families who need full-day options.
- Increased awareness and education for parents and the community on the importance and availability of ECEC programs in our Region.
- A well-developed and supported ECEC workforce that can sustain the needs listed above.
- Prioritization of parent/caregiver partnerships and support services that connect families with the ECEC system and strengthen their relationships. These services include:
 - Transportation.
 - Interpretation and translation support.
 - Timely access to developmental screenings and Early Intervention.
 - Awareness and expanded support services for children with disabilities and their families/caregivers.
 - Affordability or economic resources.
 - Housing.
 - A continuous outlet for families to share their voices.

Recommendations

Recommendations were developed based on the identified ECEC strengths and needs in Region 47. The recommendations are comprehensive, considering both local and State responsibilities and the previously established Community-Based Planning for Expansion efforts. With a mission to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early childhood services for all children and families in the Region, the recommendations focus on equitable access, prioritizing family engagement, and increasing enrollment. To achieve this, our Family Council and Action Council proposes the following recommendations:

Expansion Recommendations

- **Local:** Continue implementing the Community-Based Planning for Expansion plan and support programs with the desire to expand. Work to ensure child care is part of the discussion by providing support and meeting times that consider everyone's schedules.
- **State:** Allocate non-competitive grant funding to support ECEC programs that tailored to meet the community's needs. Provide infrastructure support for programs to address space barriers.

Quality Program Recommendations

- **Local:** Explore blending and braiding of programs to enhance programs and support sustainability.
 - Supply the ECEC community with education on potential program collaboration partnerships.
 - Utilizing Coordinated Intake, create a family-first, not program-centered, approach by informing families who are on a waitlist of other programs for which they may qualify.
- **State:** Support and fund a statewide Coordinated Intake system.
 - Extend the use of IRIS (Integrated Referral and Intake System) by funding the program in each Region statewide.
 - Permanent funding for a Coordinated Intake Specialist so the Region can fully implement a Coordinated Intake and referral process.
 - Support additional grant funding for programs to participate in the Quality Rating and Improvement System confidently and competently for overall program quality enhancement.

Affordability Recommendations

- **Local:** Ensure the community is aware of and supplied with resources related to child care assistance.
 - Encourage ECEC providers to accept the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) as a form of payment for families; provide ECEC providers with education, resources, and a simplified system of seeking support related to CCAP.
 - Educate and supply local businesses with Child Care Resource and Referral contact information, forms/applications, and educational material on child care costs for employers who wish to provide child care assistance as a benefit for their employees.
- **State:** Revise policies related to CCAP so the program works for all families and providers. Some of these revisions could include:
 - A graduated subsidy scale for all families based on household size and income with no cap.
 - Modifying the rule that a provider cannot charge other families less than a CCAP family to allow providers to provide their own graduated scale for middle class families who do not qualify for CCAP.
 - Larger incentives for providers who accept CCAP and provide quality programming so providers can utilize funds for programming costs rather than raising their rates.

ECEC Awareness Recommendations

- **Local:** Continue efforts of providing ECEC marketing materials to the places parents and caregivers indicated, which include medical offices, grocery stores, older siblings' schools, and online or social media.
 - Provide families with desired in-person events where they can collect resources and connect with other caregivers.
 - Create and market a modern, simplified Regional Resource Guide for caregivers that is up-to date and can be accessed online.
- **State:** Provide grant funds that can be tailored to the Region and allow funding for continued marketing and outreach and a dedicated ECEC support team.

ECEC Workforce and Sustainability Recommendations

- **Local:** Provide regional support and recognition to the ECEC field
 - Create and execute a community campaign that recognizes the value of early childhood educators and providers.
 - Support the continuous coordination of ECEC to the Birth-to-Third Grade (B-3) initiative.
- **State:** Provide funding that allows for competitive wages and a higher education pipeline for future employees.
 - Provide adequate funding to compensate professionals employed in child care, publicly funded programming, and support services with a salary that is competitive to their K-12 counterparts, while simultaneously avoiding an increase in costs for families.
 - Support the continuation of the ECACE grant or other programs that incentive and properly prepare future educators and providers.

Parent Partnership Recommendations

- **Local:** Prioritize parent/caregiver partnerships by providing families with the means they need to connect with the ECEC system.
 - Continue expansion efforts in ECEC deserts to minimize travel and transportation needs.
 - Translate all ECEC materials to include resources in English and Spanish.
- **State:** Provide funding and or system support needed for Regions to support priority populations.
 - Statewide interpretation and translation services for families with limited English proficiency.
 - A universal data system of families who meet the definition of homelessness per the McKinney Vento Act that is accessible by ECEC programs to offer support and services.
 - Increased support for families with children with disabilities, providing a liaison or system navigation support to ensure families understand their child's rights and needs are met

Region 48

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Regional Strengths & Needs

Assessing what our community does well and where there are areas for improvement is essential for building on existing strengths, while providing opportunities for growth.

Strengths

- Public transportation is available in the Peoria area.
- Publicly funded programs are available in our Region.
- The Family Connects program is available in Peoria County.
- The Region has highly knowledgeable Early Intervention service providers.
- Early Childhood Collaborations are present and strong in the Region.
- The Early Childhood Navigator, a newly created position within an independent Collaboration, will be a central source of information and can connect families with developmental screenings, programs, and services.
- Developmental screening kits will be provided to child care providers in the Region.

Needs

- Reliable transportation for all programs, whether urban or rural.
- Diverse and appropriately compensated workforce.
- Address the Early Intervention waitlist.
- Child care options for children with special needs.
- Affordable child care.
- A central data management system for all programs/providers serving children birth through age five.
- Adequate funding for programs and services.
- Progressive ECEC funding to keep up with increasing expenses.
- Increased awareness of ECEC services and programs among healthcare professionals and child care providers.

Recommendations

It is evident that our current system and approaches must adapt to meet the evolving needs of families. While Region 48's Action Council and Family Council considered many recommendations, they prioritized what they felt are the most urgent in providing equitable access to high quality ECEC programs and services.

- Provide transportation funding independent of programmatic funding to ensure programs do not need to choose between funding transportation and funding services to children and families.
- Diversify the ECEC workforce and provide adequate compensation.
 - Add ECEC certificate/degree to the Workforce Equity Initiative (WEI) program at the local community college.
 - Implement paid apprenticeships for ECEC programs of study in lieu of a bachelor's degree for non-licensure tracks.
 - Encourage local high schools to provide a career or technical education program leading into a variety of ECEC careers.
 - Support Raising Illinois' initiatives around appropriate compensation for ECEC fields.
- Utilize alternative options to ease the Early Intervention (EI) waitlist.
 - EI should refer families through IRIS to Coordinated Intake to be connected to home visiting services so they can receive support while on the waitlist.
 - While a child is on the waitlist, suggested activities and resources should be provided to the family and child care provider based on the developmental needs requiring EI services.
 - Implement apprenticeship programs for EI providers. Apprentices would provide therapies under the supervision of a provider with an advanced degree.
 - Expand the use of therapy assistants to provide therapy to children birth to age three under the supervision of a provider with an advanced degree.
- Increase the availability of inclusive child care for children with special needs.
 - Raise awareness of child care programs that provide an inclusive environment for children with special education needs.
 - Coordinate specialized training opportunities for child care staff based on the population served.
 - Provide incentives to child care programs that provide an inclusive environment for children with special education needs.
 - Provide incentives to staff who take Early Childhood Special Education courses.
 - Require Early Childhood Special Education courses at the associate level.
- Expand eligibility criteria for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) to increase access to affordable child care.
 - CCAP should provide a sliding scale for program tuition based on household income and family size with no cap.
 - CCAP should provide a graduated increase in tuition costs over an extended period when household income increases or family structure changes.
 - Incentivize CCAP participation for licensed child care centers and family child care homes.

- Provide a comprehensive centralized data management system to aggregate data collected at the program level.
 - Expand the use of IRIS beyond the referral process to track family access and utilization of services.
 - Use Help Me Grow as a centralized access point for families to request developmental screenings and services; track access and utilization of services.
 - Connect ISBE's Student Information System (SIS) platform for K-12 schools to other statewide systems.
- Examine the funding needs of existing programs and services before directing funds to new programs and initiatives.
- ISBE should provide progressive funding for multi-year grants.
 - A minimum of 3% increased funding to cover compensation increases, staff benefit cost increases, cost of living adjustments, and increased operational expenses.
- Provide updated information about services available in the Region to healthcare professionals and child care providers to improve their ability to serve as a resource for families and engage them in the referral process.
 - Train healthcare professionals and child care providers on IRIS so they can make referrals to other available services.
 - Strengthen our Region's collaborative reach to healthcare professionals and child care providers.
 - Utilize Help Me Grow as a comprehensive source of up-to-date information and connection to services for families with young children.

Region 49

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Regional Strengths & Needs

Science indicates that a child's brain develops more rapidly during the first five years of life than at any other time in life. These first years shape brain development, have long-lasting impacts on their health, and affect their ability to learn and their chances of success in life. The Region 49 Action Council and Family Council worked together to identify strengths, needs, and possible strategies to help all Rock Island County children have the best start in life. These collective insights are as follows:

Strengths

- The Early Childhood Coalition, AOK Network, and other Local Community Collaborations make the ECEC system better for children, families, and providers in Rock Island County.
- There is a high commitment of the Region's educational institutions in addressing challenges and uplifting the professionalism of the ECEC workforce.
- School superintendents and the community at large understand and embrace the importance of ECEC programs and services.
- Free publicly funded programs, including Preschool for All, Preschool for All Expansion, Head Start, Early Head Start, Prevention Initiative, Healthy Families Home Visitation, Early Intervention, and Early Childhood Special Education exist within our Region.

Needs

- A strong and diverse ECEC workforce
 - Classrooms across Region 49 are closed due to a lack of qualified educators, especially educators that reflect the demographics of our Region. ECEC teachers cite low pay, lack of benefits, and little support as reasons why they are leaving the field. The expense and lack of quality child care availability is causing families to leave their jobs and the Region.
- Accessible and quality child care for all families
 - Currently only one in three children in Region 49 can attend ECEC programs because of the insufficient number of available slots. Infant and toddler care are the most difficult to find given the lack of openings due to smaller classroom ratios and lack of publicly funded slots.
- An ECEC system that is easy to navigate
 - Many families cannot access ECEC programming due to barriers like child care deserts, lack of transportation, lack of second and third shift care, language or cultural barriers, and a complex paperwork process.
- Affordable ECEC services
 - The cost of infant care in Rock Island County is more than annual tuition at Illinois State University. Economists recommend that a family should not spend more than 7% of their annual income on child care. Given the average household income is \$57,895, families are spending, at minimum, 28% on infant care, 22% on toddler care, and 19% on preschool.

- Provider and family input on policy changes
 - At times, investment in ECEC does not serve its intended purpose (or result in the intended outcome) for the children and families it is meant to serve. Some policy changes bring unintended consequences to the individuals they are meant to support. Ensuring the people that are impacted are at the decision-making table can assist the state in making policies that are more proactive.
- Accurate and extensive data
 - Region 49 cannot determine needs in a way that is data-informed if the data is incorrect. Slot gap numbers are skewed because one child can be counted in multiple slots based on the programming they are enrolled in. Data that answers questions like, “What percentage of kids go to Kindergarten with previous ECEC experience?” will be helpful in evaluating the needs of children in Rock Island County.
- Specialized and specific services to meet the needs of children, families, and providers
 - There is a lack of specialized providers serving Region 49 children. Dental services beyond routine preventative care and mental health screenings are difficult to find and often require exorbitantly long waitlists. There is also a need for more professionals who represent families’ identities, culturally responsive programs, and more language interpretation and translation services.

“ I’m much more likely to engaged in services with someone who looks and speaks like me. ”

- Native Spanish Speaker

Recommendations

Collaborative funding has been instrumental in bringing essential programming to our Rock Island County. Current Early Childhood Local Community Collaboration efforts demonstrate a strong need to evaluate and address specific difficulties faced by all early childhood professionals, families, and community members. As a result, the following recommendations have been identified:

1. Optimize the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Workforce

The recruitment and retention of the ECEC workforce is vital in ensuring consistency and stability as children create trusting relationships that support social and emotional growth and development. The state should implement a framework to ensure ECEC providers receive compensation and benefits that align with those being offered through local school districts. Locally, Region 49 should continue to recruit and promote a diverse workforce through supporting ECEC coursework, modeling self-care and healthy practices, and providing mentorship opportunities.

2. Streamline Service Coordination

Streamlining service coordination helps to ensure that all families have access to the services they need in a timely and efficient manner. For Region 49 to become a more accessible community, leaders should create a centralized intake system that connects families with the appropriate ECEC services based on their individual needs. The state should modernize the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) by adding it to the current Application for Benefits Eligibility (ABE) system, which allows families to understand the programs they are eligible for, have all their documentation uploaded, and complete renewal activities all in one place.

3. Data-Informed Action & Advocacy

A data-informed approach to action and advocacy will help to identify the most pressing ECEC needs in Rock Island County. This starts with ensuring that the family and provider's insights are amplified on the state level and that legislation is informed by the people it impacts. This also involves collecting data on the availability, accessibility, and quality of services in the Region. This information will then be used to develop evidence-based policies and advocacy efforts such as making child care more affordable for families by limiting rates at 7% of a family's income, ensuring the pre-employment approval process for providers (background checks and health and wellness requirements) are subsidized and processed quickly and efficiently, and reimbursing infant and toddler slots in ECEC settings at higher rates - all of which aims to improve access to high-quality child care services.

4. Access to Specialized Supports

Access to services in ECEC is vital because they address unique challenges that can impact a child's development and well-being. Navigating disabilities, behavior, new parent support, and transportation are all critical areas that require specialized attention to ensure every child has equal access to high-quality programs and services. With this support, ECEC can become more inclusive, better equipped to meet the diverse needs of children and families, and promote positive outcomes for children, families, and the community as a whole.

5. Culturally Responsive Programming

Culturally responsive programming is crucial in ECEC programs as it recognizes and values the diverse backgrounds and experiences of children and their families. By incorporating culturally responsive practices, educators can create inclusive and equitable learning environments where every child feels seen, heard, and respected. Region 49 should build intentionality around equipping educators with the knowledge and skills needed to create culturally affirming learning environments while fostering and encouraging partnerships that allow for the exchange of knowledge, resources, and expertise. Region 49 must also recognize the importance of language diversity and promote opportunities for children to maintain and develop their home languages by using multilingual signage, labels, and communication materials. These resources can be leveraged by employing bilingual or multilingual staff and/or interpreters to facilitate effective communication between families and educators.

Region 50

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Regional Strengths and Needs

The Family Council, Action Council, and community members at large all expressed that Region 50 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

- Collaboration within the ECEC community across the Region; St. Clair County has a knowledgeable pool of Early Childhood Educators.
- Existing partnerships and collaborations that use family engagement and interact with multiple sectors to increase Kindergarten readiness.
- Strong Child Care Subsidy Office that is one of the largest in the State.
- Fairly flexible job market that families can access.
- Community resources that support a wide variety of needs and service requests.

Needs

- Full-day or wrap-around services so families can return to work.
- Qualified ECEC professionals to fill vacancies.
- Transportation so families can access services and programs.
- Professional development for ECEC staff to support the growing needs of children (e.g., special needs, trauma-informed care).
- Intentional parent outreach for the agencies that provide services to families.
- More Special Education slots in Early Childhood programs.
- A statewide data collection system into which all programs can that all programs can input data.

Recommendations

The Region 50 Councils discussed numerous recommendations for systemic changes that could improve the lives of the families and children in the local communities. They understood, however, the necessity to prioritize those recommendations that would have the most profound impact on the greatest number of community members throughout the Region.

- Develop a statewide data collection system that all programs use to collect real-time data.
- Explore transportation collaborations with the St. Clair County Transit District, school districts, and other community transportation.
- Explore opportunities for high schools to participate in the Level 1 ECE credentialing process to promote ECEC as a career option.
- Coordinate collaborative Child Find Efforts.
- Conduct outreach and promotion to the community around the available ECEC resources and services.
- Create training to support all staff in all programs for children with disabilities.

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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.

Region 53

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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.

Region 54

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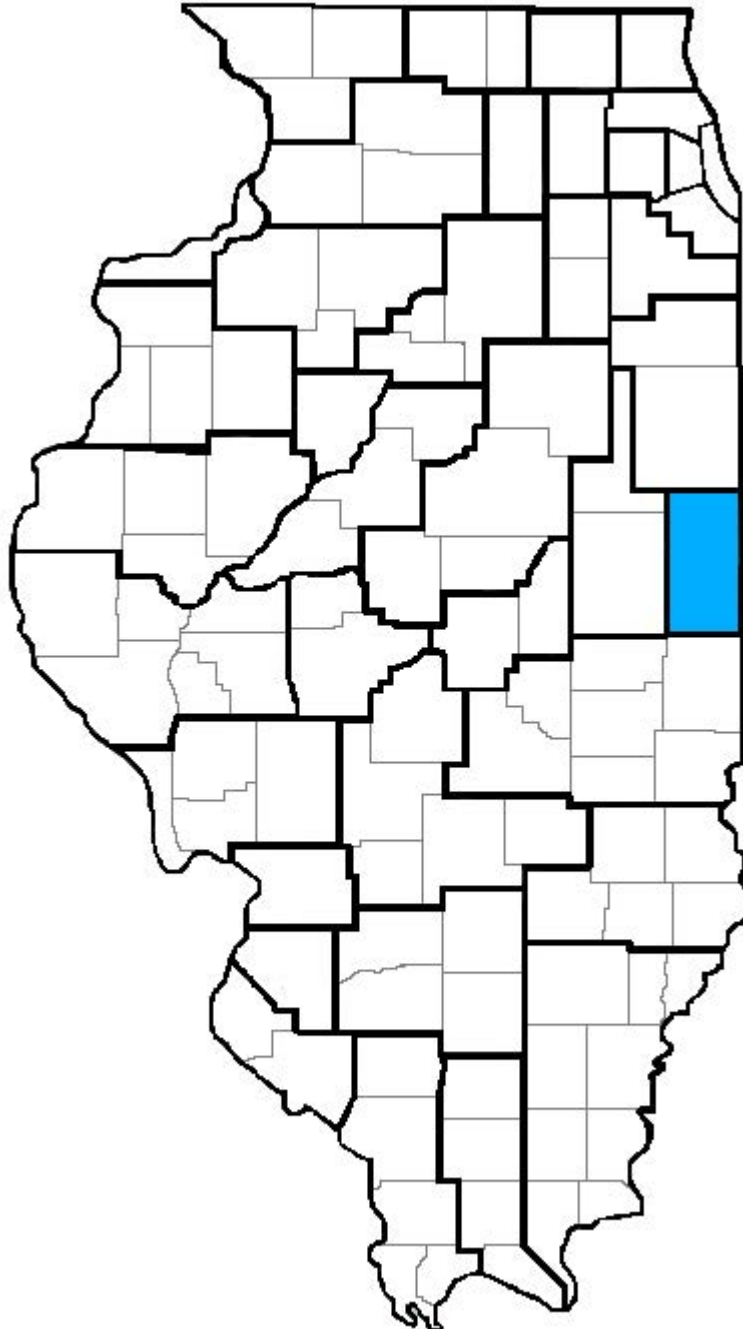
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Regional Strengths & Needs

Action and Family Council members reviewed available data, attended Council meetings, held conversations with community stakeholders, and identified strengths and needs. In addition, the Region 54 Team hosted focus groups, held individual interviews, and spoke with numerous community members. Region 54 will remain a great place to raise young children. However, there are still opportunities for growth within the Region and for more equitable access to ECEC programs for all children birth to five.

Strengths

ECEC Programs

- Multiple publicly funded ECEC programs throughout the Region.
- Numerous family child care locations throughout the Region.
- A handful of licensed and license-exempt child care centers, primarily located within Danville.
- Early Invention (EI) programs throughout the Region for children birth to three years old.

Community Resources

- Many available resources for families, including food banks, free clothing facilities, and after-school programs.
- Established relationships between key stakeholders, not-for-profit organizations, businesses, and government agencies.

ECEC Workforce

- Educational and professional development opportunities offered to current ECEC professionals through the local CCR&R.
- Financial incentives to pursue credentials offered to aspiring ECEC professionals through INCCRRA.
- ECEC teacher preparation coursework is available locally at Danville Area Community College (DACC).

Collaborations

- ECEC professionals across multiple programs and agencies willingly collaborate to serve children and families.
- A variety of birth to three home visiting programs that connect families to existing resources and services.

Needs

Program Affordability

- More affordable child care options throughout the Region, including in rural communities.
- Eligibility criteria that consider household income and expenses to allow more families to qualify for publicly funded programs and services.
- Shortened payment timelines to incentivize more ECEC providers to accept CCAP.

Program Availability & Accessibility

- An ECEC system that promotes equitable access and outcomes for all children, including children from historically marginalized groups such as children of color, children from Indigenous communities, and children in families living on poverty-level incomes.
- A greater number of programs that offer full-day preschool and Head Start services.

- More high-quality and accessible child care options throughout the Region, including programs that offer around-the-clock care.
 - Lengthy waitlists for publicly funded preschool programs limit families' options, causing them to use less convenient and/or lower quality programs.
 - Too few providers offer second or third shift child care.
- Expanded ECEC programs and providers in rural areas so families can more easily participate in the workforce and ensure their children's learning needs are met.
 - Rural areas offer limited child care options, requiring parents, families, and caregivers to travel to neighboring communities.
- Increased funding to expand home visiting programs.
- Seamless transitions from Early Intervention (EI) to Preschool and/or Head Start for all enrolled children.
 - While EI services exist in Region 54, the transition to preschool classrooms is cumbersome due to waitlists and limited slot availability.
- Intentional and smooth transitions for young children and families experiencing homelessness, specifically to ease the transfer process from one school district to another.
- Responsive ECEC programs that serve children with individualized learning needs, specifically multilingual children, and children with physical, mental, or emotional challenges.
- Public transportation options and schedules that correspond to ECEC program locations throughout Region 54.
 - Some rural schools do not provide transportation to and from ECEC programs, forcing families to choose more easily accessible options that may not be best suited to the developmental needs of their child.
- Improved access to medical and mental health care for young children throughout Region 54.
 - Many families must travel outside the Region to meet their medical and mental health needs.
 - Staffing shortages prevent medical providers from efficiently issuing referrals, which ultimately delays children's enrollment in essential ECEC programs and services.
 - Without a labor and delivery facility, expectant parents and caregivers must travel 30 to 45 minutes to a neighboring county to deliver their baby.

Program Awareness

- A Community Collaboration that strategically and intentionally brings together key stakeholders, as well as coordinated ECEC resources to ensure all children and families have what they need to thrive.
- A public awareness campaign to promote ECEC programs and services and their corresponding positive impact on children's social, emotional, and academic development.
- A centralized resources and information hub that serves to make families and providers aware of the available programs and services, as well as how to access them.
- Build awareness among the medical community to increase the number of eligible children receiving Early Intervention services and reaching age-appropriate development milestones.

ECEC Workforce

- A Region-wide effort to boost the number of aspiring ECEC professionals enrolled in preparation and credentialing programs.
- An ECEC workforce that is prepared, qualified, and fairly compensated.
- An ECEC workforce that has access to medical and dental benefits.
- A comprehensive infrastructure that improves the qualifications of the ECEC workforce and supports their ongoing professional growth and development.

Recommendations

After gathering Family and Action Council member input and having conversations with local stakeholders in the community, Region 54 has several recommendations to improve the current ECEC system.

Affordability

- Provide stable, non-competitive, grant funding for public and private ECEC programs based on community needs.
- Subsidize child care for families to ensure no family pays more than a set percentage of their household income on child care.

Availability

- Increase the number of ECEC providers throughout the Region, especially in rural areas.
- Develop and implement a comprehensive system to support the whole child's development, spanning from in-utero to Kindergarten.

Accessibility

- Design and implement a system to facilitate smooth and seamless transitions for children moving from Early Intervention to Preschool/Head Start programs.
- Eliminate waitlists by increasing the number of publicly funded ECEC slots.
- Ensure an adequate number of slots for children transitioning from EI to Preschool/Head Start to prevent breaks in services.
- Expand part-day publicly funded programs into full-day programs.
- Increase funding to assist families with the cost associated with transporting children to and from ECEC programs and services.
- Develop and implement a comprehensive system to support children transferring from one school district to another, specifically young and families children experiencing homelessness.

Awareness

- Develop effective methods to communicate with families and build awareness of existing ECEC programs and services, as well as how to access them.
- Develop a resource and information hub where families can learn about and explore various ECEC options.

ECEC Workforce

- Support the higher education system, such as DACC, to expand the ECEC teacher training infrastructure, address the current workforce shortage, and build a talent pipeline to meet future ECEC workforce needs.
- Prepare, recruit, and support a high-quality ECEC workforce.
- Increase and improve ECEC teacher compensations, benefits, and incentives to retain greater numbers of high-quality ECEC professionals.

Region 56

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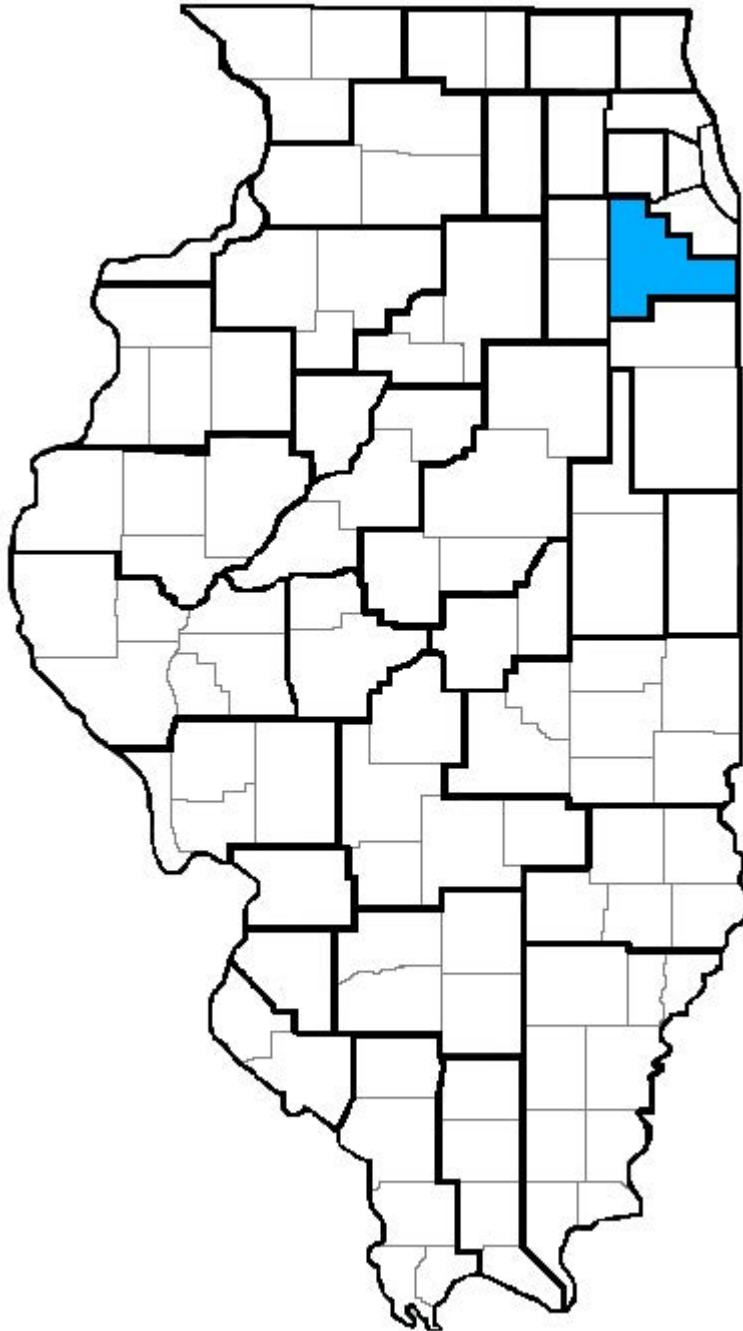
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Regional Strengths & Needs

The Family Council, Action Council, and community members at large all expressed that Region 56 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

- Regional public transportation infrastructure.
- Passionate ECEC providers and provider network.
- An abundance of school districts.
- Access to culturally diverse family engagement opportunities.
- Dedicated informal community partnership and an official Collaboration (AOK).
- Pipeline for ECEC workforce and job placements through regional higher education options.
- Variety of ECEC services and programs.
- Regional commitment from families to strengthen services for children, especially those who are most often underserved.
- Robust family engagement opportunities (i.e., public libraries, park districts, parks).
- Wide range of family-centered resources and services.

Needs

- English as a second language (ESL) programs and services for children and families.
- Full-day ECEC programming that supports working hours and non-traditional employment work schedule.
- ECEC workforce compensation/benefits that align with a livable and respectable wage.
- Streamlined and understandable ECEC system for families and providers.
- Reduction in and/or elimination of child care deserts.
- Parental leave that aligns with family needs.
- Increased investments in transportation around ECEC needs.
- Quicker CCAP turnaround times and payments.
- Additional investments in recruiting, hiring, retaining, and compensating diversity within the ECEC workforce (i.e., linguistics).
- Intentional training and support opportunities for ECEC professionals and providers who care for children with special needs.
- Recognize child care family home and center providers as equivalent to providers that work in a school-based setting.
- Consider years of experience as a provider to override education requirements.

Recommendations

The Region 56 Councils discussed dozens of recommendations for systemic changes that could improve the lives of the families and children in the local communities. They understood, however, the necessity to prioritize those recommendations that would have the most profound impact on the greatest number of community members throughout the Region.

- State-Regional-Community Model of Partnership
 - Continue to support and fund organizations that work as a conduit between the State, Region, and local community so the authentic family and provider voices are included in the decisions made around equitable, intentional, and practical funding, policy, and resource allocation decisions.
- Create One State ECEC Agency with a Unified ECEC Data System
 - Streamline and consolidate the ISBE, DCFS, IDHS, and Governor's Office of Early Childhood Department (GOECD) into one ECEC state agency to better align funding, communication, program performance standards, credentialing, and licensing.
 - Create one unified ECEC data system that aligns both state and federal ECEC performance standards, monitoring, reporting, outcomes, enrollment, licensing, and credentialing across all funding streams.
- Full-Day ECEC Programming
 - Expand ECEC programming hours across all funding streams that align with traditional full-time working hours to support working families, streamline transportation, and offer consistent care routines for children and families.
- ECEC Workforce Investments
 - Permanent and consistent initiatives for workforce compensation, diversity, and higher education.
 - Respectable wage/benefit minimums for all ECEC providers.
 - Accessible training and professional development opportunities for ECEC professionals through community and regional partnerships that target special needs, diversity, and equity.
 - Expand braided/blended funding opportunities.
 - Support the alignment of teaching standards with neighboring states to recruit ECEC professionals, considering relevant years of ECEC experience.
- Elimination of Child Care Deserts
 - Continue to strategically and equitably identify ECEC areas of need.
 - Continue to expand and fund Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) and early childhood Request for Proposals (RFP) opportunities for all providers regardless of the setting.
 - Support and fund transportation needs for families and children to improve access to ECEC.
 - Support workforce investments.

Next Steps

Between September 2023 and January 2024, Regional Teams, in conjunction with their Regional Councils, will develop Action Plans based on some of the recommendations that were identified in their Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments. These will include steps that should be considered by community partners to implement the chosen recommendations, as well as identify who else from the community and state should be involved in the discussions around the recommendation and funding considerations, among other things.

After that, Regional Councils will continue to build on their initial findings and expand their reports to include a focus on Early Childhood Mental Health. Once finished, the Action Plans and new findings on mental health will be published on the Birth to Five Illinois website.

If you would like to support the work of Birth to Five Illinois, please go to: www.birthtofiveil.com/councils to find your Region and connect with your Regional Council Manager.



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