

**Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Funding Design Workgroup  
Meeting 8**

**June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2025, 4:30 – 6:00 pm**

**Public attendee link:**

[https://aftonpartners.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN\\_NTedBwTdS2KUzmA4e9dSpA#/registration](https://aftonpartners.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_NTedBwTdS2KUzmA4e9dSpA#/registration)

**In attendance**

**Workgroup members:**

Jill Andrews (Kiddie Kollege), Grace Araya (Concordia Place), Shontee Blankenship (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services), Christina De La Rosa (Erie Neighborhood House), Lee Eklund (Malone's Early Learning Center), Minerva Garcia Sanchez (DeKalb Community Unit School District 428), Kesha Harris (Parent, TAC Member), April Janney (Illinois Action for Children), Tom Layman (Center for Early Learning Funding Equity), Marcy Mendenhall (SAL Family and Community Services), Anastasios (Taso) Michalopoulos (Right Start Pediatric Therapies, Inc), Candace Moore (City of Chicago), Delreen Schmidt-Lenz (IECMH and Early Intervention Provider), Lesley Schwatz (Illinois Department of Human Services), Jodi Scott (Regional Office of Education 33), Matt Seaton (Illinois State Board of Education), Robin Steans (Advance Illinois), Bryan Stokes III (McCormick Foundation), Edie Washington-Gurley (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services), Emma Watters Reardon (Illinois Healthcare and Family Services).

**Subcommittee members:**

Catherine Enright (Kids Above All), Trish Rooney (Illinois Department of Human Services)

**State Agency Members and Consultants:**

Ann Whalen (Early Childhood Transition Director), Maya Portillo (Project Director for Funding Design, IDEC), Thomas Bazan (Chief Fiscal Officer, IDEC)

Liz Garza (Afton Partners), Megan Bock (Afton Partners), Marissa Ortiz (Afton Partners), Heather Wendell (Afton Partners), Abby McCartney (Afton Partners), Katie Reed (Afton Partners), Beza Bulega (Afton Partners), Siri Smillie (Afton Partners), Kayla Rosen (Afton Partners), Crystal Roman (Afton Partners)

German Barrios – Interpreter

**Members of the public: 20**

Amber Peters, Angela Farwig, Beata Skorusa, Becky Speerly, Bob Spatz, Britt Gordon-McKeon, Chelsea Guillen, Cindy La, Cindy Luzeniecki, Ireta Gasner, Jean Davis, Karen Berman, Kathleen Kimmey, Krysten Emanuel, Lori Orr, Mary Kestel, Miya Lewis, Rachel Charters, Rosario Hernandez, Rowan Atwood

**Minutes**

**1. Welcome & Introduction – Megan Bock, Afton Partners (15 min)**

Megan Bock (Afton Partners) started the meeting and interpreter German Barrios gave instructions for accessing Spanish interpretation. Megan welcomed Maya Portillo, Project Director for Funding Design for the Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC). Maya introduced herself and expressed her excitement about joining the IDEC team.

Megan invited participants to introduce themselves in the chat while she shared meeting reminders and housekeeping items for the virtual meeting. Megan reviewed the meeting norms and agenda. She reminded the Workgroup of the shared the goals of funding design and emerging design principles.

Megan reviewed takeaways from the discussion on “imaging what is possible” at the last meeting in May:

- If you were to design a funding system from scratch to promote these goals and principles, what would it look like?
  - Universal access for families without the need to navigate eligibility
  - A single funding stream with a simple, non-competitive grant for providers
  - A high quality and well-compensated workforce across services and delivery methods
  - A dedicated revenue source with stable, ongoing funding
- What tensions do you feel or anticipate? What tradeoffs might have to be made?
  - Largest tension is in serving less children fully vs serving more children with less funding per child
  - Increasing compensation for the workforce may mean less funding available to fund other parts of the ECE system or serve fewer children

Discussion:

- Bryan Stokes III (workgroup member) asked for clarification on the last point
  - Megan clarified that increasing compensation and expanding services or serving more children both require additional resources. If resources are limited, there is a tension between investments in these priorities.
  - Catherine Enright (subcommittee member) shared that from a program perspective, when a program raises salaries but can't serve fewer children, other areas of the budget may need to be cut to accommodate the raises.

Megan also summarized themes from the discussion on Targeted Universalism:

- Workgroup members discussed the trade-offs between an approach that first prioritizes access versus an approach that first prioritizes comprehensive services for children with the highest needs:
  - Some were worried that focusing on access may result in lower quality services or not fully meeting the needs of children and families.
  - Members suggested a phased approach towards universalism, starting with targeted groups to demonstrate success and build investment over time.
  - Members were interested in considering how regional strategies and local coordination can support ECEC and differentiating funding based on need.

## **2. Discussion: funding and partnerships – Megan Bock, Afton Partners, and Jodi Scott, Regional Office of Education 33 (35 minutes)**

Given feedback from workgroup members and interest around learning about different partnership models, Megan introduced Funding Design Workgroup Member Jodi Scott (Regional Office of Education 33) and asked: What partnerships have you established to expand access to quality care in your community?

- Jodi provided context about the Regional Office of Education 33, which operates all of the Early Childhood Block Grants (ECBG) in their region. To accomplish this, they have created collaborations with many child care centers and have now also started working with child care homes to deliver Preschool for All (PFA) and Prevention Initiative (PI) services.
- They also have three doulas that work out of the ROE 33 office and coordinate with hospitals, and partnerships with the local hospitals, and local children's museum.
- They have a diaper bank to provide diapers weekly for all home visiting families.
- They work closely with the Birth to Five organization in their area. Birth to Five helped bring to the table "non-early childhood" partners such as business owners and mayors, which has been a great value to their work.
- Funding streams include ECBG, local funds, Birth to Five, family literacy grant.
- Using these grants, they are able to braid and blend funding to provide comprehensive services to families in their region.
- Jodi noted that using a regional approach and partnering with multiple school districts has been very beneficial. This gives the ROE flexibility to shift funds as needed, for example if an ECBG program isn't able to expend all of their funds (hiring delays, other reasons), they can shift funds to other areas in the region, including across district boundaries or settings (schools and child care programs).

Megan: How have your current funding streams facilitated collaboration? How have they made collaboration more difficult?

- Jodi shared that the ability to shift dollars in regional approach has facilitated collaboration across the region.
- She also noted that they have hired shared employees who can serve multiple smaller districts in the (rural) region, expanding the services those smaller districts are able to offer.

Megan: What is important to remember as we design the future funding system to encourage partnerships and local support for early childhood?

- Jodi responded that it's important that programs to know budgets well in advance, regardless of the service.
- She encouraged allowing blending and braiding, not creating additional obstacles.
- Finally, Jodi noted that the regional approach has been so beneficial for their area.

Discussion:

- Catherine Enright (subcommittee member) commented that regional approach can reduce competition and equity across districts or entities in the region that have varying levels of resource
- April Janney (workgroup member) also appreciated the shared approach. She asked about the impact to families of moving children across programs to the slots that are available.
  - Jodi agreed that the process of shifting slots isn't perfect and some places still have waitlists, while in some areas families have a choice between child care centers and school-based opportunity.
  - Transportation can also be a challenge
- Jill Andrews (workgroup member) asked how child care centers and family child care partner with the ROE.
  - Jodi clarified that child care centers are sites for ECBG and even the center in the region that doesn't have ECBG is a partner in other ways.
- Lee Eklund (workgroup member) gave kudos to Jodi – he appreciates this model, particularly the ability for children to move around the region, rather than being restricted to a particular school district.

Megan reminded that group that this is just one example of community partnerships demonstrating how providers and intermediaries can partner together, but there are many other examples and models.

The Workgroup had 10 minutes in small groups to discuss the following prompts:

- How does your experience align with or differ from this discussion?
- How can funding encourage community collaboration to support early childhood?
- What needs to be reimaged to encourage stronger partnerships?

Small group discussion summaries:

- Group 1: The group noted that some funding streams – such as Head Start – require community partnerships and partnerships can also be driven by relationships and networks at a community level. In some areas, programs or service providers feel more competitive than collaborative as providers struggle to access funding.
- Group 2: The group shared specific examples of leveraging regional early childhood advisory councils and IRIS for coordinated intake and referrals to other services. They also noted that a shift from funding individual programs to funding partnerships had a big impact toward collective impact rather than a competition of resources. They discussed that even when collaboratively funded such as ECBG in Chicago, individual programs are incentivized to spend down funds so their portion isn't reduced in subsequent years.
- Group 3: The group was interested in learning more about other models of partnership and collaboration, particularly how those models play out based on different geographies, community resources, and demographics. They talked about funding incentives and requirements as options to drive collaboration, and how local partnerships could address specific challenges in a community.
- Group 4: The group acknowledged that the geographical context of ROE 33 helped to make it a successful model, but other areas – like the City of Chicago – may need another approach. They also discussed the opportunity to encourage or incentivize collaboration as a contract

requirement, as home visiting does to ensure coordinated intake. There is more to learn about the effectiveness of this strategy from the family and provider perspective.

Public attendees had the opportunity to respond to the same prompts on Padlet [see all Padlet comments in the Appendix].

- English - <https://padlet.com/croman65/june-funding-design-workgroup-community-discussion-english-45xls9l8i9weg071>
- Spanish - <https://padlet.com/croman65/june-funding-design-workgroup-community-discussion-spanish-26b6uq9cic64sln4>

### **3. Subcommittee updates – Megan Bock, Kayla Rosen, and Marissa Ortiz, Afton Partners, and Catherine Enright, Kids Above All (15 minutes)**

Megan shared the purpose of two subcommittees. The *Funding Alignment Subcommittee* will focus on considering how funding across programs can be better aligned and organized in service of our goals. The *Funding Distribution Subcommittee* will focus on how the state should distribute funds to providers in a way that best supports our goals. Megan also reminded the Funding Design Workgroup of the relationship between the workgroup and subcommittees. The Workgroup establishes principles and direction, helps to develop the charge of the subcommittees, and will review and pressure test recommendations that emerge from the subcommittees. The subcommittee's role is to engage in deeper discussion on specific topics, research, analyze, and debate first drafts, and bring considerations and recommendations to full group.

Kayla Rosen (Afton Partners) provided a summary of the Funding Alignment Subcommittee including the essential question, membership, selection process.

- Essential question: How can funding across all programs be better aligned and organized in service of our goals?
- Membership:
  - Amber Peters, Enriching Partnerships for Early Learning
  - Catherine Enright, Kids Above All
  - Grace Araya,\* Concordia Place
  - Gudelia Lopez, Latino Policy Forum
  - Janice Bell Martin, Under Carrey's Care
  - Jenny Metcalf, ISBE
  - Jennifer Garrison, CUST 203
  - Jodi Scott,\* ROE 33
  - Lesley Schwartz,\* IDHS
  - Melinda Martinez-Epperson, The Play Lab
  - Robin Steans,\* Advance Illinois
  - \* denotes Funding Design Workgroup member
- These representatives were chosen with these goals in mind:
  - Be inclusive of bringing new voices and wanted to include people who indicated interest on the funding design workgroup interest form last fall

- Have diverse perspectives and represent different geographical regions and provider types
- Create continuity between the subcommittee and the workgroup
- Include representatives from state government

Catherine Enright (subcommittee member) shared a summary of the conversation at the first meeting (June 23).

- Key takeaways:
  - Current misalignment across funding streams creates confusion, frustration, and sometimes arbitrary barriers for both families and providers
  - A majority of providers do not utilize multiple public funding streams, potentially due to the complexity and administrative burden
  - Criteria for alignment might include:
    - Similar or highly connected purpose
    - Common recipient pool
    - Similar child/family and provider eligibility
    - Enough flexibility in federal requirements, or ability to align state requirements to federal requirements
  - Opportunities for alignment could include **CCAP and PFA/PFAE** because of common recipients **and home visiting funding** across IDHS, MIECHV, and PI
- Next steps and questions:
  - What are the greatest opportunities for alignment and barriers to streamlining funding?
  - To what extent and how do we address program standards requirements in the funding alignment conversation?

Discussion:

- Several members requested that subcommittee membership be posted, along with the region and role each member represents.
- Jill Andrews (workgroup member) commented in the chat: Alignment of policies of DCFS/IDHS child care funds would be great. Example: DCFS doesn't allow providers to use their total enrollment of all children on assistance when determining if they met the 70% attendance threshold.

Marissa Ortiz (Afton Partners) provided a summary of the Funding Distribution Subcommittee including the essential question, membership, and a summary of the first meeting which took place earlier today (June 24).

- Essential question: How should the state distribute funds to providers in a way that best supports our goals?
- Membership:
  - Barbara Corby, Step by Step
  - Delreen Schmidt-Lenz,\* EI & IECMH
  - Evan Krauss, East Side Aligned
  - Kimberly Bianchini, Advance Preschool
  - Nykisha Barefield, Oswego CUSD 308 & Birth to Five Action Council Member

- Priscilla Bahena,\* Parent
- Rosary Horne, East Aurora District 131
- Shauna Ejeh, Illinois Action for Children
- Stacey Mixon, DCFS
- Tiffany Taylor,\* Grandma's House Group Child Care Home
- Trish Rooney, IDHS
- Key takeaways
  - Different distribution mechanisms have different strengths and challenges. It is important to match the mechanism with the purpose of the funding.
  - Key considerations include:
    - Administrative burden
    - Up-front funding vs. Reimbursement-based
  - Emerging ideas:
    - Non-competitive grants could work well for "base" funding and competitive grants could work well for "add-on"
    - Programs that have proven consistency over time could have longer timelines for grant renewal or simpler application processes
- Next steps and questions
  - Question: What are opportunities to connect the distribution & alignment conversations over the summer?

Discussion:

- Bryan Stokes III (workgroup member) asked in the chat: This might be too early, but what kinds of program components would be considered "base" vs "add on"?
  - Marissa agreed this is a good question, it was not something the group has discussed yet.

#### **4. Discussion: federal updates and implications for funding design – Abby McCartney, Afton Partners (20 minutes)**

Abby McCartney (Afton Partners) presented the federal funding context and a high-level look at funding sources and amounts for current EC programs in Illinois. Then Abby talked through details for the Child Care Development fund (CCDF), Head Start/Early Head Start and the Maternal Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) programs. For each, she gave an overview of what is federally required and options or flexibilities that states have in implementation of those programs.

CCDF Discussion

- Catherine Enright (subcommittee member) asked what portion is from CCDF vs. TANF, etc.
  - Maya Portillo (IDEC) shared the link to the "Funding Streams Guide" for additional detail: <https://idec.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/idec/documents/resources-materials-and-reports/resources-final-erlychildhood-programs-fundingstreams-guide.pdf>

- Grace Araya (workgroup member) asked for clarification about “contracted slots,” Trish Rooney (IDHS) explained that there are some contracts with providers for a certain number of slots, that a provider then fills with eligible children.

Head Start/Early Head Start discussion:

- Robin Steans (workgroup member) acknowledged that all of these federal programs are in flux.

MIECHV discussion:

- Lesley Schwartz clarified that states can fund models not approved federal with state dollars

Abby provided additional information about on the evolving federal context. The budget reconciliation bill which has passed the House (commonly known as “One Big Beautiful Bill”) does not include impact to these programs but does have impacts to Medicaid, other programs for children and families, and other impacts to state budgets. Appropriations bills (which have yet to be introduced) will indicate spending levels for these programs. The President’s budget did propose changes to funding levels on some of these programs, but Congress does not necessarily adopt the President’s budget, rather will develop their own through the appropriations bills.

- Catherine Enright (subcommittee member) noted in the chat: Not sure if this belongs in the distribution discussion but might be worth noting. MIECHV funding is authorized by Congress. It was last authorized by a standalone bill that funded MIECHV for 5 years from FY23 to FY27. Reauthorization of MIECHV is scheduled for the Fall session of 2026. It shouldn't be affected by the "Big Beautiful Bill"

The group had a few minutes for discussion and reflection on three questions:

- What questions do you have about the current state and federal funding landscape?
- What challenges do federal requirements pose?
- What opportunities do you see to innovate within federal requirements?

Discussion

- Marcy Mendenhall (workgroup member) commented that the stacking of these safety net services and funds is what makes me nervous. When the supports for families do not exist at the federal level, that puts a strain on local providers and makes it difficult to support our families and makes our families more vulnerable.
- Robin Steans (workgroup member) noted that Medicaid is really important, including being used in early intervention, so the ripple effects of changes to Medicaid will be felt.
- Bryan Stokes III (workgroup member) noted that there are many programs that currently blend and braid multiple funding in different ways. How will the subcommittees ensure that they have representation from all of these different models?
  - Ann Whalen (IDEC) responded that we want to understand how we have traditionally navigated and worked around funding barriers but also want to understand what the state can do to reduce the complexity and need for workaround. She also encouraged/asked for additional voices to be shared with the team while noting a need to balance the size of the subcommittee to engage in discussions.



- Abby added that some of what we have already heard from providers is: yes, they are doing creative things, but it is really challenging and complicated and they would like not to need to do that.
- Bryan commented in the chat: Agreed that we should not be stuck with how we have done things in the past. I think it would be helpful for Afton to intentionally seek out providers who represent a variety of those blending/braiding models (at different program and organization sizes) and capture their input for us to consider at these meetings. Not every organization approaches it the same way (there's no need to give a parent three applications!) and we should start from a base of learning.
- April Janney (workgroup member) asked if there are plans for the two subcommittees to have cross conversations to ensure they don't go in two different directions? What will the communication be between the subcommittees and the workgroup?
  - Abby responded that this workgroup will be the place. We are balancing the tension of wanting to share broad perspectives and go deeper.
- Marcy Mendenhall (workgroup member) – asked Ann to clarify what the is priority – quality? Access? Serving the most vulnerable kids? What is our north star?
  - Ann responded that this group has had some conversations here to begin to tease that out. The funding design conversations should center family and provider experience to let this guide where we head and understand the implications of tradeoffs and decisions.

Non-workgroup attendees also had the opportunity to respond to the prompts in Padlet [all Padlet comments are included in the appendix].

- English – <https://padlet.com/croman65/june-funding-design-workgroup-federal-funds-discussion-engli-xef7nvjtwzmgchry>
- Spanish - <https://padlet.com/croman65/june-funding-design-workgroup-federal-funds-discussion-spani-kuf9itfevfsi63vu>

## 5. Public comment, next steps & adjourn – Abby McCartney, Afton Partners (5 min)

There was no public comment. Abby closed the meeting by reminding attendees and workgroup members of upcoming meetings and the post-meeting survey.

## Appendix: Padlet comments

### Collaboration and Partnerships

How does your experience align with or differ from this discussion?

- We serve 4 counties with multiple ROE's this sounds great but in bigger areas would not work.
- We serve 4 districts within one county and ROE.
- Community definitions: The definition of "community" is so different across the state given if very different populations densities. West40 (West Cook ROE) contains 40 school districts of

vastly different size, some K-8, some HS, some Unit, and every EBF tier. They have very little in common except that they are in West Cook County. Creating an operational definition of Local/Community/Region is necessary to implement anything statewide in statute.

- Not all programs require partnerships: As a program that previously received PFA and HS funding, I can tell you that not all programs need partnerships — and for those that do, the specific partnership needs can vary. It should be part of the role of some CCR&Rs to help inform programs about the partnerships available to them.

How can funding encourage community collaboration to support early childhood?

- Blending, Braiding and Smoothing: The ability to blend, braid, and smooth funding at a higher "collaboration" level provides the necessary economies of scale (expertise, staff, technology, need, etc.) (has the potential to) make funding more efficient.
- Some states have established special taxing districts dedicated to early childhood, whereby districts can levy property or sales taxes to fund ECEC programs in their community. I think this acts as a way to build political will for increased investments in ECEC and can foster community collaboration when more people are invested in where their money is going.
  - Yes! And providing options for funding to flow through government entities like counties and cities before being sub-granted to programs in their area can also encourage those cities and counties to feel more invested in early childhood in their area and contribute local funding to support it.
  - Illinois has Special Recreation Associations (SRA) that are funded by an addition to Park Districts taxes (outside of tax caps) might be a model for early childhood.
- Funding Agencies' Roles: How can the funding agency play a more active role in supporting these partnerships? Why is the burden of identifying and securing them placed entirely on the programs? I'm hopeful that the new Department of Early Childhood can begin to take on some of this responsibility.
- Making sure that funding is designed in ways that allow for multiple funding streams to flow through the same higher-level entity and being braided and integrated at that level before being sub-granted to individual programs-- whether a larger region in more rural areas, or a city or county in more populated areas-- can really make things work better for kids/families and programs.
  - I don't think it would need to default to the most stringent. The state could put some guardrails on what local entities making subgrants can do if that seems like it is needed-- that could address past or potential problems without throwing the baby out with the bathwater...
  - Isn't that what DFSS in Chicago did/does?
  - Some programs just want CCAP but don't want to deal with the requirements of HS
  - If one agency receives all the funding and gets to decide which programs are awarded funds, which set of funding stream requirements would they follow? Would it default to the most stringent, like Head Start? I'm concerned that concentrating that level of decision-making power in a single agency is a serious mistake. We've already seen how this played out in the city of Chicago — and it didn't go well.
  - Agreed -- another possibility to consider that is larger than city/village, but smaller than county is to consider multiple municipalities that feed into the same HS district

- Community collaborations: I would expect that places where there is an organized collaborative at the local level (particularly if there is funding available for those role - as there has been off and on over the years) that you see stronger and most accessible partnerships and local planning. While we have focused on building at the regional level, we still need collabs who are even closer to the ground for a variety of reasons - including the topic at hand.

What needs to be reimaged to encourage stronger partnerships?

- State programs such as home visiting need to be extended to service through 5 years. I am EI and we serve through 3, home visiting serves to 3, and in the perfect world all EI would qualify for school programs. There are not enough slots, not enough teachers, and not enough rooms and then they fall through the cracks until they go to kindergarten!
- Our county has only HeadStart and a couple of private part-time preschools. We only have two child care facilities in one area of the county. Would love more collaboration.
- Funding Streams that Incorporate Local Dollars (governmental, philanthropic, and family/parent): When dealing only with state money, adjacent communities with different economic needs often can't collaborate, because local, state, and federal monies are often very hard to integrate.
  - Everyone functions in their own silo!

### **Federal Funding Discussion**

What questions do you have about the current state and federal funding landscape?

What challenges do federal requirements pose?

- Federal regulations are often a source of important "leveling" of expectations across the country - so that while state flexibility seems appealing - and IL would likely be a responsible actor - many states would drive to the lowest possible point (this is one reason why Head Start is a federal to local stream - to avoid that and generate expectations of quality across the country). So in this current climate i think we should be thoughtful in our conversations about how federal requirements play out in our state system and perhaps focus more on where we have flexibilities.
  - I don't necessarily say this to say that we should always align to the federal if it is a higher standard because i know that causes some challenges. That can be an option, but also we can use state dollars in more flexible ways and align as much as possible.

What opportunities do you see to innovate within federal requirements?

- When possible it seems best for the state to help absorb the "risk/uncertainty" of federal funding changes and requirements rather than putting all the onus on families/providers (especially small providers).
- Ideally, state and federal requirements for programs should align, especially when they are more bureaucratic than scope. When the scope is different, make sure that there is a real pedagogical reason for different scope (rather than just legacy funding or regulatory reasons).
- Finding ways for state funding to fill in the gaps by paying for kids, families, staff, and/or expenses that don't qualify to receive federal funding for various reasons-- with a more integrated and manageable set of requirements for programs across funding streams.

