

Illinois Early Learning Council Research Agenda: Priority Questions

In 2015, the Data, Research, and Evaluation (DRE) Subcommittee of the state's Early Learning Council (ELC) identified potential Research Agenda priority questions. The DRE's goal was to have a small number of questions identified as key priorities to inform researchers and funders of research. While the Subcommittee did not use a set of defined criteria to develop its list, in general it was guided by the question: what information would cause us to behave differently in policy and practice, in ways that would likely lead to better outcomes for young children? The focus was accordingly on questions that, if answered, would help inform changes in policy and practice. This document represents the second version of the Research Agenda, updated in August 2019.

Historical Context

In 2018 the DRE began the process of updating the Research Agenda. It developed an initial list of possible questions, which was brought to the ELC Executive Committee. The Executive Committee agreed that the DRE should share its draft list with other committees and subcommittees to generate their feedback. Based on that feedback, in February 2019 the DRE considered a draft set of questions based on that committee feedback, and added some additional related questions. This document reflects the results of that conversation, and some additional changes made by the ELC Executive Committee in August 2019.

Racial Equity

In 2018, the Executive Committee of the ELC convened meetings to discuss the implementation of racial equity across the work plans of all ELC committees and subcommittees. The Executive Committee formally adopted the following definition for racial equity:

A RACIALLY EQUITABLE SOCIETY VALUES AND EMBRACES ALL RACIAL/ETHNIC IDENTITIES. IN SUCH A SOCIETY, ONE'S RACIAL/ETHNIC IDENTITY (PARTICULARLY BLACK, LATINO, INDIGENOUS, AND ASIAN) IS NOT A FACTOR IN AN INDIVIDUAL'S ABILITY TO PROSPER.

AN EARLY LEARNING SYSTEM THAT IS RACIALLY EQUITABLE IS DRIVEN BY DATA AND ENSURES THAT:

- EVERY YOUNG CHILD AND FAMILY REGARDLESS OF RACE, ETHNICITY, AND SOCIAL CIRCUMSTANCE HAS EVERYTHING S/HE/THEY NEED TO DEVELOP OPTIMALLY;
- RESOURCES, OPPORTUNITIES, REWARDS, AND BURDENS ARE FAIRLY DISTRIBUTED ACROSS GROUPS AND COMMUNITIES SO THAT THOSE WITH THE GREATEST CHALLENGES ARE ADEQUATELY SUPPORTED AND NOT FURTHER DISADVANTAGED; AND
- SYSTEMS AND POLICIES ARE DESIGNED, REFRAMED, OR ELIMINATED TO PROMOTE GREATER JUSTICE FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES.

The DRE Subcommittee is uniquely impacted given the specific call for data driven decision-making. Should any entity consider answering the following questions, it should do so with the intent of incorporating a racial equity in the process. In particular, researchers should consider distinct counts that -- when possible -- should draw comparisons between resource allocations to the general population.

There are data challenges as federal and state agencies, local entities, and programs do not collect uniform data on race or ethnicity. Lack of uniform definitions, differences in data collection practices and data quality should not be deterrent to draw conclusions or make comparisons. Data quality is an important consideration but lack thereof should not necessarily inhibit research. Descriptive counts might be difficult to parse - but when possible, statistical differences and/or practical differences could be important distinctions to inform the conversation. The DRE will continue to advocate for improved data quality at the state level, which will ultimately allow for better research and a richer understanding of equity within the early childhood system.

Going Forward

The DRE recommends that federal, state, local and private dollars be specifically allocated to fund research to advance the early childhood landscape in a way that would lead to better childhood outcomes. The DRE will continue to seek opportunities to engage with researchers and funders of research to advance the agenda, and to the extent possible will track whether or not current research will answer some of these key questions. This document should inform conversations at other early learning tables and the DRE could convene further conversations when applicable.

If you have additional questions regarding this Research Agenda – or information about existing research relevant to this agenda – please contact DRE chair Elliot Regenstein at elliot.regenstein@flpadvisors.com, and/or DRE staffer Carmen Garcia at cgarcia@theounce.org.

Factual Questions

These are questions that DRE believed the state’s Longitudinal Data System should ultimately be able to answer, presumably on an annual basis. Some of them can already be answered in significant part, but they do not necessarily require a research design to answer. Where questions potentially cut across multiple funding streams they were intended to be interpreted broadly to address as much of the system as possible.

2018 Research Agenda <i>Potential</i> Priority Questions
<p>Distinct count and service delivery:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the distinct counts of enrollment across multiple early childhood programs? • To what extent do at-risk children have access to programs? How do we define “access”? • What are the risk factor profiles? Are there patterns or clusters? What do we learn across programs that we don’t learn from the programs individually? • What are the patterns of parental work (and how is this defined?) How effectively are services being provided to families with non-traditional work schedules? • Which communities have concentrations of risk, including: premature birth, low-birth-weight infants, and infant mortality, including infant death due to neglect, or other indicators of at-risk prenatal, maternal, newborn, or child health; poverty; crime; domestic violence; high rates of high-school drop-outs; substance abuse; unemployment; or child maltreatment? • What are the characteristics of programs participating in quality improvement initiatives?

2018 Research Agenda <i>Potential</i> Priority Questions
<p>Workforce:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What credentials do program staff, directors, and family child care providers currently have? What are the gaps in qualifications for program staff, directors, and family child care providers? • How long have staff been in their current program or in the field? • What are the demographics of program staff compared to the general population they serve? Compared to the K-12 sector?
<p>What is the quality and capacity of existing programs or initiatives for early childhood home visiting in the state including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the number and types of programs and the numbers of individuals and families who are receiving services under such programs or initiatives; • the gaps in early childhood home visitation in the State; and • the extent to which such programs or initiatives are meeting the needs of eligible families?

Research Questions

These are questions that DRE believed would require a research study to answer – in particular, questions about the expected impact of different early childhood programs. The questions included here are high-level, and our hope is that any researchers addressing them will also address numerous potential sub-questions that could be included.

2018 Research Agenda <i>Potential</i> Priority Questions
<p>Policy changes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were the impacts of the 2015 emergency rule change to the Child Care Assistance Program? • What have been the impacts of the new federal policy changes related to perinatal care? • What is the impact of the state’s new suspension/expulsion legislation? • What has been the impact of CCDBG reauthorization? • Are there best practices from other states relating to service in communities that lack resources? • What is the impact of the adoption of the Pyramid Model?
<p>English Learners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What services are provided to these children? • What process does program use to determine if outcome is result of language and/or developmental delay? • What is the scope of the shortfall in the demand for qualified bilingual professionals to work with English learners?
<p>Long-term child outcomes (however defined):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What differential outcomes do we see from different ExceleRate levels? • What differential outcomes do we see more broadly by program quality and demographics?

2018 Research Agenda *Potential* Priority Questions

Developmental delays and Inclusion:

- When are we actually identifying children?
- How are we providing continuity of service?
- How are we tracking referrals if a child meets the eligibility for a developmental delay?
- Where are children referred?
- What services are available especially if families miss the cutoff period?
- How many children are referred to the school districts (and Early Intervention) for evaluation?
- Were these children evaluated or not?
- Of those who are evaluated, how many are found eligible/ineligible?
- Of those found eligible, do those children remain in the program or leave special education services?
- Of those found ineligible, are these children able to remain in their ECE program?
- What happens when a child is determined to be ineligible for services?

Absenteeism/attendance:

- What are the impacts of chronic absenteeism or low attendance?
- What interventions work best to address absenteeism? What are promising practices?
- How is the Every Student Succeeds Act impacting chronic absenteeism?

Preschool Enrollment:

- How many at-risk children transition from (licensed and/or unlicensed) family child care and/or family, friend and neighbor care to preschool?
- How many at-risk children were placed in preschool as a result of home visits?

ExceleRate implementation:

- What is the actual cost of quality?
- What factors keep programs from moving up?
- How effective is T&TA?
 - How is “effective” defined? What does this encompass and what types of T&TA does this refer to?

Workforce and workforce pipeline:

- What are characteristics of stayers vs. leavers?
- How effective are workforce preparation programs?
- What is the quality of organizational leadership in the workplace, and how does that relate to leadership qualifications?
- What is the current baseline of data available on staff wages? What is the impact of the new \$15 minimum wage law on teachers? Do increases in minimum wage and likely passage of a teacher salary bill impact recruitment?

2018 Research Agenda *Potential* Priority Questions

Kindergarten Individual Development Survey:

- What is the impact of the Kindergarten Individual Development Survey (KIDS)?
 - How is it impacting the later grades? K-3rd grade? K-12th?
 - What information can be drawn to inform policy?
- How is the opioid crisis impacting multiple systems?
 - What is the state's capacity for providing substance abuse treatment and counseling services to individuals and families in need of such treatment or services?