



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

Region 8

(Carroll, Jo Daviess & Stephenson Counties)





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Table of Contents

Region 8 Executive Summary.....	3
Region 8 Snapshot Infographic	5
Overview & Acknowledgements	7
Introduction.....	8
Letter from State Leadership	9
Letter from Regional Leadership.....	10
Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) in Illinois	11
Timeline.....	13
Birth to Five Illinois Regions	14
Spotlight on Region 8.....	15
Regional Community Landscape.....	16
Local Community Collaborations.....	19
Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs	21
Slot Gap.....	24
Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce.....	27
Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice	30
Regional Strengths & Needs.....	33
Recommendations.....	35
Appendices	37



Region 8 Executive Summary

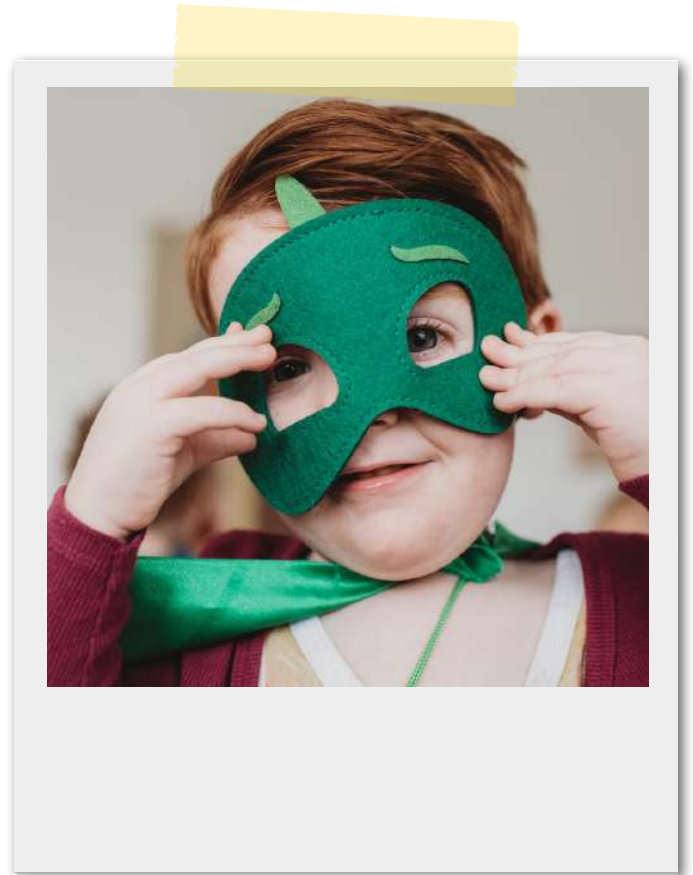
In 2021, the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Funding issued a report with findings that highlighted the inequities in ECEC funding in Illinois and the need to create a better statewide infrastructure to support ECEC professionals, expand services and programs for families and caregivers, and increase enrollment in ECEC programs. The report focused on the importance of addressing racial inequities and the need to include local voices in the conversation funders and decision-makers were having about ECEC.

The experiences and knowledge families, caregivers, and early childhood professionals gain while navigating the complexities of the State's ECEC system is valuable, and understanding their lived experience in the local context is vital for decision-makers to ensure communities have access to the programs, services, and supports they need. To this end, Birth to Five Illinois was created to harness family and caregiver voices in ECEC and serve as a bridge between the communities and policymakers so family, caregiver, and professional experiences can guide the decisions made to expand or enhance services across the State.

An Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment was created to present publicly available quantitative data and qualitative data from caregivers, ECEC professionals, and other community stakeholders collected through Action Council and Family Council meetings, focus groups, interviews, community meetings, and surveys. Throughout the process, regional barriers were documented, and recommendations were developed based on identified needs of families. This Executive Summary provides an overview of key findings from the development of the Region 8 Needs Assessment, which includes recommendations developed by our Action and Family Councils. Additional findings, analysis, and recommendations can be found in the full report.

Needs

- Growing and improving the ECEC workforce.
- More training in providing care for emotionally and socially complex children is needed.
- Additional emotional support for ECEC workers is needed
- Increased availability of child care and preschool.
- An ECEC system that works for families.
- Capital development of more preschool classrooms and more child care centers is needed.



- Early childhood educators and providers called for support services for families with children between the age of three and five.
- The Region needs a family-friendly public transportation system that takes child care into account

Recommendations

Growing & Improving the ECEC Workforce including wages, benefits; educational and retention opportunities for ECEC workforce.

Increasing the Availability of Child Care & Preschool: Develop new licensed child care centers, Recruit new home-based providers; Expand Preschool For All programs.

Supports for Families: new strategies for comprehensive and effective outreach; Additional resources for caregiver/family engagement; Fund additional Family Resource Coordinators (FRCs) in schools

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

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REGION 8 SNAPSHOT INFOGRAPHIC

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

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



5,132

Children Under the Age of 6 in Region 8



2,375

Children 0-5 at 200% Federal Poverty Level



1,092

Children 0-5 Without Publicly Funded ECEC Slots

80%

Percentage of Family Council Members who said they had difficulty finding a child care or preschool provider for their children.

"I tell my mothers I currently have in our program they should call me the moment they confirm they are pregnant to get their expecting baby on my list. It will take nine months of their pregnancy and maternity leave to get them in."

- Child Care Provider, Stephenson County

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

REGION 8 NEEDS

1. Recruit and retain ECEC professionals
2. Increase number of preschool classrooms and child care centers
3. Connect families and caregivers with support systems and programs, including resources such as behavior counseling
4. Create awareness of preschool options in all communities

REGION 8 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Improve the wages and benefits of ECEC workers
2. Increase the number of licensed care centers
3. Provide Early Intervention services for all families
4. Implement a family-focused public transportation system



“It would be better for my family if both my husband and I worked, and I want to work. But with no child care in our community, I have no choice but to stay home with my preschooler.”
**- Community Member,
Jo Daviess County**

Overview & Acknowledgements

Introduction

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

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

This report will be used in a variety of ways.

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

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

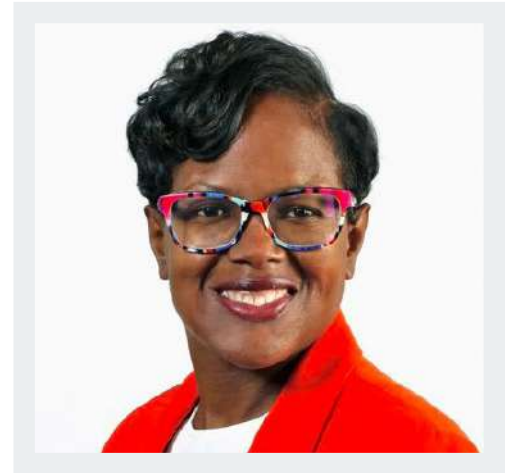
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand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

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



Letter from State Leadership

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Letter from Regional Leadership

In August of 2022, Birth to Five Illinois opened its Region 8 office in Freeport. Since then, our local Region 8 Team has logged hundreds of miles crisscrossing Stephenson, Jo Daviess, and Carroll Counties to learn from our Region’s parents and families, educators, service providers, and advocates about the strengths, challenges, and opportunities within our Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system in our corner of Illinois.

We have learned much over the past several months and look forward to continuing to strengthen our relationships with the many dedicated Birth to Five Action Council and Family Council members, as well as the dozens of partners in education and child care we have had the pleasure of meeting along the way.

We cannot thank our Birth to Five Illinois Region 8 Action Council and Family Council members enough for their time, knowledge, insight, and passion for our Region’s children that they have given this project since its inception last summer. The amount of information and countless experiences you have shared with us is immeasurable and provides so much of the context to fully understand our current ECEC landscape in northwest Illinois.

Additionally, we would like to thank our Region’s superintendents, administrators, educators, local librarians, and child care providers for all they do day in and day out in educating our youngest learners and strengthening our local communities. Your collective insight shared with us on kindergarten readiness and the importance of preschool learning has been invaluable in preparing this report.

Also, we acknowledge the dozens of dedicated education, child care, social service, economic development, and human resources professionals, as well as the many parent/family groups, interview, and focus group participants that have given us their insights and honest perspective of child care, preschool, and education in Region 8. Your participation has helped us to fully understand both the many limitations of our current local ECEC system and a few opportunities worth exploring to improve our system.

Finally, we owe special thanks to Illinois House Minority Leader and Region 8 Action Council member Tony McCombie (R-Savanna) for her continued support to improve Illinois’ ECEC system. We would like to thank Freeport Mayor Jodi Miller and United Way of Northwest Illinois Director Connie Kraft for their continued support and encouragement of our local team. We are also grateful to Amanda Myers with the Freeport Public Library for helping us with our wildly successful “Pete The Cat” story time outreach effort.

Thank you,

Lou Ann Hayes (she/her)

Regional Council Manager: Region 8

Birth to Five Illinois



Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) in Illinois

ECEC in Illinois is made up of several programs, including publicly funded programs such as Head Start/ Early Head Start, Early Intervention, Early Childhood Special Education, home visiting, preschool, and center- and home-based child care. ECEC also exists within a larger system of services and supports for families, including pediatric health care, mental and behavioral health care, child welfare, and family-focused economic supports. When available, these services and supports can be confusing and difficult to navigate.

While programs and services for families and children exist across the state of Illinois, they are not accessed equitably. For example, families in rural areas oftentimes live in child care deserts and are forced to travel long distances to place their child in any program, regardless of its quality. Another example is families who speak a language other than English who may live in an area without programming in their home language, making it difficult to find educational options. A family that has little to no access to economic or material resources may live in a city with many programs but be unable to enroll their children due to the excessive cost of tuition and long waitlists for access to publicly funded slots.

Additionally, funding for ECEC has been siloed across multiple state agencies and has lacked a cohesive process for distributing funds to providers. Decentralized funding has led to unintended equity issues, leaving some areas of the State with nominal public funding for ECEC programming and others without enough funding to meet the demands of communities.



In 2019, Governor JB Pritzker declared, “Illinois will become the best state in the nation for families raising young children, with the nation’s best early childhood education and child care. My promise is this: our work won’t be complete until every child in this state enters kindergarten with the cognitive skills to think, learn, read, remember, pay attention, and solve problems, but also the social-emotional skills to communicate, connect with others, resolve conflict, self-regulate, display kindness and cope with challenges.”

To honor this commitment, the Governor’s Office formed the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding to study and make recommendations on funding that would provide more equitable access to high-quality ECEC services for all children ages birth to five. Work groups met throughout 2020 and published a report of findings and recommendations in March 2021.

The Commission made the following recommendations to address the racial, geographic, and economic inequities found in Illinois’ ECEC system:

1. Increase public investment to help better subsidize the cost families pay out of pocket.
2. Create a coordinated funding approach by centralizing state and federal funding and distribute funding in new, more targeted ways.
3. Provide a single source for information and funding for ECEC with designated regional structures to make the system easier for families and providers.

Following these recommendations, the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) established the Division of Early Childhood (DEC) to help centralize and streamline the State’s existing child care, home visiting, and Early Intervention programs.

Additionally, after the Commission report recognized, “community input and data can fuel distribution of funds more effectively and equitably” and urged for the creation of a community and regional infrastructure to ensure input from families and providers is included in the state level decision-making process, the State partnered with the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) to launch our equity-focused regional system. Named Birth to Five Illinois, the goal of this new infrastructure is to create a network of community Councils across the State tasked with identifying the service needs in each region.

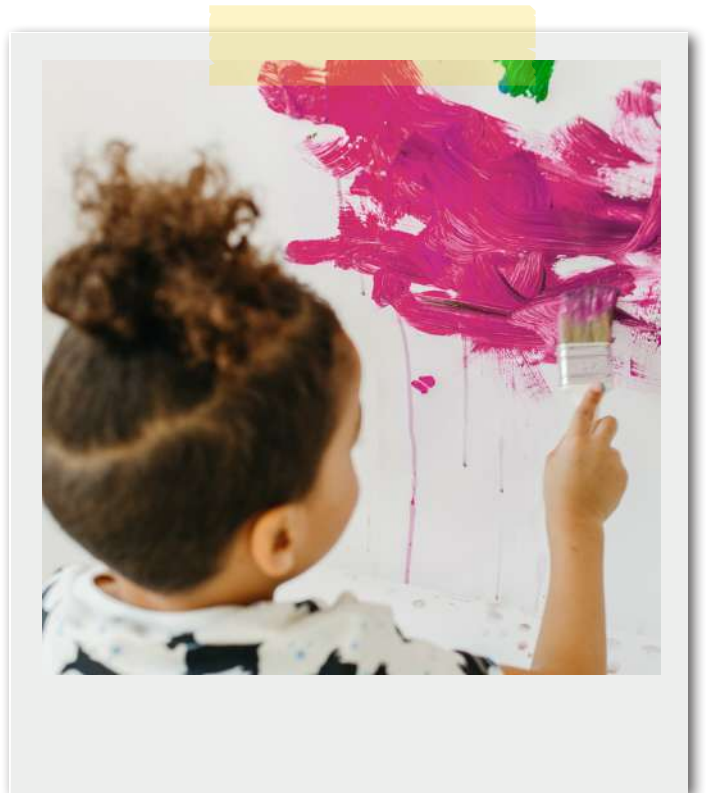
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early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

Our **vision** is reimagining a more equitable ECEC system that respects family and community voice and works to ensure it is centered and prioritized at every level of decision-making in Illinois.

Our **values and goals** are:

- **Family Voice:** Through this transformation centered on authentic family and community engagement, we will address the inequitable distribution of resources and services and rebuild our State’s ECEC system.
- **Racial Equity:** In an effort to move our ECEC system to one where racism no longer impacts a child’s success, we will work to dismantle barriers that have limited access to high-quality services for minoritized children in every corner of our State.
- **Collective Impact:** Birth to Five Illinois will build a system that harnesses knowledge directly from families and providers and encourages decision-makers to ensure new and/or expanded services are created to meet community needs. This community-driven framework will directly influence policy/funding at the local, regional, and state level.

Staying true to our mission and vision, Birth to Five Illinois has standardized the use of pronouns to affirm all genders and has included a land acknowledgement in each Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments to honor the Indigenous Peoples who were forcibly removed from their land.

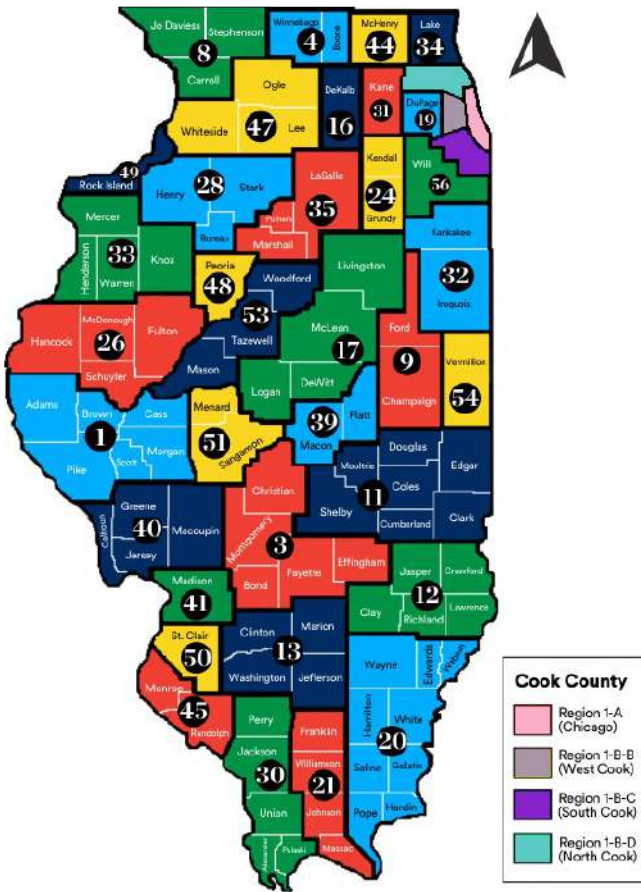


Timeline

- **March 2021**
Early Childhood Commission Report Published
- **September 2021**
Birth to Five Illinois Director, Cicely Fleming, Hired
- **February 2022**
Official Public Launch of Birth to Five Illinois
- **March 2022**
Held Regional Community Engagement Live Webinars
- **April 2022**
Established Partnerships with Existing Regional Early Childhood Collaborations
- **May – July 2022**
Hired 39 Regional Council Managers across the State
- **August – November 2022**
Hired Additional 78 Regional Support Staff
- **September 2022**
Awarded \$2.6 Million to 24 Implementation Grantees
- **October – November 2022**
Established 39 Birth to Five Illinois Action Councils
- **December 2022**
Established 39 Birth to Five Illinois Family Councils
- **January 2023**
Awarded \$575,000 to 9 Planning Grantees
- **January – April 2023**
Council Meetings & Ongoing Community Engagement (Focus Groups & Interviews)
- **June 2023**
39 Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments Released
- **July – August 2023**
Report Dissemination & Public Input



Birth to Five Illinois Regions



To provide a structure for communities, families, and caregivers to engage with the data and share their experiences, our new statewide infrastructure was created across 39 Regions. The Regions align with existing Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) Regional Offices of Education (ROE) boundaries. To better match demographic data to the needs for ECEC programs, Illinois Action for Children (IAFC), along with the Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM), provided maps that reflect the true boundaries of the Birth to Five Illinois Regions. Birth to Five Illinois regional boundaries align with school districts instead of strictly following county lines, which can be a challenge for gathering and interpreting data because many early childhood services are provided by, or tied to, school districts.

After the Regions were established and staffed, Birth to Five Illinois Action and Family Councils were created by Regional Selection Committees. To ensure diverse perspectives, outreach efforts focused on community members who might be new to this type of work. Action Councils are comprised of ECEC professionals, healthcare providers, faith leaders, elected officials, and other community members. Each Action Council reserved two seats for parents/caregivers to ensure

family voices were included in every discussion. Family Councils are comprised of parents/caregivers from a wide variety of family types: single parents, adoptive and foster parents, caregivers of relatives, underage parents, two parent families, multi-generational families, and more. Each Regional Selection Committee reviewed Interest Forms, and recommendations were made based on a full consideration of a submitter’s role/sector, location within the Region, race/ethnicity, gender, and answers to open-ended questions.

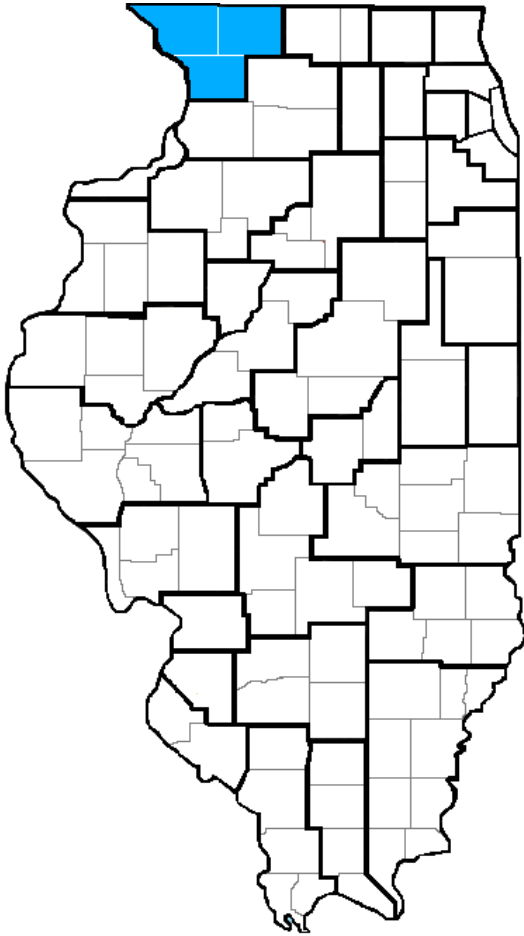
Regional Needs Assessment Methodology

Regionally based demographic, programmatic, and service provider data from IECAM and workforce data from INCCRRA were presented to Action and Family Council members during meetings and is included in the following section. The data comes from both IECAM (2020-2021) and INCCRRA (2021), unless otherwise noted. Some Regions included additional data collected during Community Based Planning or from state and/or local organizations and agencies. Action Council members were invited to bring additional aggregated data on programs and services provided by their agency/organization to complement IECAM data, while Family Council members brought their stories and experiences with the ECEC system to help contextualize quantitative data presented and discussed during meetings.

Additional qualitative data was collected community-wide through focus groups and interviews, and all Council members were invited to provide input on their Region’s report. Council members developed the strengths, needs, and recommended next steps that are unique to each Region. Regional Teams, along with the support of their Action and Family Council members, created a dissemination plan and are holding community meetings virtually and in-person to share their report’s findings. Throughout the fall of 2023, Regional Teams will lead their Councils through implementation planning based on the recommendations made in their report.

Spotlight on Region 8

Regional Community Landscape



Regional Boundaries

Located in the far northwest corner of Illinois is Birth to Five Illinois: Region 8, which consists of Stephenson, Jo Daviess, and Carroll Counties. Region 8 is bordered on the north by the Wisconsin state line and the west by the Mississippi River. As the three-county Region was unscathed by glaciers during the Ice Age, the area is topographically hilly, making it ideal for tourism, dairy farming, vineyards, winemaking, and outdoor sporting. Region 8 is made up of mostly farmland, wooded areas and bluffs, and small villages with populations under 3,000 people.

Freeport, in Stephenson County, is the largest community in the Region with 23,973 people and serves as a hub for manufacturing and social services. The Region's largest employer, Freeport Health Network, as well as other large employers like Seaga Manufacturing, Anchor Harvey, Titan Tire, Tri Star Metals, Honeywell, Newell-Rubbermaid, and Snak King, are all based in Freeport. Other notable employers in the Region include the US Penitentiary (Thomson), Berner Foods (Afolkey), Adkins Energy (Lena), Brewster Cheese (Stockton), Metform (Savanna), Elkay Manufacturing (Savanna), and MacLean Fogg (Thomson).

According to the Regional Office of Education (ROE), Region 8 has 10,941 K-12 students within its 14 public school districts.

Over one-third of those students attend schools in Freeport School District 145. Total enrollment in Region 8 has dropped by 22% over the past 20 years. Region 8 also has three private schools, all located in Freeport. Highland Community College and Columbia College are the institutions of higher learning in Region 8.

With its rich history, boutique shopping, preserved streetscapes, wineries, outdoor recreation, and quaint weekend and vacation rentals, Jo Daviess County and Galena (the Civil War-era home of United States General and 18th President Ulysses S. Grant) hosts several popular tourist destinations in the Region. Region 8 also boasts a number of recreational lake and golfing communities that are home to many weekend residents and retirees.

Land Acknowledgement¹

Region 8 acknowledges that the Counties of Carroll, Jo Daviess, and Stephenson are the traditional homelands of many Native Nations. This Region is the homeland of the Myaamia (Miami), Hoocąk (Ho-Chunk), Očhéthi Šakówinj (Sioux), Ojibwaki-hina-ki (Sauk) and Meškwahki-aša-hina (Fox), Peoria, and Kiiikaapoi (Kickapoo) Nations. We acknowledge the historic and ongoing injustices experienced by Indigenous communities and honor all Native Peoples who came before us and who continue to contribute to our Region.

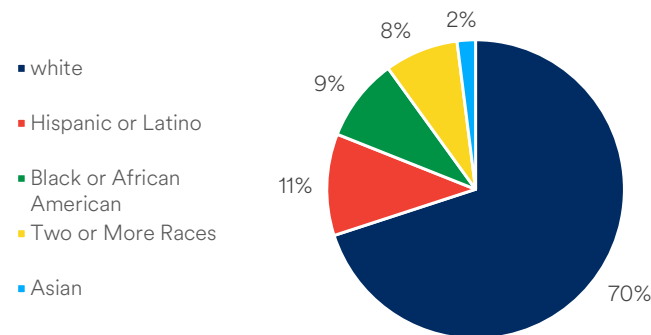
¹Based on information provided at <https://native-land.ca>

Regional Demographics

According to the 2020 U.S. Census Bureau, Stephenson, Jo Daviess, and Carroll Counties are home to 82,367 people. Almost half of those Region 8 community members live in Stephenson County, and within Stephenson County, almost half live in the City of Freeport.

The loss of manufacturing jobs and white-collar employment opportunities throughout the Region over the past 20 years has led to a slow decrease in population. The Census Bureau also reports that the three-county Region lost just over 3,400 jobs over the past 10 years. The slow decrease of the population has negatively impacted ECEC in several ways, including the loss of child care sites and a decrease in workers in the early childhood field.

Figure 1: Percentage of Children by Race and Ethnicity Ages Birth to Five²

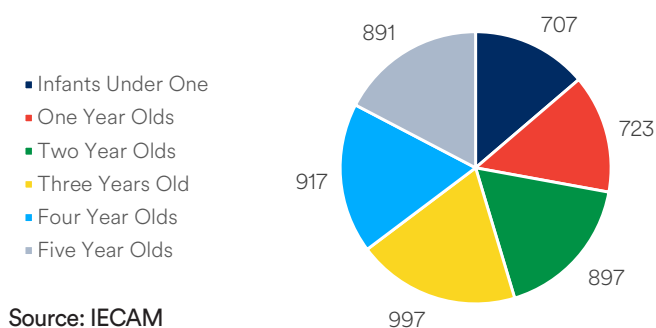


Source: IECAM
Created By: Birth to Five Illinois

According to the 2020 U.S. Census, there are 82,367 people living in Region 8. Eighty-two percent of the Region's population identifies as white, while 6% identify as Black, 5% as Hispanic/Latine, and 5% as two or more races. The diversity among children is more varied than adults in the Region (Figure 1).

Most Black and Hispanic/Latine households are in Freeport (Stephenson County), but there are communities of Hispanic/Latine families in both Savanna and Galena as well. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, 5,132 children under the age of five live in Region 8. As identified in Figure 2, infants under the age of one were the smallest group of children with 707, while three-year-olds made up the largest group with 997 (Figure 2).

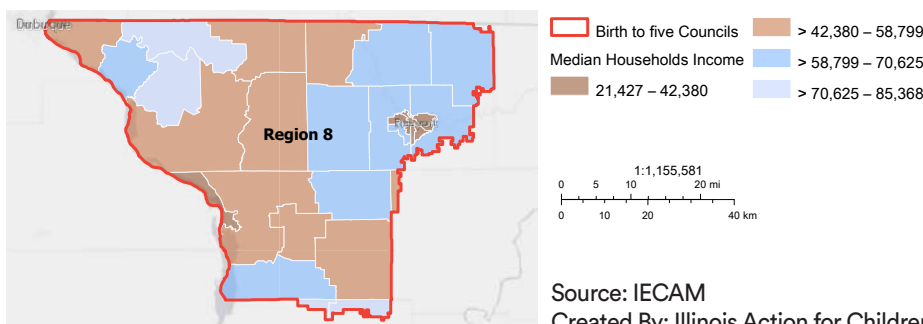
Figure 2: Children Ages Birth to Five By Age Category



Source: IECAM
Created By: Birth to Five Illinois

The median household income across the Region is \$54,167. The wealthiest areas within the Region are in the Galena Territory and Apple Canyon Lake areas in northern Jo Daviess County and in several agricultural communities in and around the city of Freeport (Figure 3). The Lake Carroll area, outside of Lanark and Shannon in Carroll County, is also a pocket of higher-wage-earning community members. Areas within the Region that have the lowest income levels are found in Freeport in Stephenson County and in Savanna in Carroll County.

Figure 3: Median Household Income



Source: IECAM
Created By: Illinois Action for Children CS3

²Two Census race and ethnicity categories not included due to the small number of respondents: Native American (0.1%) and Other (0.1%)

Children in Priority Populations

The Illinois Early Learning Council has identified several priority populations, defined as underserved and underrepresented populations.³ The purpose of the priority populations list is to drive resources and attention toward improving access to high-quality, responsive services for children and families with limited to no access to economic or material resources. While the priority populations list addresses the access issue, Birth to Five Illinois strives to focus the attention of policymakers and early childhood stakeholders on identifying ways to engage these impacted communities to remove the systemic barriers causing the access issue within each Region.

Most state-funded Early Childhood Care and Education (ECEC) programs have systems in place to identify and enroll priority populations; however, difficulty serving children and families experiencing systemic barriers persist. In Region 8 the priority population that is most underserved and underrepresented is children below the 200% Federal Poverty Level (FPL).

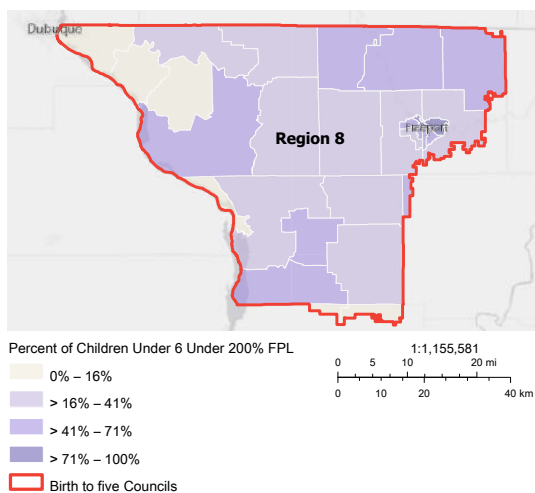
Federal Poverty Level (FPL) is a measure of income level created by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that calculates the minimum amount of money needed by a family to cover their basic household needs, such as food, housing, utilities, and other necessities. Yearly income bands are created based on household size and income; an example is included in Figure 4. Please note that 100% FPL is considered the “poverty line” by federal and state guidelines.

Figure 4: Federal Poverty Levels at 50%, 100%, 185%, and 200% for a Family of Four

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

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

Figure 5: Location of Children Under Age 6 at or Below 200% Federal Poverty Level



Source: IECAM
Created By: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Within the Region, there are several areas where high concentrations of children who live in families receiving poverty-level incomes reside. According to the Illinois Early Childhood Education Asset Map (IECAM), east Freeport and southwestern Jo Daviess and Carroll Counties have over 70% of children under the age of six living at or below 200% FPL (Figure 5).

When considering the expansion of preschool and child care opportunities in the Region, understanding the Region’s complex population, racial and household income demographics, as well as barriers like transportation, is important. Awareness of the Region and demographic data can guide decisions on what type of ECEC services are needed for what communities, counties, and areas.

Finally, when building an ECEC workforce for the future, our ECEC training partners and child care centers will want to consider their own communities’ diversity to recruit students and workers who can communicate with and relate to the young children they hope to serve.

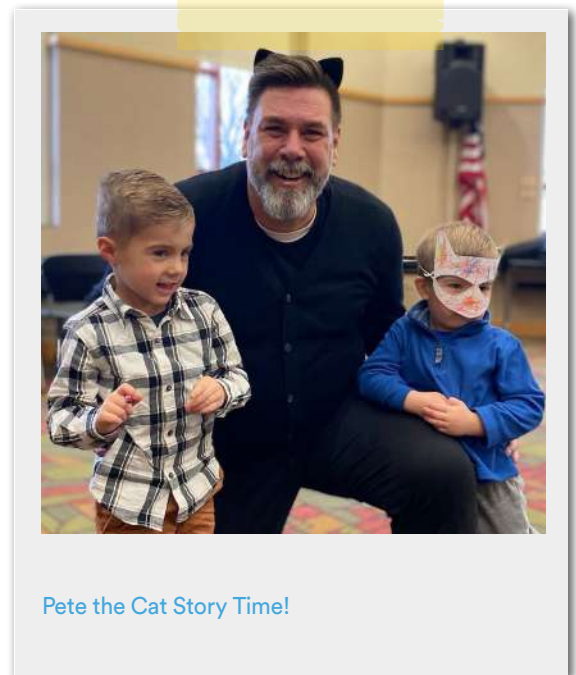
³ <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/earlylearningcouncil/access/documents/priority-populations-updated-2021.pdf>

Local Community Collaborations

According to the Partner Plan Act website, an Early Childhood Collaboration is when communities develop local partnerships to help enhance the lives of young children and families and to ensure the healthy growth and development of Illinois' youngest learners.

There are two ECEC Collaborations and networks in the Region: the Stephenson County Health Department's All Our Kids Network (AOK) and Freeport's Early Childhood Consortium (ECC).

The Region's AOK Network is a Collaboration of 43 community partners throughout Region 8 committed to building and supporting a community system that assures growth and development of children ages 0-8 and their families. This network works to ensure children are born healthy, stay healthy, and enter school ready to learn. Members meet monthly and as needed in various community workgroups to complete the strategic plan initiatives. They share information and data regarding agency changes, upcoming events, new or revised programmatic requirements, program eligibility, and other agency-related news.



Additionally, several ECEC providers, agencies, and educators participate in Freeport's Early Childhood Consortium (ECC). The ECC is a Collaboration of early childhood providers and agencies that share resources and support each other to provide a system of care for young children and their families in our communities. The ECC hosts, supports, and coordinates staff development activities, parent and family support programs, communication among agencies, shared expertise and consultation, staff recruitment assistance, equipment sharing, and curriculum support. The ECC also supports awareness of the Highland Community College Early Childhood Education Scholarship.

The Region is also served by two Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agencies. The YWCA of Northwest Illinois serves Stephenson and Jo Daviess Counties, while the 4-C (Community Coordinated Child Care) serves Carroll County.

The YWCA of Northwest Illinois provides support services to women, children, and families in Rockford, and the counties of Boone, Winnebago, Stephenson, and Jo Daviess. The YWCA CCR&R program provides child care referrals and consumer education to parents, offers training opportunities and technical assistance to child care providers, works to develop new child care options, and assists employers in meeting their employees' child care needs. Through the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA), the United Way of Northwest Illinois is creating a new ECEC consortium that will include all three of the Region counties.

Similarly, the 4-C is a non-profit agency that promotes children's well-being by advocating for quality, affordable, and accessible child care. They help families in Carroll County find child care services and assist families with the State's Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). Additionally, the 4-C assists with the development of child care centers and provides child care providers with ongoing workforce education support.

Most community members reported that they were not aware of the Early Childhood work the AOK, ECC, YWCA of Northwest Illinois, or the 4-Cs were doing in the Region. Community members aware of the work of Local Community Collaborations were pleased with the ECC in Freeport but verified the lack of existence of any similar structure in both Jo Daviess and Carroll Counties. They agreed that a three-county consortium would be beneficial to all. Some members saw opportunities for better collaboration and reduced duplication of services between providers and Collaboration participants. ECEC Collaboration partners and community members agreed that a greater level of collaborative work between educators, providers, and families would strengthen the local ECEC system and ultimately benefit the Region's children.

“ I’m not sure who I would contact if I was looking for child care in a community I was new to.

– Community Member
(Stephenson County)

”

“ I don’t know if people are just not getting the information or it is not being communicated to them in the way they will pay attention, but I don’t see much parental engagement in our system.

– Community Member (Stephenson County)

”

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

ECEC programs are an integral part of support for families and young children in the Region. Across the Region, there are licensed, license-exempt, and publicly funded programs and services available to families, but families still face challenges in accessing child care.

Figure 6: Region 8 Child Care Centers and Homes

	Number of Sites
Licensed Child Care Centers	6
Licensed Family Child Care Homes	46
Licensed Exempt Child Care Centers	2

Source: IECAM
Created By: Birth to Five Illinois

with most located in or around Freeport, located in the southeastern part of Stephenson County (Figure 7). The number of licensed child care centers in the Region dropped from eight in 2018, to seven in 2019, and then six in 2020.

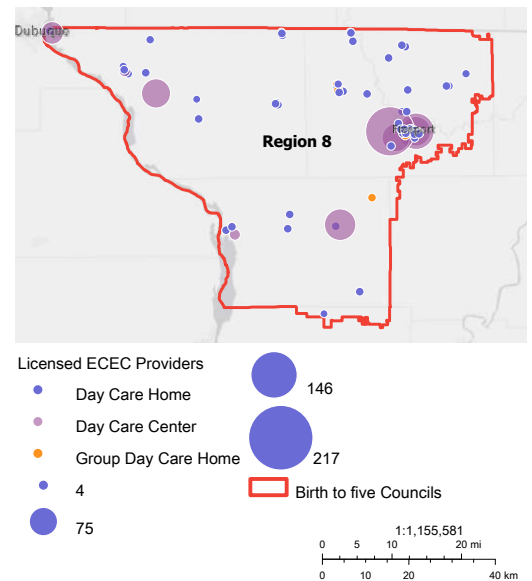
A licensed family child care home is a family home that is also monitored by DCFS and can offer a variety of full-day or half-day child care services for children ages birth to 12. Homes are limited to eight children or 12 children with an assistant. According to IECAM, there are currently 46 licensed family child care homes throughout the Region. The number of licensed family child care sites dropped from 76 in 2018, to 68 in 2019, 51 in 2020, and 46 in 2021.

A license-exempt child care center is a child care center that still meets state standards for quality care but is not licensed by DCFS. License-exempt home care providers are limited to three children, including any that live in the home. Currently, there are two licensed exempt child care centers, both located in Stephenson County. The number of licensed family child care sites dropped from six in 2018, to four in 2019, and down to two in 2020. A license-exempt child care home is a family home that is inspected by the State if the provider participates in the State’s Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP).

CCAP is a program funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) that helps families access affordable, quality child care, Early Childhood Education programs, and after school programs. Caregivers must be enrolled in an academic or vocational training program or be employed and meeting income requirements to be eligible for CCAP. For child care centers receiving CCAP payments, maximum full-day rates range from \$57 to \$40 and half-day rates range from \$29 to \$20 depending on the age of the child. For homes, those rates range from \$36.92 to \$31.34 for full-day and \$18.46 to \$15.68 for half-day, depending on age.

A licensed child care center is monitored and licensed by the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and can offer full-time and half-day child care for children ages birth to 12. Licensed child care centers staff must complete training and have educational requirements for teaching staff and center directors. There are six licensed child care centers in Region 8 (Figure 6),

Figure 7: Location of Licensed Child Care Centers and Family Home Care Centers



Source: IECAM
Created By: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Data on licensed child care centers and family home child cares is currently only available at the county level. In 2022, 111 licensed and licensed exempt child care centers and homes reported receiving payments from the Illinois Department of Human Service’s Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), serving 385 children under the age of five. It is important to note that out of 63 licensed child care centers receiving CCAP, 62 of them are in Stephenson County, leaving families with limited to no access to economic resources in Carroll and Jo Daviess Counties and minimal access to affordable licensed child care options. Despite the prevalence of CCAP in the Region and the capping of child care rates by the CCAP program, many community members believe child care in the area is still expensive.

There are also several publicly funded programs available for families that meet enrollment requirements (Figure 8). Preschool for All (PFA) and Preschool for All Expansion (PFAE) programs are funded through the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and are available for children ages three and four. The programs provide high-quality education to children who face barriers to academic success and prioritize families who live at or below 50% or 100% FPL, military families, and children from priority populations.

In Stephenson and Jo Daviess Counties, the Regional Office of Education Region 8 (ROE 8) administers and oversees 15 Preschool for All sites through its Early Learning Academy. In Carroll County, the West Carroll School District administers and oversees three Carroll County Preschool for All sites through its Right Steps program.

Figure 8: Publicly Funded Sites by Type and County

	Number of Sites Carroll County	Number of Sites Jo Daviess County	Number of Sites Stephenson County
Preschool for All	3	6	9
Preschool for All Expansion	0	0	0
Early Head Start	0	0	0
Head Start	1	0	2
Prevention Initiative	3	1	2

Source: IECAM
 Created By: Birth to Five Illinois

Head Start is a federally funded preschool program that supports children’s growth from ages three to five through services that support early learning and development, health, and family well-being. Head Start staff actively engage parents, recognizing family participation throughout the program as key to strong child outcomes. The Region currently has three Head Start programs, two in Stephenson County and one in Carroll County (Figure 6). A fourth Head Start program in Jo Daviess County temporarily closed due to the loss of a site. Families in the East Dubuque area have mostly been impacted by this closure. Income-eligible families that cannot access the Region’s three Head Start programs due to geographical, transportation, or logistical barriers are given priority in their respective school district’s publicly funded PFA programs.

The Region currently does not have any Early Head Start programs. The lack of Early Head Start programs in the Region has added to the challenges many families with limited to no access to economic and/or material resources face in securing child care and support services for their infants and toddlers.

Funded through ISBE, Prevention Initiative (PI) is a comprehensive child development and family support program for expectant parents and families with children from birth to age three. The program aims to help parents build a strong foundation for learning and to prepare children for later school success. In Stephenson and Jo Daviess Counties, the ROE 8 administers three PI programs called the Family Enrichment Program, while the West Carroll School District administers three similar programs through its Right Steps program (Figure 6).

Understanding what ECEC programs currently exist in our Region, what programs are sufficient or deficient in meeting the current demands of priority populations, and the geographical accessibility to these programs will be critical in assessing regionalized slot gaps and valuable in future conversations on how to improve the Region's ECEC system.



Smiling boy.

Slot Gap

Slot Gap is a term used to describe the difference between the number of children who might need child care and the capacity (or slots) across child care options. Region 8 identified three types of slot gaps: the overall child care capacity slot gap which measures the capacity of all licensed child care centers and homes, and license-exempt child care centers compared to the total number of children ages five and under in the Region; the publicly funded program slot gap which measures the number of slots in publicly funded programs compared to the number of children living at or below 200% FPL; and the number of children receiving Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) funding compared to the number of children living at or below 185% FPL.

Slot gap analysis uses the capacity of licensed and license-exempt child care centers and family child care homes. This is different, and likely higher, from actual enrollment at child care centers and family homes. Likewise, the use of the total population of children’s age brackets may be different from the current demand or eligibility of those children and their families.

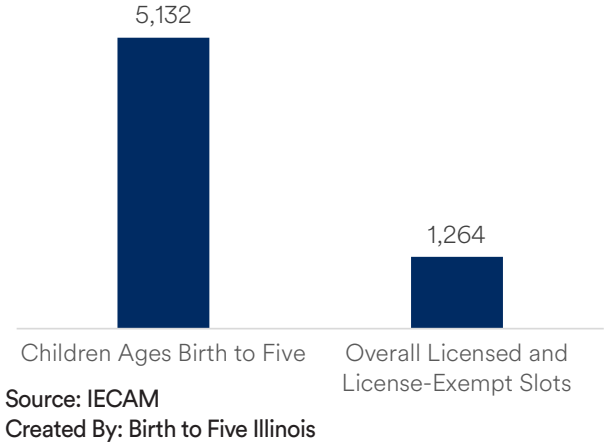
There are 5,132 children under the age of five that live in the Region; 2,217 are ages birth to two and 2,805 are ages three to five. Overall, there are not enough slots to serve all the children in the Region (Figure 9). Stephenson County has the largest slot gap in child care services in the Region, while Carroll County has the smallest.

“When I lived in our previous community, I had a neighbor that did child care so our kids went there. When we moved to Freeport it would have taken two years to get my kids in. We drove back and forth from Freeport and our previous community basically for four years.”
– Community Member (Stephenson County)

“I tell the mothers I currently have in our program they should call me the moment they confirm they are pregnant to get their expecting baby on my list. It will take nine months of their pregnancy and maternity leave to get them in.”
– Child Care Provider (Stephenson County)

“There are families who travel from Savanna to Lanark (20 miles away) for child care, go to Clinton, Iowa (30 miles away) for work, return to Lanark to pick up their child, then go back home all in one day. All because there is no available child care in Savanna.”
– Community Member (Carroll County)

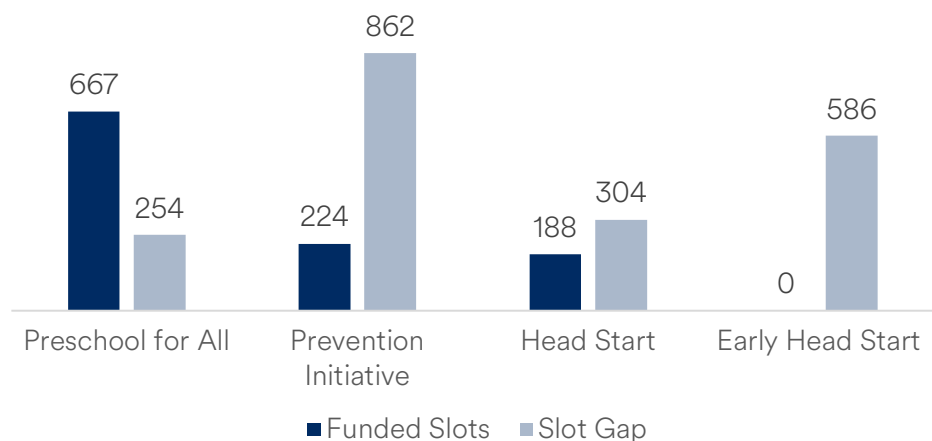
Figure 9: Number of Children Ages Five and Under Versus Overall Child Care Slots



Finding licensed infant care can be a challenge in the Region. Between the six licensed child care centers and 54 licensed family child care homes, only 295 slots exist to accommodate 707 children under the age of one. Both community members and child care providers confirmed that there is at least an eleven-month waiting period for parents to get child care for their infants.

There are also not enough slots in publicly funded programs to meet the needs of children living at or below 200% FPL (Figure 4). There are no Early Head Start sites in the Region, and only three Head Start sites are located only in Stephenson and Carroll Counties.

Figure 10: Publicly Funded Program Slots and Remaining Slot Gap



Source: IECAM
Created By: Birth to Five Illinois

While there are 18 Preschool for All (PFA) programs in the Region, there is a greater need for additional PFA slots in Stephenson County. It is worth noting that the slot gap analysis of Regional PFA programs does not consider that enrollment into the PFA program is done in accordance with school district boundaries. It's possible that some school districts have more capacity for serving preschool-age children than they have actual children in their districts and others have more children than available slots. For example, 650 of the 921 children ages three to five living at or below 200% FPL in the Region reside in Stephenson County; however, they only have 307 PFA slots. A further breakdown reveals the majority of those 650 children reside in Freeport School District #145.

Finally, though there are 921 children ages three to five living at or below 200% FPL, there are a total of 1,914 preschool-age children in the Region. Should Illinois consider universal PFA, where all preschool-age children, regardless of systemic barriers, are invited to enroll, the slot gap in the Region grows significantly since we only have 667 PFA slots at the time this report was published.

The Region also has six state-funded Prevention Initiative (PI) programs that have the capacity to serve 244 children. The Region has 845 children between the ages of birth to three living at or below 100% FPL, creating a slot gap of 601 children. Stephenson County has the largest PI slot gap with potentially 444 children unserved.

“It would be better for my family if both my husband and I worked, and I want to work. But with no child care in our community, I have no choice but to stay home with my preschooler.”

– Community Member
(Jo Daviess County)

Finally, although data is incomplete on the enrollment capacity for child care centers and homes to receive or accept the State's Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) voucher payments, there are currently 385 children in the Region who are receiving CCAP assistance. With eligibility for CCAP at 200% FPL, there are currently 2,375 children under the age of five living at or below 200% FPL.

A greater understanding of caregiver usage and child care provider acceptance of the state's CCAP vouchers, as well as the areas with the most children living in families with poverty-level income, will be critical in the strategic planning for the creation of additional child care slots in the Region.



Storytime at the Freeport Public Library.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

Early Childhood professionals are integral partners to families, connecting them to resources and services that help support their child’s development. Unfortunately, Early Childhood programs face challenges in hiring and retaining professionals due to the educational and training requirements, low pay, and the challenges that come with working in the field. Additionally, caregivers expressed a need for an Early Childhood workforce that is more diverse in terms of race, culture, gender, and language.

Data provided by the Illinois Network of Child Care Referral and Resource Agencies (INCCRRA)³ on licensed Center Directors, teaching staff, and family child care professionals show that most child care professionals self-identify as white (Figure 11) and around 97% self-identify as female. Only about 5% of professional identified as bilingual, with very few reporting Spanish as their primary language.

“Men are lacking in the field. We need teachers that look like them, especially the boys. The desire to do ECEC is lacking in our high schools.”
 – Community Member (Stephenson County)

“Without a workforce, we are only talking about problems and not taking action. Children must be served, but we need people to serve them. We’ve been trying to solve these problems on our own, but we can’t do it on our own. It’s for lack of resources, not lack of trying.”
 – Community Member (Stephenson County)

Figure 11: Percentage of Licensed Center Directors, Teaching Staff, and Family Child Care Providers by Race and Ethnicity⁴

Position	Asian	Black or African American	Hispanic or Latine	Multi-Racial	Native American/ Alaskan, Pacific Islander, Other	White
Licensed Center Directors	0%	5%	0%	0%	0%	95%
Licensed Center Teaching Staff	*	11%	4%	*	0%	85%
Licensed Family Child Care Providers ⁵	0%	10%	1%	0%	1%	88%

Source: INCCRRA
 Created By: Birth to Five Illinois

The Region has several avenues for local individuals interested in going into the ECEC workforce. Highland Community College (HCC) in Freeport offers an associate of applied sciences degree in Early Childhood Education (ECE) along with certificates in Early Childhood and infant/toddler care. Currently, 48 students are enrolled in HCC’s ECE program, and several local child care workers reported attending HCC’s program. HCC said they are looking forward to increased enrollment for the Fall 2023 academic semester. Additionally, the Region has two career and technology schools that help prepare high school

⁴ Cells with an asterisk * indicate fewer than five but more than zero respondents.

⁵ Includes family child care providers and assistants, substitute/floaters, other direct service providers, and other indirect service providers.

students for a variety of occupations. Career Tec offers an ECE program for Stephenson County students, while Jo Daviess and Carroll County high school students can attend ECE classes at the Career Technical Education (CTE) Academy. Though HCC and CTE have seen interest and enrollment in their respective programs grow over the past three years, Stephenson County’s Career Tec ECE program has been in decline. HCC attributes its growth in part to the Early Childhood ACE scholarship program.

INCCRRA’s Gateways to Opportunities hosts online training tools for worker credentialing. While many providers said they utilized the program, some noted that course descriptions and process information in the system can be misleading or unclear. Also, they said the credential processing can create employment delays for ECEC workers and providers. Related to this is the increasing difficulty child care centers are having in recruiting and retaining qualified child care workers.

ExceleRate Illinois is a quality rating and improvement system for licensed child care, Preschool for All/Prevention Initiative and, Head Start/Early Head Start programs. This quality rating and improvement system gives providers standards, guidelines, resources and supports to help you make sensible changes that lead to better quality outcomes using a rating system of Gold, Silver, Bronze, and Licensed.

Income and compensation are also cited as big barriers to attracting new workers into the Early Childhood workforce. For example, at one child care center in the Region, the wage for a part-time Level 1 child care worker will start at the minimum wage of \$13 per hour, while a full-time Level 1 will start at \$14 per hour; this is the same wage as a general merchandiser at the Freeport Walmart.

The Great Start Wage supplement, which provides additional pay to child care providers earning less than \$24 per hour and \$49,920 per year (recipients must meet both requirements), is available to some professionals. However, there are restrictions on who can receive the supplement. Professionals must work in a licensed program for at least 15 hours per week, have worked at the same place for at least a year in a program that has held a Silver or Gold Circle of Quality for at least six months, and be a U.S. citizen or legal resident. Additionally, there are educational requirements that must be met based on the position the professional holds. This limits the number of people who are eligible for the program. Feedback from professionals in the Region also noted that the processing for payment is slow.

One Gold Circle child care center in the Region has benefited from the State’s ExceleRate Illinois pilot program that raised wages for child care workers. Amity Learning Center, a not-for-profit child care center that accepts the State’s CCAP assistance from almost all families with children who attend, has a starting wage of \$15.25 per hour for Level 1 child care workers. While the higher wage is one reason the organization believes employee turnover is relatively low, the wage is still low in comparison to other careers in the field, as well as the competitive markets that employers face given our proximity to Wisconsin and Iowa.

“Pay is the big issue while trying to recruit young workers to the field. We cannot compete in a workforce world when a person needs 2-4 years of college to be certified, only to graduate and get just more than minimum wage to care for our most prized possessions, our little ones. We, as a society put more value on things than people.”

– Child Care Educator (Stephenson County)



Child giving a “growl” to the camera with her face painted.

Community members report that several child care homes closed during the COVID-19 shutdown in 2020 have never reopened. Since 2019, the Region experienced a loss of 221 licensed family child care home slots (30%), creating higher demand for the remaining child care homes, centers, and ECEC workforce, as well as additional challenges to parents, caregivers, and families in need of child care.

Adding to the challenge of finding qualified child care workers is a rise in emotional, physical, and behavioral challenges that children are experiencing. Lack of Early Intervention (EI) services, delays in therapy referrals, and a myriad of challenges within the home have made providing child care and preschool services very challenging.

Members of the Action Council also cited the challenge of maintaining Home Visiting Parent Educators in the ECEC workforce due to the many challenges that come with the job and the relatively low wage it pays. Many do not feel the pay is commensurate with the amount of work and increased needs of families. Many are opting for retail and entry-level office jobs instead.

“With the home visiting program, staff turnover is a problem. That’s because of factors that include uncertainty of the home environment they will be going into, and they are low-paid positions. Thankfully we have five or six great people who’ve been doing it a long time but replacing them is very hard.”

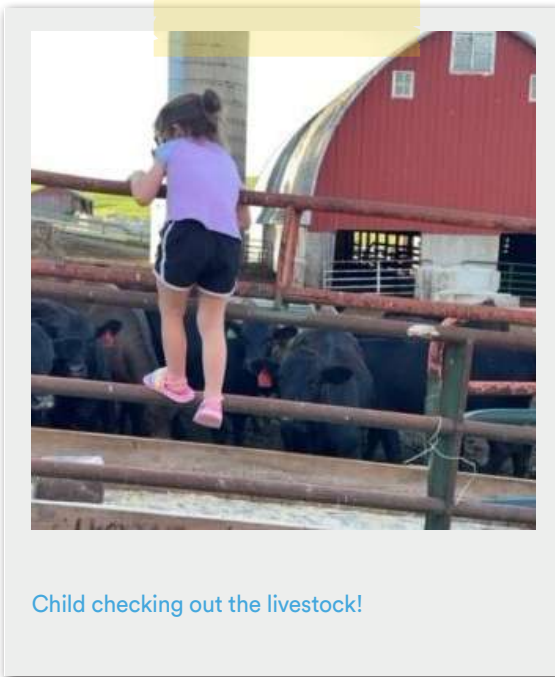
– Child Care Educator (Jo Daviess County)

“There are only two licensed providers, so thankfully I know a neighbor. There were five here and three shut down. Parents are scrambling and my kids go to an unlicensed provider.”

– Community Member
(Jo Daviess County)

It is important to understand the challenges Early Childhood professionals are facing, especially since many have left the field or may leave the field due to issues that could be improved through additional funding or re-evaluating educational and training requirements for those who wish to enter or continue working in the field.

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice



Parent, child care, and school staff working together to support and improve the learning, development, and health of young children are at the heart of meaningful engagement. Ultimately, this greater level of engagement can help lead our children to greater academic success. The Region's top barriers to accessibility - availability and cost - are discussed, as well as the child care challenges faced by families with children with disabilities, Spanish-speaking families, domestic violence survivors, and families experiencing homelessness. Finally, we explore meaningful engagement and communication between parents, families, and caregivers and their respective child care and preschool providers and public school systems.

Availability

Starting from the February 2022 Birth to Five Illinois Virtual Kick-Off Event through several Action and Family Council meetings, focus group conversations, and one-on-one interviews, a consensus has emerged that the greatest barrier

to meaningful engagement and accessibility in the Region's ECEC system is the availability of child care and preschool slots for children. Simply put, there are not enough licensed child care and preschool slots in the Region to accommodate all children who need them.

Jennifer lives in Savanna and is a single mother of a three-year-old daughter. Although she is eligible for the Preschool for All (PFA) program at the West Carroll School District, a wrap-around program that extends service hours, with transportation is not available. With no licensed child care center or home provider in Savanna, no available slots at any of the few non-licensed child care providers in Savanna, or any relatives or friends available to care for her daughter during the day, Jennifer travels 19 miles every morning to Lanark where her daughter attends Carroll County's only licensed child care center. She then travels 34 miles to her job in Clinton, Iowa before making the return trip back to Lanark to pick her daughter up and head home to Savanna. Jennifer travels over 100 miles per day because of a lack of child care in Savanna. Unfortunately, because Savanna is a part of the West Carroll School District and Lanark is a part of the Eastland School District, her daughter does not attend PFA.

The lack of available child care can add to the financial burden parents, families, and caregivers face as employment opportunities for them are limited due to their need to take care of their children. This is true as well for parents, families, and caregivers who have children who attend half-day preschool but do not have afterschool or wrap-around child care services available. This is particularly burdensome to families in smaller, rural communities where employment opportunities are limited and where people must travel long distances for work.

Chloe lives in Chadwick with her husband and their four-year-old son who attends Preschool for All (PFA) in Chadwick. Because of a lack of employment opportunities in Chadwick, most residents of the small village work in other communities. As PFA is only offered as a half-day option in Chadwick and there is no available wrap-around child care options at any after-school child care in

“ Three hours during my child's preschool time isn't enough time to get to work, work, and get home to pick him up. ”
– Parent (Carroll County)

her community, Chloe has no option but to stay at home during the day instead of going to work. She admits this adds to the financial burden her family faces.

Access to child care is particularly challenging for parents, families, and caregivers who need infant care. There are currently 707 children under the age of one in the Region but only 295 licensed child care slots for infants.

Working parents, families, and caregivers who have non-traditional employment or employment hours that vary from day to day and/or seasonally have very few, if any, child care options available to them. Piecing together child care from private providers during the day and friends and/or family members in the evening hours can be very challenging and burdensome to workers and their children. Dairy operations and cheese manufacturers are in abundance in northwest Illinois and employ hundreds of workers. In the summer, workers work 10- to 12-hour shifts. In the winter, shifts can drop to just 4-6 hours per day. Securing quality and flexible child care for parents, families, and caregivers who work in an industry that requires a great deal of flexibility is very challenging.

Finding an open slot for children with disabilities or who are medically complex can also be a challenge. There are no known child care centers that specialize in care for children with disabilities in the Region. The absence of available specialized child care can create a challenge for families with children with disabilities, particularly in families where all caregivers in the household must work.

Despite the increase of the Region's Spanish-speaking population and the growing number of Spanish-speaking community members moving to more rural communities in the area, very few preschools and child care centers and homes have Spanish-speaking staff. Currently, the Freeport and Galena School Districts are the only two PFA sites with English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. Only Head Start, one Care Center, and just one other known licensed family child care home has Spanish-speaking staff.

The lack of available child care in the Region is the top barrier for survivors of domestic violence and/or sexual assault and abuse in securing child care for their children, according to domestic violence case workers and support staff. Survivors, whose abuser, or abuser's family and/or friends provide child care for the household's children, are less likely to exit the relationship if their continued employment might become endangered due to a lack of child care for their children.

Affordability

Every parent, family, and caregiver interviewed for this report noted that the high cost of child care has either impacted the decisions they have made as it relates to the quality of child care they secured for their child, decisions they made about their finances, or the financial or employment sacrifices they have made. The high cost of child care also forces some to make difficult decisions about the quality of child care they provide their children. Families who are under-resourced and live on limited budgets often forgo higher quality, licensed child care providers for more economical non-licensed providers, friends, or families who are not certified or experienced in child care or may not have homes suitable or safe for younger children.

“ I believe the lack of quality and affordable child care in northwest Illinois is directly linked to our area's challenges in attracting new industry and business. Companies do not locate or expand in communities that do not have adequate child care for their workers.

– Employer (Stephenson County)

”

“ My oldest daughter has medical issues so we knew probably not a lot of places would be comfortable with her. It was hard to find a provider for her.

– Community Member (Stephenson County)

”

Meaningful engagement between parents, families, and caregivers and their child care and preschool providers is essential in building a stronger local ECEC system. Though most community members interviewed were pleased overall with the quality of child care and preschool services offered, most found the need for improved outreach, awareness, and communication. Community members often cited the need for more awareness of child care services in the area, dates and locations of preschool screenings, and the preschool enrollment process. Almost no one interviewed knew of any local resource for finding licensed child care in the Region or was only aware of the existence of child care referral services by either of the Region's CCR&R agencies. Likewise, almost none knew who to call if they were interested in opening a licensed family child care home or center. Most indicated that 'word of mouth' or social media was how most people in the Region hear of available child care.

The lack of awareness of preschool enrollment requirements, the dates, times, and locations for Preschool For All screenings, and the overall process of how to enroll a child in preschool was also cited by many community members from several different school districts as a barrier to meaningful engagement with the local ECEC system.

When Abby's first child turned three, she learned she needed to contact her local elementary school to find out when the next available screening was. Abby did not know of any of the requirements for Preschool For All (PFA), and like many others, just assumed her daughter would be enrolled in preschool and attend half-day classes at the local elementary school. After her daughter's screening, she was surprised to learn that, due to her married status, her family's income, and her daughter's good health, her daughter did not qualify for PFA. As a new parent, Abby was unaware of any private preschool alternatives for her daughter and so her daughter did not attend preschool her first year.

Creating a stronger, more equitable, and more accessible ECEC system in Region 8 will require more meaningful engagement between child care and preschool providers, advocacy groups, and parents, families, and caregivers. Improving access means increasing child care slots at strategically located, high-quality, low-cost, licensed child care centers and family homes, including those that effectively serve families with children with disabilities, off-shift and seasonal-flexible workers, and infants. Reaching out to historically minoritized and underserved communities, while raising awareness and reducing the barriers to preschool screenings and enrollment, will set the Region on the right track for creating meaningful engagement with local school systems in the early stages of a child's education.

“ Several years ago, when I could no longer afford child care for my oldest, I briefly placed him with an unlicensed home in the community I lived in at the time. There was always something off and I grew uncomfortable with the arrangement. I took him out of that environment and, though it was more expensive, I found a better place for him. To this day, I have regrets about the decisions I had to make.

– Employer
(Stephenson County)



Birth to Five Illinois at the Trick or Treat Trail.

“ Not only was I disappointed that she didn't get into preschool in my town but also disappointed that neither the school nor anyone else ever followed up with me to go over my options for her.

– Community Member (Stephenson County)

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.

In compiling this report, it is our hope that local and state leaders will use this information to advance ECEC services in the Region. We will continue our community engagement efforts to expand our understanding of the ECEC needs of local families and providers. If you have further questions about these recommendations or would like to get involved with the work of Birth to Five Illinois in Region 8, please find our contact information on the front inside cover of this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment.

Appendices

Appendix A: References

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

Figure 1: Federal Poverty Levels at 100%, 150%, 200%, 400% for Various Households

# of Persons in Household	2023 Federal Poverty Level			
	100%	150%	200%	400%
1	\$14,580	\$21,870	\$29,160	\$58,320
2	\$19,720	\$29,580	\$39,440	\$78,880
3	\$24,860	\$37,290	\$49,720	\$99,440
4	\$30,000	\$45,000	\$60,000	\$120,000
5	\$35,140	\$52,710	\$70,280	\$140,560
6	\$40,280	\$60,420	\$80,560	\$161,120
7	\$45,420	\$68,130	\$90,840	\$181,680
8	\$50,560	\$75,840	\$101,120	\$202,240

Note: Add \$5,140 for each person in a household over 8 persons

Source: INCCRRA

Created By: Birth to Five Illinois

Appendix C: Focus Group Interview Questions & Conversations

Parents/Families/Caregivers

1. There are many Early Childhood services available in our Region (you can provide specific examples such as Head Start, Early Intervention, licensed/exempt child care centers, pediatricians, etc.). What Early Childhood services does your family use/has your family used?
2. Do the child care services you're using now meet your family's needs? If not, please describe what would better fit your family's needs.
3. What, if anything, has been particularly helpful in making Early Childhood Education and Care work for your family?
4. What barriers or challenges has your family had with using early childhood services in your community? Availability? Affordability? Transportation? Hours of operation?
5. Have any of the children in your care been referred to services? (Early intervention, special education, pediatric occupational therapy, speech therapist, etc.) What was that process like?
6. What services don't currently exist in your community that you think would help families, in general? What services would help parents/caregivers, specifically?
7. Do you see enough diversity in the child care workforce?

Early Childhood and Education Professionals

1. In your opinion, what are the biggest barriers for people wanting to enter the ECEC workforce?
2. What changes have you seen in the community over the past few years? (This could mean shifts in demographics, the number of recent refugee/immigrant families, access to safe, affordable housing, schools consolidating/closing, etc.)
3. How do you think those changes impact Early Childhood Education and Care?
4. How do you think those changes might impact the needs of Early Childhood Education and Care in the future?
5. What challenges do you think families have in accessing Early Childhood Education and Care?
6. What are the possible drivers of the gap in care in the Region?
7. Over your long tenure as an educator, what changes have you seen in general with students? Curriculum? The school environment? Education as a whole?
8. As a Kindergarten teacher, do you feel the preschool-age children you teach are less prepared today upon entering Kindergarten than they were five years ago? Ten years ago?
9. What three reasons would you cite as possible reasons for the decline of preparedness?
10. Do you think children entering Kindergarten today are more prepared than they were 5 years ago? 10 years? If yes, how so?
11. Are you satisfied with the curriculum your school has for its pre-K? If not, how so? If yes, how so?
12. How many (approximate %) of your Kindergarten class did NOT attend preschool before Kindergarten?
13. Do you see any difference (preparedness, behavior, academics, etc.) between those that attended preschool versus those that didn't?

Providers Serving People Experiencing Domestic Violence and Homelessness

1. How long have you been involved in providing services to families that are survivors of domestic violence/unhoused/experiencing homelessness?
2. What programs do you have in Region 8 that serve children who are survivors of Domestic Violence, unhoused, or experiencing homelessness from birth through age five?
3. What programs have closed over the past year or two in our area?
4. What changes have you seen in the community as a whole over the past few years? (This could mean shifts in demographics, the number of recent refugee/immigrant families, access to safe, affordable housing, schools consolidating/closing, etc.)
5. How do you think those changes impact Early Childhood Education and Care?
6. How do you think those changes might impact Early Childhood Education and Care in the future?
7. What data do you think would be helpful in better understanding families that are surviving domestic violence, unhoused, or experiencing homelessness use early childhood services and/or the barriers/challenges they have accessing those services?
8. What challenges do you think families surviving DV, unhoused, or experiencing homelessness have in accessing Early Childhood Education and Care?

Employers

1. Tell me about barriers for staff that affect employees' attendance?
2. What changes in the community would help your business thrive?
3. Are there changes that your company has had to make that have been due to child care?
4. As businesses come to the community, what support do they need to thrive and build longevity in the community?
5. As businesses are opening in this community, what support are they seeking to be successful?
6. What are the challenges in economic development regarding child care?
7. What trends have you seen in employment over the last 2-3 years (hiring, recruitment, challenges)?
8. Why do you think you are having trouble retaining/hiring people?
9. Is child care readily available and close to employers in your community?
10. Have you connected with Child Care providers in the community to build relationships and build relationships with partners to provide the care you need for employees?

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