

Modernizing and Unifying Early Childhood Services in Illinois

Project Abstract

Illinois' goals for the PDG-B5 project, Modernizing and Unifying Early Childhood Services in Illinois, are as follows.

1. Accelerate years of ambitious work to develop a shared, comprehensive vision for early care and education;
2. Establish a unified, coherent statewide early care and education system, led by a new agency focused on early childhood, the Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC); and
3. Maximize family choice in early childhood services, including efforts to increase the available options and make it easier for families to access those options.

The Illinois Department of Early Childhood and the Illinois Department of Human Services are working closely to successfully implement this vision. This includes IDHS applying for the PDG-B5 funds as a partner with IDEC and fiscal agent for the grant.

Summary of Project-Specific Activities

Illinois launched IDEC in July of 2024 as a new cabinet-level agency that will oversee early childhood programs and services on July 1, 2026. Currently IDEC is focused on strengthening core infrastructure and unifying service delivery for providers of all types, including Head Start. IDEC is also working on a new cohesive financing strategy, enhancing family engagement lifecycles, realigning program standards, and modernizing its technology infrastructure in a way that will dramatically improve processes for families and providers. The state has invested millions of dollars in these efforts and will continue to do so.

A major focus of the PDG-B5 work will be making it easier for families to access services, for service providers to input data and receive the information they need to provide care, and for members of the workforce to verify their credentials. IDEC will do this by simplifying the application and reporting infrastructure for parents and providers into a seamless system of secure portals called IDEC 360. In every portal, users will be able to enter data once and then use and update it on an ongoing basis, rather than having to repeatedly provide the same information across separate platforms. The portals will provide ongoing updates for users, accelerating processes and making them easier to navigate. The portals will leverage a data and analytics hub that will also provide important information to specific groups like providers and researchers as well as the broader public. All of this will reduce burdens on families and providers while simultaneously providing far more information about how the early childhood system is operating.

The opportunity presented by this grant is to do yet more for Illinois families, building on the work Illinois already has underway. The grant will be used to simplify applications and data

entry, to quickly implement the underlying technology for the portals, and to significantly improve Illinois' approach to managing workforce credentialing.

Performance Goals

Key performance goals for the project include:

- Faster responses and processes that are easier for families and providers to navigate;
- Greater family choice, including better supports to help families find the services they need;
- Streamlined and modernized provider operations, including for Head Start providers; and
- Transparent and data-driven planning, so that the public can understand the state's work to support the mixed delivery early childhood system.

Beneficiaries

The major beneficiaries of the grant will be Illinois families with young children – particularly families with low-income, families in rural areas, families in areas with limited access to services, and other families with limited access to the early care and education system. Illinois' early childhood providers and educators, including Head Start providers will also benefit from improved support and reduced administrative burdens.

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Project Summary

Modernizing and Unifying Early Childhood Services in Illinois

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Illinois' application builds on years of ambitious work to develop a shared, comprehensive vision for early care and education; to establish a unified, coherent statewide early care and education system, led by a new agency focused on early childhood; and to maximize family choice for early childhood, including efforts to increase the available options and make it easier for families to access those options.

Illinois has launched the Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC), a new cabinet-level agency that will assume administrative responsibility for a core set of early childhood programs and services on July 1, 2026. The process of establishing IDEC has brought together stakeholders from across the mixed delivery system – including Head Start – to focus on strengthening core infrastructure and unifying service delivery. Illinois is creating a new cohesive financing strategy, updating its approach to stakeholder engagement, realigning program standards, and modernizing its technology infrastructure in a way that will dramatically improve processes for families and providers. The state has invested millions of dollars in these efforts and is dedicated to this work.

A major focus of the work has been IDEC 360, a series of interconnected user portals that make it easier for families to access services, easier for service providers to input data and receive the information they need to be successful, and easier for members of the workforce to verify their credentials. In every portal, users can enter data once and then use and update it on an ongoing basis, rather than having to repeatedly provide the same information across separate platforms. Moreover, the portals will provide ongoing updates for users, accelerating processes, and making them easier to navigate. The portals will leverage a data and analytics hub that will also provide important information to key stakeholders and the broader public. All of this will reduce burdens on families and providers while simultaneously providing far more information about how the early childhood system is operating.

The opportunity presented by this grant is to do even more for Illinois families, accelerating the work Illinois already has underway. The grant will be used to support providers in streamlining their data entry, to quickly implement the underlying technology platform for the unified portals, and to significantly improve Illinois' approach to managing workforce credentialing.

Because of the close alignment between PDG-B5 and IDEC's vision, Illinois is well-positioned to successfully execute its proposal within the one-year grant period. Moreover, Illinois' demonstrated commitment to its long-term plan ensures that the impact of the grant will be sustainable. This grant will be administered in partnership between the Illinois Department of Human Services and IDEC, ensuring seamless leadership as IDEC steps into its new role.

Illinois' early childhood system has long focused on ensuring that its families with the lowest income have access to the services they need for their children to thrive. As a new era of Illinois early childhood policy dawns, a Preschool Development Grant will make a meaningful difference in the experiences of families and the providers that serve them.

Project Narrative

Critical Element 1: Statewide ECE needs assessment and strategic plan

Since Illinois conducted its most recent Needs Assessment and Strategic Plan, it has taken a critical step toward achieving its systemwide vision: establishing a new Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC). IDEC will be taking over responsibility for the administration of services currently housed in three different agencies: the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS), the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). The launch of IDEC will fundamentally change how the state meets the needs of young children, families, and providers. Illinois' updated Needs Assessment and Strategic Plan will reflect the new landscape and improved processes that the state has been working hard to implement.

IDEC will take the lead in developing the updated Needs Assessment and Strategic Plan. IDEC began its operations on July 1, 2024. It is scheduled to take administrative responsibility for the state's early childhood programs on July 1, 2026. Because the state wanted to ensure a smooth transition as IDEC was launched, the enabling statute specifically granted statutory authority to IDHS and IDEC to work collaboratively prior to July 1, 2026, and the agencies entered into an intergovernmental agreement to operationalize this joint statutory authority. This statutory authority is necessary for IDHS to provide fiscal supports to IDEC, in addition to its substantive role as a close partner of IDEC and active participant in multiple advisory groups under the proposed grant (including the State Advisory Council). While both agencies have Unique Entity Identifier (UEI), because of its long history of strong fiscal management, IDHS has been designated as the grantee, complementing its substantive role. IDEC will be the implementation lead. This arrangement is described further under Organizational Capacity below.

In the summer of 2025, IDEC posted a position to lead the work of updating the state's strategic plan to reflect the state's new governance structure. The Project Director of Strategic Plan, who will be hired imminently, will lead the work of updating both the needs assessment and strategic plan. In doing so they will draw on the extensive learnings from the stakeholder engagement conducted to inform the transition to IDEC over the last two years. These efforts included dozens of listening sessions around the state that have drawn more than 8,000 participants, with representatives from every county.

Updates to the Needs Assessment and Strategic Plan will also leverage the multiple work groups established to support the IDEC transition. Leading that work has been the Transition Advisory Committee (TAC), which was formed to support the process of establishing IDEC. The TAC is chaired by a Head Start provider and has regularly engaged with a cross-section of the state's early childhood community, including families and providers from services including Preschool for All (the state's pre-k program), Head Start, home visiting, and early intervention. The TAC has worked with a series of other more targeted work groups that are focused on goals including:

- Integrating and strategically layering state, federal, local, and non-governmental funding (such as family co-pays and fees) for all mixed delivery providers, including Head Start, to reduce the burden of multiple applications, systems, and data-entry, and other administrative burdens;
- Improving the lifecycle of stakeholder engagement and advisory bodies, including how the state can revamp its Early Learning Council (which is the designated State Advisory Council under the Head Start Act);
- Using comprehensive analytics and insights by mapping out the state's data needs and developing plans for the information infrastructure needed to meet those needs – including

how best to maximize family choice by supporting families seeking to access services in Illinois' mixed delivery system, and how best to integrate Head Start data with state data to show the availability and quality of existing early childhood programs in the state;

- Aligning program standards – regardless of funding stream – to look at how program requirements can be better integrated, thereby supporting quality while reducing provider burden through regulatory reform; and
- Improving family services through improved processes, systems, and policies.

As IDEC takes over program administration, it will initiate new efforts to address the state's early childhood workforce and its network of intermediaries. The Illinois Head Start community has been represented in each of these work groups, all of which also include other provider and family representatives.

Illinois' Comprehensive Statewide Birth to Five Needs Assessment was last updated by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) in 2022. The Illinois Statewide Strategic Plan was completed in 2020 by AIR and updated in 2023 by the Morten Group. These projects were overseen by the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development (which was wound down in advance of the establishment of IDEC). The updated version of these documents will provide a framework for the state's efforts to radically improve its support for families, providers, and communities.

While IDEC will take the lead responsibility for completing the updated Needs Assessment and Strategic plan, in doing so it will engage all of its partner agencies, including the IDHS, DCFS, ISBE, the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH), Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services(DHFS), the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE), and the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB). It will also seek input from outside stakeholders, including

the Early Learning Council and other work groups (described above). IDEC will also work directly with providers, including Head Start, child care, state pre-k, home visiting, early intervention providers, and advocates from Illinois' expansive advocacy community, including groups representing families. A coalition of Illinois advocacy organizations has provided a letter of support for this application, which is included in File Two.

The strategic plan will reflect the priorities of the PDG-B5 program, which have also been key guiding priorities of Illinois' work since the plan was last updated. Illinois' work has included active efforts to develop a shared, comprehensive statewide vision for early care and education – mostly centered around ensuring that IDEC's operational infrastructure can achieve the state's goals over time and seamlessly transition programs from the transferring agencies. That work is led by a Cabinet-level official who is held accountable for results, including streamlining funding and strengthening the state's data infrastructure. Illinois is working to maximize family choice and make it easier for families to access those choices, both by reducing the administrative burdens that prevent new and existing providers from delivering service and by making it easier for families to find and access a broadened set of options. The Head Start community has been and will continue to be a core partner in this work throughout the process – with state systems integrating Head Start wherever possible and appropriate.

Another critical aspect of the strategic plan will be a focus on strengthening the workforce, building on the recommendations made in the previous strategic plan. Some of the work that remains ahead includes developing a shared vision for professional development that is integrated with program quality improvement; a vision for strengthening the workforce grounded in the state's updated approach to financing (described further below under Critical Element 2, Category 1, Strategy 2); and an overall approach to supporting the workforce that takes

maximum advantage of the state's updated technology infrastructure. As part of the state's work to align policies and reduce administrative burdens, it will also align professional pathways for the early childhood workforce.

IDEC's vision is to make it easier for families to access early childhood services and for providers to deliver services families want. The agency will be a one-stop shop for child care, preschool, home visiting, and more by elevating operational excellence, transparency, and efficiency to families, educators, and providers across the state. IDEC will integrate programs while transitioning from antiquated operations, data, and technology systems to new, more efficient systems that will provide improved service to Illinois' next generation of families with young children.

Critical Element 2: Outcome strategies to advance program priorities

Illinois' approach to Critical Element 2 will focus on Categories 1 and 3: Reconciling fragmented elements into a unified system, and aligning or sharing information and data systems, both of which have been a substantial focus of the effort in the work to establish IDEC. Given the tight alignment between the goals of PDG-B5 and the work already underway in Illinois, Illinois is certain that a PDG-B5 grant would allow it to accelerate its efforts in a way that achieves the goals of the PDG-B5 program.

Category 1: Reconcile fragmented elements into a unified system

In the last few years Illinois has taken essential steps toward reconciling elements of a fragmented system into a more unified one, including:

- Unifying governance oversight of key early childhood programs through the enabling legislation creating IDEC, which will assume programmatic responsibility for core early

childhood programs by July 1, 2026 to accelerate the state's years-long efforts to align programs;

- Integrating Head Start and state grantees into a unified system by integrating their data in IDEC data systems (including the Early Childhood Integrated Data System) and simplifying access to program administration tools (like grants management and subsidy into streamlined portals that make it easy to input data and receive back updates (described further under Category 3). This work will ensure that parents can readily access Head Start services and Head Start personnel can access state systems, and by ensuring that all workgroups and advisories include Head Start representation;
- Developing a cohesive financing strategy through a new funding approach for early childhood that builds on existing investments – and accounts for the fact that many providers, including Head Start grantees, will continue to rely on a mix of federal and state funding;
- Aligning operations across programs to improve administrative efficiency; and
- Using technology to provide a seamless experience for families, integrate Head Start (and other) programs, improve access to care for vulnerable groups like foster families, and streamline the verification of workforce credentials.

STRATEGY 1: IDEC IS UNIFYING OVERSIGHT OF KEY PROGRAMS

To make Illinois' early care and education (ECE) system simpler for parents – and better for providers and the workforce – Illinois has established IDEC. Legislation was passed with near unanimous bipartisan support and signed in June 2024. By July 1, 2026, IDEC will administer all ECE programs and services– including subsidized child care, child care licensing, the state-funded Preschool for All program, the Head Start collaboration office, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, Early Intervention, home visiting (including both state-funded programs and the

Maternal and Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program), and Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH). Illinois is using this historic moment to improve access and efficiency through efforts such as redesigning its funding approach and leveraging its unified governance model to streamline services to parents and providers – using policy, data, and technology to enable a seamless experience of both accessing and delivering early education and care.

The creation of IDEC was sparked by a bipartisan 2021 commission on early childhood education and care funding (Commission), which recommended dramatically reimagining the state’s system of funding and governance. The Commission identified multiple challenges, none unique to Illinois: accessing high-quality services is burdensome for parents; funding for the system is inadequate to cover the true cost of care for providers; and the system is confusing for parents and providers to navigate, as it is spread across three agencies. The Commission presented three overarching recommendations for a coherent, unified ECE system:

- Centralizing the ECE system in one state agency, with a regional and community infrastructure to inform decision-making and operationalize efficiencies;
- Ensuring adequate funding and using a long-term funding goal for policymaking; and
- Coordinating and distributing funding through fair formulas and mechanisms, such as contracts for transparency and stability.

Unifying governance will allow IDEC to take a holistic approach to redesigning funding, aligning operations, and using technology to provide a seamless experience for families. Illinois has chosen to pursue this work because its extensive engagement with stakeholders showed that it could not achieve its goals without taking legislative action to improve its decision-making processes. By bringing together the full range of early childhood services from three different

agencies into one, Illinois will be positioned to move forward in a way that meets the needs of the early childhood community – including executing on a single vision for the system, implementing coherent policies, and maximizing family choice, all of which are described further below.

STRATEGY 2: ILLINOIS WILL REDESIGN ITS APPROACH TO EARLY CHILDHOOD FUNDING

Illinois families and providers – like families and providers in states across the country – have struggled with the fragmentation of early childhood funding. Accordingly, IDEC is preparing to implement a unified funding framework that maximizes the use of all available public resources to provide a simpler experience for providers and families. This approach will include:

- 1) a single funding stream for child care and state pre-k, and
- 2) a single funding stream for state-managed home visiting.

This new approach will mean that funding will be integrated at the state level, rather than blended and braided at the provider level, and will reduce the burden of multiple applications for providers and multiple proposal cycles for the state.

Historically, funding streams have had different requirements for family eligibility, provider eligibility, program implementation, data, and reporting, along with wide variation in the funding allocated to providers to serve eligible children. Illinois' preschool program is statutorily obligated to focus on children from lower-income families, and federally funded child care and home visiting programs include the same priority. But to date the implementation of those programs has made it hard for prioritized lower-income families to receive services in a seamless way, in part because of their imperfect alignment with Head Start.

IDEC's cohesive financing strategy through new funding mechanisms is meant to create administrative simplicity, leading to a more efficient and transparent system. It will also make it

easier to determine how much funding is required to truly meet the needs of families, using a family-choice centered definition of quality. This means including factors that contribute to family access, such as care in non-traditional hours.

The financing redesign process began with the bipartisan Commission. Since November 2024, IDEC's Funding Design Workgroup has been meeting monthly to discuss considerations for the state's approach to early childhood financing strategy. The workgroup includes more than 30 providers from child care, preschool, home visiting, Early Intervention, and Head Start – along with parents, advocates, philanthropic partners, and elected officials. The workgroup conducted in-depth analyses of how to efficiently and strategically layer federal, state, and local resources in alignment with their common purposes, and how to distribute funds in a predictable, stable, and transparent manner. With the support of targeted subcommittees, the workgroup is also studying how to provide a consistent way of allocating funding based on the actual costs of the comprehensive services that meet family needs.

Because the cohesive financing strategy IDEC is designing will require legislative action, IDEC is preparing legislation for consideration by the Illinois General Assembly. The legislation would set an implementation timeline for Fiscal Year 2028. The current draft will redesign 12 funding streams to four – including a simplified application process and streamlined reporting. The simplified application will be enabled through the technology project described under Critical Element 2 Category 3, which includes grant management services. The reforms will also provide better information about existing service gaps, which will inform future policy decisions and drive accountability while furthering the state's early childhood vision.

In October 2025, IDEC launched a project to complement its funding redesign work focused on Head Start programs. The Head Start Cost Modeling project is meant to develop a clearer

understanding of the costs associated with Head Start, Early Head Start, and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start program – informing adequacy targets, assessing funding gaps, and gathering provider insights on key cost drivers. Head Start providers have shared the challenges of managing multiple funding streams and noted that meeting Head Start Program Performance Standards drives unique and sometimes higher costs; more than 40 providers from across the state have engaged in this effort. As IDEC develops its unifying financing strategy, providers stressed the importance of understanding these distinct cost factors so that the state deploys resources in a way that allows Head Start providers to effectively leverage state funding to best meet the needs of families.

STRATEGY 3: ILLINOIS WILL ALIGN OPERATIONS ACROSS EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS TO IMPROVE ADMINISTRATIVE EFFICIENCY

IDEC has a unique moment to redesign how early childhood services are administered throughout the state. To achieve operational efficiency, IDEC is in the process of a comprehensive review to assess the current state of program administration by functions. This includes:

- Assessing efficiencies and streamlining services, including putting similar functions together, integrating data across all services, and consolidating technology systems by service type rather than disparate programs. The redesigned agency will be organized not by funding stream but by function – such as data, professional development, engagement, monitoring, and budgeting.
- Evaluating and best directing human capital resources, aligning the agency’s staffing practices to what families want and providers need.

- Identifying and filling gaps to ensure health and safety guidelines and protections are in place and aligning policies where they have been regulated somewhat differently by different agencies.
- Identifying inefficient incentives in contracts or workflows and remediating them.
- Mapping and making plans to mitigate statutory requirements that are out of date or inefficient.
- Automating and modernizing manual functions and processes – including steps in establishing policies, internal capabilities, and technology infrastructure needed to leverage responsible artificial intelligence for maximizing efficiency.

The work of modernizing Illinois’ technological infrastructure – described under Category 3 below – is informing conversations on the alignment of policies to systems. This includes reducing the paperwork needed for the licensure process. The program standards alignment committee referenced under Critical Element 1 is also developing recommendations to align program standards to reduce administrative burden and eliminate the need for multiple accountability systems. The Head Start community has been and will continue to be integrally involved in all of these discussions.

STRATEGY 4: ILLINOIS WILL USE TECHNOLOGY TO PROVIDE A SEAMLESS EXPERIENCE FOR FAMILIES, AND TO STREAMLINE VERIFICATION OF WORKFORCE CREDENTIALS

Illinois will be creating IDEC 360, a suite of interconnected user portals and a case management system to provide (1) a seamless experience for families seeking services, (2) simplified processes for early childhood providers, and (3) a streamlined service for verifying workforce credentials. In parallel, IDEC is modernizing most of its services and will make them more accessible and integrated via the portals and case management system. At the core of each

streamlined service is the IDEC Data and Analytics Hub, an advanced structure for data integration, management, and analytics. These projects are described further under Category 3 as part of an integrated narrative about Illinois' efforts to strengthen its data infrastructure.

IDEC is spearheading the state's efforts to integrate ECE programs across all mixed delivery settings into its state-level initiatives. To support these strategies, Illinois is investing substantial state funds and staff time at related agencies. In Fiscal Year 2025, the work included at least \$14 million in state investment at IDEC, and in Fiscal Year 2026 another \$21.7 million has been appropriated for work related to the goals of the Preschool Development Grant. Philanthropic funds have also been secured to help implement the strategies. Operationally, those efforts include ensuring data systems are functional for Fiscal Year 2027 and supporting the stand-up of IDEC in Fiscal Year 2026. Programmatically, those efforts include identifying opportunities to make programs more efficient and effective during consolidation. Some of the highlights from IDEC in Fiscal Year 2025 and Fiscal Year 2026 include:

- More than \$8 million across the two years to support the change management process as IDEC is launched (described further under Organizational Capacity and Plan for Oversight of Federal Award Funds and Activities).
- More than \$8.5 million across the two years to support the state's technology buildout (described further under Critical Element 2, Category 3).
- Over \$2.9 million across the two years to develop a cohesive financing strategy (described above).

These investments are an integral part of the state's support for the creation of IDEC, complementing its investment in the personnel needed to make the agency successful. Because of the strong base laid by state investments targeted toward achieving the grant's priorities, the

state is well positioned to use federal grant funds in calendar year 2026 to rapidly accelerate its progress and increase the scope of service transformation.

Category 3: Align or share information and data systems

STRATEGY 1: USER PORTALS

The lack of a single entry point has created significant friction for families, who have been required to understand and navigate multiple applications and processes, and for providers, who have struggled with multiple funding streams and licensing applications using a mix of paper and electronic forms. This administrative burden increases wait times, reduces awareness of options, and limits access for eligible families (particularly foster families and families in underserved communities). This burden can be so prohibitive that it impacts family choice by preventing some providers or potential providers from being able to offer services. Improving Illinois' administrative processes and the data systems supporting them is essential to achieving its goal of easier family enrollment – and to modernizing the system in a way that allows the state to leverage the newest technologies while best deploying its human capital more on service to families than administrative processes.

Improving information flow to and from the state is a core priority for IDEC. One of its central reforms will be to develop a series of portals for different partners through its IDEC 360 initiative – including a Family Portal, a Provider Portal, an Administrator Portal, and a Workforce Portal. Each portal will be the place where families, providers, and members of the ECE workforce can enter all of their data once, creating a base profile that can be expanded as users engage with additional programs or services – or edited as families have life events, providers change or expand their services, and workforce members grow professionally.

IDEC is required by its enabling legislation to simplify family experiences and reduce administrative burdens for providers. This statutory mandate builds on the recommendations of the Commission and is entirely aligned with the goals of PDG. In addition to improved customer service for users, the portals will save all of IDEC's partners the burden of repetitive data entry – and ensure that more reliable data is captured that most closely represents the experience of a child, family, provider and/ or workforce member while minimizing the chance of duplicate profiles or over-complexity of benefits.

The portals will provide notifications and information about IDEC activities and services, with users able to set up their own preferences for notifications. The secure portals will also provide user-specific data about the early childhood landscape using up-to-date data from the IDEC Data and Analytics Hub (described further below under Strategy 2). For example, in the Provider Portal, a Head Start provider will see where there may be underserved eligible families near their center. Data that is captured from these portals will be centrally organized in IDEC's Data and Analytics Hub, creating or augmenting a persistent and unique longitudinal record for that individual, be it a child, a family, a provider or an educator.

The portals can be used to simplify processes for all IDEC's partners – including providing a seamless experience for families accessing early education and care services. The Family Portal will help to maximize family choice by ensuring that families with young children have all the information they need to access early childhood opportunities from a variety of provider types. Over time, the Family Portal will include information about all services in which families have ever enrolled, including the Child Care Assistance Program, Early Intervention, Head Start, home visiting, state preschool, and more. The Family Portal will include a Unified Eligibility and Intake process designed to provide a single point of entry for families seeking any early

childhood service. Families will be able to provide basic information – such as location, income, and child age – and the system will determine likely eligibility for a range of services, including Head Start.

The system will include specific supports for foster parents and children given their automatic eligibility for certain services, including child care. The portals will include specific notifications for foster parents and DCFS caseworkers after they register a new child, letting foster parents know they are automatically eligible for child care. The unified eligibility system will automatically take the foster child's status into account to significantly expedite receipt of child care subsidies, fundamentally changing the process by which child protective services managers help children access services. More information about the state's support for foster children is included in the Bonus section.

The discovery work to create the portals began in 2023, followed by key design work in 2025, including national work done by Wonderschool to modernize providers' technology infrastructure. Implementation would be accelerated and expanded by PDG-B5 funds. IDEC currently plans to launch the Family, Provider, and Administrator Portals in calendar year 2026 with a new user interface, core design elements, the underlying eligibility and intake system, and certain integrated service modules. IDEC also plans to enhance an existing Workforce Portal with new automated services in the credentialing process while doing extensive discovery work for a new version of the Workforce Portal that would be implemented by IDEC in calendar year 2027. PDG-B5 funds would allow the state to expand the scope of service enhancements, integrations, and automations and accelerate the rate at which it adds additional digital services. IDEC has contracted with multiple vendors to map agency operational processes and define the business workflows that will allow the state to implement the portals successfully. IDEC is now

hiring staff based on the technical skills needed to successfully implement those workflows.

Technology infrastructure and services have been identified that are necessary to implement the portals. Those functions include a cloud-based orchestration platform that combines data rules, an application management service, and a case management system to work in the background of the user experience in the portals. The case management system will be used for eligibility determinations, prescreening, and matching services. The data rules and application services will allow IDEC to link together phases of a user journey, providing seamless handoffs between families, providers, and administrators at each stage in the journey, while keeping each user group updated on application progress with timely notifications – and protecting data privacy. Similar data rules and application services will be built into the modernized Workforce Portal following the 2026 discovery and design work outlined in this proposal.

In addition to the Family Portal, IDEC will have portals focused on early childhood providers and professionals that include the following:

- A Provider Portal for providers to create a public and protected profile, connect to funding opportunities and apply for funds, qualify to provide services, monitor incoming funds, get matched with families, and conduct compliance and reporting activities. This will include support for viewing and receiving direct referrals to Head Start programs. The portal will also show each provider notifications tied to the different phases of the grant application process, indicating an action is required or a status has changed.
- A Workforce Portal that allows individuals to maintain an up-to-date profile, demonstrate qualifications or credentials for early childhood roles, access financial supports for the ECE workforce, explore professional development resources, and identify higher education programs that can be used to master early childhood competencies. While the launch of a

new Workforce Portal will not occur until 2027, in 2026 IDEC will launch high priority service modules into the existing portal. Rather than automate a flawed process, the state will use this opportunity to modernize the entire process of approving workforce credentials.

- One element of the overhaul will be to automate the process of seeking course credit for workforce credentials. For example, some processes still require paper forms and manual processes - such as some credential applications and competency verification for credentials. In addition, while the state is required to collect and post higher education courses, there is no technology to support this collection nor to code these or the additional 75,000 courses in the database, as has been recently required by legislation.
- An Administrator Portal for case workers, intake specialists, licensing representatives, monitors, and other early childhood administrators who support families in accessing early childhood services. This portal will allow administrators to manage family cases, view eligibility results, initiate referrals, track service progress, and communicate with both families and providers – ensuring that no family falls through the cracks and that every referral is followed through to completion, thereby helping to maximize enrollment. The Administrator Portal will also include access to child and family experience analytics to show any delays in the process of enrollment.

Individually and collectively, these portals – and the underlying case management and eligibility system – will dramatically improve how families and professionals experience Illinois' early childhood system.

STRATEGY 2: DATA AND ANALYTICS HUB

The IDEC Data and Analytics Hub will be a centralized, cloud-based platform that powers real-time data integration and analytics across all early childhood programs, including feeding timely data into each of the portals. Critically, the Data and Analytics Hub will also maintain unique, secure, and persistent records for each child, each family, and each provider and workforce member. This persistent record documenting unique experiences over time will enable both analytical and operational use cases. As a business capability, it will enable faster workflows where new information from parents automatically sparks a rapid response from the state. The Data and Analytics Hub will also provide actionable insights through dashboards and reporting tools embedded in the portals. This Data and Analytics Hub is essential to IDEC's ability to track performance, ensure responsiveness and accountability to the child and family, make data-informed decisions that improve outcomes for children and families statewide, and provide public transparency on Illinois' early childhood system.

In addition to the data insights embedded with the portals, some additional resources the Data and Analytics Hub will offer include:

- Public dashboards that allow users to interactively analyze and answer foundational supply and demand questions across all early childhood programs in Illinois. The dashboard will include interactive filters that enable users to disaggregate by key populations (e.g., low- or middle-income), eligibility (e.g., children eligible for Head Start), and filter the data by key geographies across Illinois, or for a specified period of time for more longitudinal views.
- IDEC's leadership team and partners will also have access to an Analytics Library that contains additional dashboards that dig deeper into operational analytics – including provider

capacity utilization, funding allocations, community-level access gaps, family and program lifecycle analytics (e.g. service delays), workforce needs, and quality/ risk assessments.

- In response to a previous PDG-B5 Needs Assessment focused on statewide data, IDEC's university and research partners will have access to a secure Research Access Point that will allow permissioned researchers to access de-identified records for research purposes, while still abiding by federal and state data privacy laws. IDEC will present this de-duplicated and standardized data with a statewide unique identifier, making it possible to link ECE data – such as child care subsidies, Early Intervention service provision, and Head Start enrollment – to other state agencies' programs, including benefits under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), foster care services, and K-12 longitudinal data for measuring early grade student outcomes.

Efforts to link the existing early childhood datasets are already underway in Illinois as part of previous PDG-B5 investments to create a unified participation dataset and, more recently, as part of a broader state statutory mandate to create an even more comprehensive Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS). Additionally, in summer 2025, IDEC contracted Third Sector Intelligence (3Si) to help IDEC prepare, analyze, and create standing dashboards and reports on the data even before IDEC administers programs. 3Si's approach allows it to not only analyze children served by publicly funded programs that will eventually move to IDEC, but also other children, including those who are eligible but unserved. The first ECIDS dashboards showing current state supply and demand analytics are expected by March 2026 and will serve as a baseline ahead of IDEC's programmatic launch.

The Data and Analytics Hub will benefit from the extensive work Illinois has already conducted to integrate Head Start data. Previous PDG-funded work supported a partnership between

Illinois' state government and the Illinois Head Start Association, leading to nearly 40 data sharing agreements between Head Start grantees and the state. These grantees serve 28,000 children. Illinois plans to build on these agreements to establish more automated data pipelines between Head Start and the Data and Analytics Hub. Benefits of this work will include:

- Making it easier for Head Start program administrators – particularly those who also provide state-funded services and must coordinate multiple types of program requirements for each child, which has historically increased administrative complexity and burden.
- Maximizing coordinated intake to help providers fill seats with eligible families.
- Providing community-level market views to each Head Start provider (and other providers) so that they can see where children are in greater need of services, satisfying obligations for market data analysis.
- Using data to better understand how Head Start/Early Head Start programs deliver high quality and help create an evidence base to inform future IDEC policies.

The existing ECIDS project – as well as the effort to migrate all 70+ sources of early childhood data from the transferring agencies – will provide a valuable foundation to IDEC's efforts to now launch a more advanced Data and Analytics Hub that not only enables analytics outputs but ensures real-time responsiveness to Illinois families. This Data and Analytics Hub is core to IDEC's vision to improve the culture of data use in Illinois for the benefit of children and families. IDEC will expand on this infrastructure by continuing to integrate with additional data sources over time. The Data and Analytics Hub will play an essential role in ensuring that programs across all mixed delivery settings are integrated into every state-level initiative – including efforts to maximize family choice, workforce development initiatives, and quality improvement.

Most of Illinois' plan for PDG-B5 funds is to strengthen data infrastructure.

Critical Element 3: Tracking project impact

Illinois' investments in the Data and Analytics Hub will help to support its tracking of project impacts. The narrative under Critical Element 2, Category 3 describes Illinois' work to update its information technologies and analytic systems infrastructure.

IDEC will have primary responsibility for ensuring that results are achieved pursuant to the grant. Given Illinois' focus on improving administrative efficiency, some of the metrics of success will include:

- A higher percentage of referrals initiated by administrators that result in confirmed enrollment or service connection.
- Lower average wait times from a family's unified application submission to confirmed placement/enrollment in a matched program (tracking across all major programs, including Head Start).
- Increase in the percentage of families that complete the unified application and enrollment process, once they start it.
- A reduction in the number of different state websites focused on early childhood, with key functions consolidated into the IDEC website.
- A reduction in the number of applications required for providers to obtain funding.
- The elimination of paper application processes, except in instances where paper applications are needed to provide an accommodation.
- A reduction in the average time taken from a provider's initial submission to final state approval (e.g., for licensing, grant applications, or subsidy billing).
- A reduction in the number of duplicated data fields across core provider processes (e.g., credentialing, licensing, and grant reporting).

Outputs of the systems will include:

- Maximized family choice and seamless access
 - Unified family access point for all early childhood programs statewide.
 - Flexible options for families to choose the care provider that is the best fit, with access across various program settings (e.g., family home, school based, center) and specific needs (e.g., time of day, specialized care).
 - Clearer eligibility processes streamlined across various programs, enabling parental choice and affordability.
 - Availability of streamlined support from trained case workers using the Administrator Portal to manage intake, eligibility, and referrals.
- Streamlined and modernized provider operations
 - Reduced administrative duplication and manual work across agencies and programs for providers and the workforce.
 - Strengthened and streamlined operating procedures that limit provider disruptions.
 - Full digitization and streamlining of the Child Care Licensing process, including new applications, renewals, and monitoring.
 - Improved coordinated enrollment.
 - Strengthened collaboration among public, private, and community providers, supported by consistent, unified administrative systems.
 - New performance indicators for programs that support improved ongoing operations.
- Transparent quality and data-driven planning

- Single source of trustworthy information about quality of care: families gain access to a single, easy-to-understand resource (combining licensing status, inspection history, and quality rating) empowering them to make informed enrollment decisions.
- Improved visibility into statewide capacity and demand: real-time data visibility into the availability of a range of quality, licensed programs and family demand, enabling the state to strategically increase supply in underserved areas.
- Consolidated rating/review system: combining previously disparate ratings and review systems into one coherent, transparent function.

All of these measures will track the broad-based work undertaken by IDEC to support the priorities of the PDG-B5 program, and Illinois will track its progress using the improved data infrastructure and dashboards described in Critical Element 1, Category 3. Tracking will also be enhanced through the governance and organizational structures, outlined in Organizational Capacity below, that will establish ownership and cadences for reviewing project measures and a culture of continuous improvement across the entire organization.

Illinois' work also builds on the 2023 strategic plan developed with PDG-B5 support, which has three primary goals: Access, Quality, and Resources.

- Access: The Family Portal and other IDEC initiatives will raise awareness of and enrollment in early education and care programs, including among Head Start and foster families. Improved systems and reduced administrative burdens will make it easier for providers to sustain their work, creating more opportunities for families. IDEC's focused approach to family engagement will build awareness of existing opportunities. Greater availability and awareness coupled with easier enrollment and streamlined funding should expand family choice in Illinois' newly unified early childhood system.

- Quality: Illinois will sustain its commitment to a strong early childhood workforce and make it easier to stay in the workforce by reducing regulatory burdens and streamlining the process by which members of the workforce achieve credentials that support higher quality services.
- Resources: Illinois' implementation of its comprehensive vision through a unified and coherent system of early education and care will allow the state to leverage its resources more effectively to serve children and families.

In accordance with the strategic plan and the PDG-B5 priorities, Illinois will complement its tracking of these grant outcomes by tracking the ultimate outputs of the system: the availability and quality of existing ECE programs in the state, including programs serving the most vulnerable or underserved populations and children in rural areas; estimates of the unduplicated number of children being served in existing ECE programs; and estimates of the unduplicated number of children awaiting services for ECE programs. That system tracking will include Head Start data, as described above under Critical Element 2, Category 3.

Project Timeline and Milestones

Project or Activity	Responsibility	Milestone	Task / Evidence of Achievement / Quant Impact	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Project implementation and start-up							
Project implementation and start-up	IDEC and IDHS	Launch Grant Implementation	Finalize internal project team structure, bring on PSCs, and assign leads for each grant component	X			
	IDEC		Conduct internal kickoff meeting with IDEC, IDHS, and key partners	X			
	IDEC and BCG		Set up project management tools and reporting templates, embed in IDEC existing PMO	X			
	IDEC	Quarterly Monitoring & Adjustment	Hold quarterly implementation review meetings with IDEC leadership, Governor's Office, IDHS, and other agency partners	X	X	X	X
	IDEC and BCG		Collect and analyze milestone progress reports, risks, and gaps from each workstream	X	X	X	X
	IDEC	Annual Report Production	Analyze project-wide progress using data from all workstreams and updated systems				X
	IDEC		Publish a public-facing summary				X
Needs Assessment	IDEC	Hire needs assessment lead	Finalize hiring of the strategic plan lead within IDEC and orient to existing data, reports, inputs	X			
	IDEC	Conduct stakeholder-informed updates	Synthesize findings from 72+ listening sessions and TAC workgroups	X	X		
	IDEC		Engage additional stakeholders (e.g., Head Start, providers, families) and incorporate related data		X	X	
	IDEC	Integrate data and analytics	Map current data gaps and align with ECIDS and Data and Analytics Hub		X		
Strategic Plan	IDEC	Align plan with new governance	Update to reflect IDEC's leadership, agency roles and updated needs assessment inputs		X	X	

Project or Activity	Responsibility	Milestone	Task / Evidence of Achievement / Quant Impact	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
	IDEC	Update to reflect priorities	Revise strategies to align with PDG-B5 priorities and IDEC’s mission		X	X	
	IDEC		Integrate workforce, funding, and technology modernization strategies		X	X	
	IDEC	Ensure cross-agency and stakeholder ownership	Share draft plan with agencies and advisory bodies for feedback; publish			X	X
	IDEC		Finalize and publish plan with clear roles, timelines, and metrics				X
Enhanced Administration and Organizational Design	IDEC	Implement Function-Based IDEC Organizational Structure	Evaluate strength of core agency functions; realign based on function rather than funding stream	X	X		
	IDEC		Reassign or realign teams and responsibilities based on function rather than funding stream		X		
	IDEC		Optimize processes, to align with new function-based structure		X	X	
	IDEC	Contract Optimization	Audit current contracts and workflows for misaligned incentives; revise as needed	X	X		
	IDEC	Improve Mandates	Conduct review of statutory mandates impacting ECE operations and propose changes	X			
Data and Analytics Hub	Illinois Head Start Association	Head Start Provider Integration	Updated data sharing agreements as needed	X	X		
	IDEC, Department of Innovation & Technology (DoIT)		Updated data needs with IDEC Data and Analytics Hub			X	X

Project or Activity	Responsibility	Milestone	Task / Evidence of Achievement / Quant Impact	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
	IDEC	ISBE Integration	Finalize data sharing agreement(s) as needed	X			
	ISBE, IDEC, DoIT		Design and build two-directional API with ISBE		X	X	X
	IDEC, DoIT	Workforce Data Integration	Finalize data sharing with data providers and update data feeds	X	X	X	
	3Si	Interactive Dashboards	Prepare supply, demand & service gaps dashboard	X			
	3Si		Prepare access desert analytics, provider dashboard		X	X	X
	3Si		Prepare program lifecycle, risk & audit dashboard			X	X
	3Si		Prepare child outcomes & funding dashboard				X
	IDEC, DoIT	Vendor Selection and Onboarding	Conduct vendor selection process	X	X		
	IDEC, DoIT		Align vendor with IDEC and DoIT teams	X	X		
	IDEC, DoIT, Krasan	Project Planning	Refine and organize requirements and create detailed project plan	X			
	IDEC, DoIT, Data Hub Vendor (DHV)	Environment Set-up	Set up Azure environment and core services	X	X		
			Build foundational data platform architecture	X	X		
	IDEC, DoIT, DHV, Clarity	Data Ingestion and Pipeline Automation	Ingest and validate critical data sources	X	X		
			Plan automated pipelines [REDACTED]	X	X		
	IDEC, DoIT, DHV	Platform Configurations and Integrations	Enable two-way integration with critical applications		X		
			Implement monitoring and audit tools		X		
	IDEC, DoIT, DHV	Security & Privacy	Conduct security architecture review and risk assessment; implement role-based access controls			X	
	IDEC, DoIT, DHV		Refine and align dashboards developed by 3Si		X		
			Define dashboard strategy and user needs		X		

Project or Activity	Responsibility	Milestone	Task / Evidence of Achievement / Quant Impact	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
		User-Based Dashboard Requirements	Define internal/external dashboard requirements		X		
	IDEC, DoIT, DHV, Clarity	Data Hub Enhanced Analytics	Expand data platform capabilities			X	
			Enhance analytics and reporting tools			X	
			Design analytics for policy and evaluation			X	
	IDEC, DoIT, DHV	User-Based Dashboard Design	Design internal dashboards for IDEC staff			X	
			Design user-facing dashboards for portals			X	
			Finalize dashboard templates and branding			X	
	IDEC, DoIT, DHV, Clarity	Data Pipeline Launch	Automate and launch Head Start, ISBE, and DCFS pipelines		X		
	IDEC, DoIT, DHV	Application Integration and Event-Based Architecture	Design event-based data architecture for IDEC intake and eligibility system			X	
			Pilot real-time features for operational use			X	
	IDEC, DoIT, DHV	Dashboard Development, Integration, and Implementation	Build, test, and deploy internal dashboards				X
			Build, test, and deploy user-facing dashboards				X
			Develop dashboards in visualization, reporting, or embedded tools for each portal and integrate into portals				X
IDEC 360	IDEC, DoIT	Unified Portals: Discovery and Requirements	Create detailed discovery scope of work and conduct vendor selection and onboarding	X			
			Conduct discovery for Unified Portals and Case Management System, including intake workflows	X	X		
			Define requirements for Unified Eligibility and Intake, including foster care workflows	X			
	IDEC, DoIT	Unified Portals: Vendor Selection	Launch competitive vendor selection process for Unified Portals and Case Management System		X		

Project or Activity	Responsibility	Milestone	Task / Evidence of Achievement / Quant Impact	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
	IDEC, DoIT, 360 Implementation Vendor (360IV), Wonderschool, EUNA	Application Hub: Architecture and Integrations	Finalize foundational architecture for the IDEC Application Hub (orchestration and API layers)				
			Configure secure API gateway and integration framework for portal and service workflows				
			Establish event-driven architecture to enable real-time service coordination and referrals				
			Enable bi-directional data exchange between the Application Hub and Wonderschool / EUNA				
	IDEC, BCG, DoIT IDEC, DoIT	Unified Eligibility Development	Build minimum viable product (MVP) for Unified Eligibility and Intake				
			Integrate Head Start eligibility and referral pathways into intake workflows				
	IDEC, DoIT, Discovery Vendor	Unified Portals: Strategy & Discovery	Integrate Unified Eligibility engine with the Application Hub to support dynamic intake				
			Connect EI intake and referral logic to the Application Hub				
	IDEC, DoIT, 360 360IV	Unified Portals: MVP Design, Build, and Test	Finalize portal MVP designs for parent, provider, educator, and administrator portals				
			Build, configure, and test portal MVPs with core functionality				
	IDEC, DoIT, BCG	Unified Portals: Change Plan	Develop change, communications, and training plan for new licensing modules				
	IDEC, DoIT, 360IV	Unified Eligibility: MVP Launch & Expansion	Deploy MVP of Unified Eligibility and Intake with pre-screening and referral logic				
			Finalize monitoring, alerting, and logging for all Application Hub integrations				
Streamlined Services:	IDEC, DoIT, Wonderschool	Child Care Search Completion	Complete development and testing of Child Care Search & Coordinated Application				

Project or Activity	Responsibility	Milestone	Task / Evidence of Achievement / Quant Impact	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Child Care Services	IDEC, DoIT, Wonderschool	Develop Phase 1 Services	Complete proof of concept of digital workflows for licensing & subsidy module phase 1 features	X			
	IDEC, BCG	Change Plan Execution	Deploy change and training plan for child care search & application, licensing, and subsidy	X			
	IDEC, DoIT, Wonderschool	Launch Phase 1 Services	Launch Child Care Search & Coordinated Applications, licensing, and subsidy modules		X		
	IDEC, DoIT, Wonderschool	Licensing and Subsidy Phase 2 Module Launch	Design and deploy “Licensing Background Check” and “Licensing Site Visit Management”			X	X
			Design and Deploy “Subsidy Appeals” and “Subsidy Monitoring and Audits” Modules			X	X
			Deliver change and training for new modules				
Streamlined Services: Grant Management	IDEC, DoIT, EUNA	Grant Management: Configuration	Launch “Pre Award” module	X			
			Finalize and launch of “Evaluation and Review”, “Award”, and “Post Award” modules	X			
	IDEC, DoIT, EUNA	Grant Management: Enhancements	Develop and deploy grant management customizations for more streamlined processes		X		
			Deliver change, communications, and training plan for Grant Management Customizations				X
Streamlined Services: Early Intervention (EI)	IDEC, DoIT, Krasan	Early Intervention: RIS	Complete business requirements and launch RIS for EI system redesign	X			
	IDEC, DoIT, Krasan, EI Vendor, BCG	Early Intervention: Phase 1 Modules	Execute contract, onboard vendor, and complete plans for EI modernization			X	
			Create designs and detailed workflows of EI Outreach, Intake, and Evaluation modules			X	
			Develop, launch, and deliver change and training for Phase 1 EI modules				
	IDEC, DoIT, Krasan	Early Intervention:	Begin phased integration of EI intake into Unified Eligibility and Intake system				X

Project or Activity	Responsibility	Milestone	Task / Evidence of Achievement / Quant Impact	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
	Consulting, EI Vendor	Integration & Planning	Define requirements and roadmap for EI Services, Reviews, and Transitions modules				X
Financing Strategy	IDEC, Afton Partners	Sustain Governance	Convene Funding Design Workgroup and subcommittees	X	X		
	IDEC, Afton Partners	Framework and Model Development	Continue to document family-driven cost factors and determine costs	X			
	IDEC, Afton Partners		Funding framework, Head Start Cost Modeling, and model development and refinement	X	X	X	X
	IDEC	Legislation and Rulemaking	Draft legislation	X			
	IDEC		Draft rulemaking/SOPs/guidance			X	X
	IDEC	Change and Training Delivery	Develop, implement and refine Communications and change management plan	X	X	X	X
	IDEC		Continue stakeholder engagement, and provide technical assistance	X	X	X	X
Workforce Portal Discovery and Design	IDEC, DoIT	Scope and Vendor Selection	Create discovery scope of work, vendor selection, and onboarding	X			
	IDEC, DoIT, Portal Discovery Vendor (WPDV)	Discovery and Stakeholder Inputs	Conduct deep-dive assessment of functionalities, strengths, opportunities, weaknesses and threats		X		
			Map business processes, current user journeys and pain points, and existing data flows		X		
			Conduct stakeholder engagement and input collection (listening sessions, interviews, surveys)		X		
	IDEC, DoIT, WPDV	Workforce Portal Future State Design	Draft future state vision			X	
			Assess process improvement opportunities			X	
			Develop user personas and journey maps			X	
			Define business and technical requirements			X	
	IDEC, DoIT, WPDV		Develop potential solution concepts, designs, pilot opportunities and quick wins			X	

Project or Activity	Responsibility	Milestone	Task / Evidence of Achievement / Quant Impact	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
		Workforce Portal Implementation Plan	Develop phased implementation roadmap				X
	IDEC, DoIT	Workforce Portal Vendor Selection	Consolidate future state plans into a detailed RIS; select implementation vendor for 2027 delivery				X
Automated Course Matching	IDEC, DoIT, WPDV	Vendor Selection and Onboarding	Conduct input collection (providers, higher ed institutions, advocates)	X	X		
	IDEC, DoIT, WPDV	Course Submission Interface	Define business rules and technical specifications for course submission interface and workflows	X			
			Set-up course submission interface		X		
	IDEC, Future WPDV	Course Submission Solicitation and Review	Solicit, validate, and import course information from higher education providers			X	
			Assess course data gaps and possible sources of data for filling in course data gaps			X	
	IDEC, DoIT, Discovery, Workforce Portal AI Vendor	Design and Launch of AI-Enabled Course Matching Tool	Define business rules and technical specifications for AI course matching		X		
			Develop AI-assisted course coding and validation interface proof of concept			X	
			Conduct testing and validation of AI model for course matching			X	X
	IDEC, DoIT, Future Web Services Vendor, Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA)	Launch of Searchable Course Database Interface	Define business rules and create user experience wireframes for publishing course database				X
			Build course database display for the IDEC website and the existing Gateways Registry				X
			Publish database of matched courses on the IDEC website and the existing Gateways Registry				X

Project or Activity	Responsibility	Milestone	Task / Evidence of Achievement / Quant Impact	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
EC Credential Redesign	IDEC	Scope and Vendor Selection	Create detailed discovery scope of work and onboard vendors	X			
	IDEC, Credential Redesign Discovery Vendor (CRDV)	Credential Redesign Discovery and Stakeholder Input	Conduct data analysis on credential uptake, gaps and trends in credential earning over time		X		
			Launch Ad Hoc Workgroup to define course eligibility criteria and review process		X		
			Collect inputs from workforce, provider, higher ed, and other stakeholders		X		
			Organize working groups to assess credentials vs needs for job roles, licensing, or career pathways		X	X	
	IDEC, CRDV	Guiding Principles	Draft guiding principles for credential redesign and validate with stakeholder groups			X	
	IDEC, CRDV	Credential Redesign Scope and Implementation Plan	Assess feasibility of adding new credentials (e.g., home visiting)			X	
			Define phased roadmap for restructuring of credentials, plus any policy or rule changes			X	X
	IDEC		Consolidate discovery and guiding principles into a scope of work for full implementation				X
Operational State Advisory Council	IDEC	Stakeholder engagement framework for ELC	Hold monthly Advisory Workgroup meetings	X	X	X	X
			Conduct outreach to pressure test new advisory engagement framework with key partners	X			
			Collect and respond to framework feedback		X		
	IDEC	Implement updated structure and processes	Launch revised meeting protocols to incorporate broader stakeholder input				X
			Establish new subcommittees or workgroups aligned with IDEC priorities				X
	IDEC	Monitor effectiveness	Develop metrics to assess stakeholder participation and feedback quality			X	X

Project or Activity	Responsibility	Milestone	Task / Evidence of Achievement / Quant Impact	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Implement Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction	ISBE and IDEC	Disseminate Illinois State Literacy Plan	Continue to provide guidance and continue training early childhood providers on the literacy plan	X	X	X	X
	ISBE	Monitor implementation	Continue to collect data on literacy instruction practices across PFA programs	X	X		
Consideration of Foster Children in the ECE System	IDEC	Strengthen enrollment and access policies	Update process to improve how foster children are prioritized for enrollment in ECE programs			X	X
	DCFS and IDEC		Continue to train DCFS caseworkers and ECE providers on enrollment rights and procedures				X
	IDEC, DoIT, DHV	Improve data integration and tracking	Link foster care data with IDEC's Data and Analytics Hub to monitor service access			X	
	IDEC, DoIT, DHV		Develop dashboards to track enrollment and service continuity for foster children				X
Supports for Nutritional Services (CACFP & Food Security)	ISBE	Expand CACFP participation	Continue to provide technical assistance and training on CACFP compliance and nutrition standards	X	X	X	X
	IDEC, DoIT, DHV	Integrate Nutrition Data into State Systems	Partner with ISBE to share CACFP participation data with IDEC's Data and Analytics Hub	X			
	IDEC, DoIT, DHV		Develop indicators to monitor food security and nutrition access in early childhood settings		X		

Bonus Options

Bonus option #1: An operational State Advisory Council that has a mechanism for feedback from a wide variety of groups

Illinois' State Advisory Council is its Early Learning Council, which was created by statute in 2003. The Early Learning Council is one of the nation's largest and most inclusive state advisory councils, with 13 members from the executive branch of state government and 33 members representing a wide range of other constituencies. Each meeting also includes an opportunity for public comment, and historically many non-Council members have participated actively in Council committees and work groups.

The Council's statutory charge is to help child-serving systems and agencies collaborate across sectors to meet the needs of young children, prioritizing those with the greatest need. Its members include representatives of the Head Start Association, child care resources and referral agencies, providers, school districts, families, higher education institutions, and more.

As part of the enacting legislation IDEC was tasked with staffing an Advisory Workgroup to completely revamp the state's processes for engaging with stakeholders – including how IDEC can receive feedback from families, providers, and others both directly and through advisory group structures. The Advisory Workgroup has developed an initial framework that is now being tested with other partners, and it plans to have final recommendations for the state's advisory functions by the summer of 2026. These recommendations will likely lead to changes in how the Early Learning Council receives and processes feedback from the full range of stakeholders, making it more efficient both for constituents and the state.

Bonus option #2: Implementation of evidence-based literacy instruction

In January 2024, ISBE adopted a comprehensive literacy plan, which represents a strategic roadmap to enhance and unify evidence-based literacy instruction. The literacy plan – which was mandated by Public Act 103-0402 – is a guidance document that includes information about language and literacy development from birth through grade 12.

The plan is grounded in the necessity of addressing low reading proficiency rates and links literacy to critical social and economic outcomes. It includes three primary goals:

- Every child receives high-quality, evidence-based literacy instruction. This includes instructional materials, systematic teaching methods, and a Multi-Tiered System of Supports.
- Every educator is prepared and continuously supported to deliver high-quality, evidence-based literacy instruction. This includes professional development, a community of practice for educator preparation programs, and regular capacity-building sessions.
- Every leader is equipped to create, maintain, and sustain the conditions for high-quality evidence-based literacy instruction. This includes data-informed decision-making, engaging with families and communities, and promoting teaching best practices.

The plan includes guidance about reader development for programs serving children up to age 5. Illinois' Preschool for All (PFA) state-funded pre-k program requires all entities applying for state funds to address all developmental domains, including language and literacy; indeed, PFA providers must describe how a language and literacy development program will be implemented for each participating child based on an individual assessment of that child's needs.

Bonus option #3: Consideration of foster children in the ECE system

Illinois policies are designed to protect foster children, ensuring that they have consistent access to critical early education and development services. Illinois' foster care system is overseen by

the DCFS, whose Office of Education and Transition Services (OETS) has an explicit policy that children should be continuously enrolled in early education services regardless of whether they are experiencing placement changes or instability. Foster children are given rights to educational stability, meaning they have the right to remain at their school of origin – including public preschools – until a “best interest determination” warrants a change. This minimizes educational disruption during placement changes.

DCFS caseworkers must ensure that all foster children between the ages of three and five are enrolled in a high-quality early learning program such as Head Start, Preschool for All, or another model of high-quality child care. If a child is not enrolled when they enter DCFS custody or move to a new placement, DCFS will seek to enroll the child within two days of the move. Children in foster care are automatically eligible for the Child Care Assistance Program. Foster parents do not need to pay a copayment – eliminating the financial burden and ensuring that foster parents can work or attend school while children are well cared for.

Children in foster care are also a priority population for the Early Intervention system for children aged birth-to-three years. Case managers are required to make timely referrals for developmental screenings and services, including physical therapy, speech therapy, and counseling; the new Administrator Portal will allow case managers greater visibility into care options, while the Family Portal will automatically notify foster parents of their eligibility for assistance. DCFS partners with organizations like Erikson Institute to provide specialized consultants who assist caseworkers in making informed decisions about the mental health and developmental needs of young children in care.

Children who meet the federal definition of youth in care are also considered categorically eligible for the state’s Preschool for All program. If a program determines a child is in foster

care, it must allow the child to begin attending the program immediately even if the child does not have complete records; the family must be given reasonable time to present these documents. Programs also cannot ask foster families for income documentation. If there are no slots available at the time of attempted enrollment, program administrators must make every effort to remain in contact with the family and provide a place as soon as one becomes available. Finally, all state-funded home visiting programs in Illinois make children in foster care a priority population.

These priority eligibility and enrollment practices are all designed to ensure that children in foster care have continuous access to high-quality early childhood experiences.

Bonus option #4: Supports for nutritional services for children through CACFP

In Illinois, the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) is administered by ISBE. The program can be accessed by Head Start providers, licensed day care centers, and family day care homes. While states are not required to allow license-exempt providers (such as family, friend, and neighbor caregivers who access child care subsidy funds) to access CACFP funding, Illinois does, which expands the programs reach through the mixed delivery system.

ISBE offers training on CACFP, including webinars on nutrition, administration, fiscal management, menu and meal patterns, and the needs of infants with regard to solid food. Child care resource and referral agencies are also required to provide technical assistance to providers on CACFP implementation.

Illinois has also undertaken numerous other activities to ensure food security for young children.

These include:

- A \$20 million state investment in SNAP to ensure that children and families receive food throughout this fiscal year;

- Providing National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program funds to school-based Head Start and Preschool for All programs; and
- Including children birth-to-five in the Summer Food Service Program.

Additionally, Illinois has created a statewide Children's Adversity Index to measure community-level adversity rates among children, including where children may be experiencing higher rates of food insecurity. The Children's Adversity Index will be incorporated in IDEC's Data and Analytics Hub, and the food insecurity views can be overlayed with the site-level data collected as part of the CACFP dataset (and other related data in early childhood programs) to determine where there might be unmet food access needs for children across Illinois communities.