



**Illinois Department of Early Childhood**

# **SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS WORKGROUP**

**December 2, 2024, 2:30 – 3:30 pm**



- Welcome, agenda & connector
- Preliminary findings and themes
- Themes and discussion by participant role
- Public comment
- Next steps

# AGENDA

# Community Agreements



Stay engaged



Speak your truth in a  
safe



Take space, make  
space



Allow time for  
interpretation



Experience  
discomfort- and  
name it



Show empathy



Expect and accept  
lack of closure



Come prepared to  
actively participate in  
meetings



Avoid the use of  
acronyms



Be flexible

# Introductions



Name

Favorite winter activity

# Workgroup Engagement

## Workgroup Members

- <https://bit.ly/4epcNp6>



## Members of the Public

- <https://bit.ly/4htrqdH>



# Using Padlet

**Padlet**

All Children Thrive + 6 • 2d

## Supporting Children with Special Needs Workgroup

For workgroup members only

**12/2 Parent Feedback**

**Theme 1: Accessible and affordable services**

All Children Thrive 2d

0 0

+ Add comment

**Theme 2: Communication and coordination for cohesive support**

All Children Thrive 15m

0 0

+ Add comment

**Theme 3: Consistent and culturally responsive relationships**

All Children Thrive 2d

0 0

+ Add comment

**All Themes: General Feedback**

All Children Thrive 7m

0 0

+ Add comment

# Engagement Opportunities

Bi-monthly  
Listening Sessions

Chi by Design  
Family / Caregiver  
Design Sessions

Transition Advisory  
Committee

Full Early Learning  
Council

Early Learning  
Council  
Committees

Child Care Advisory  
Council

Illinois Interagency  
Council on Early  
Intervention

ECACE Consortium  
Advisory Council

Ad hoc workgroups

Other Regional or  
Program Specific  
Advisories

Listening Survey on  
Illinois ECE  
Governance  
Transition

Regional listening  
sessions

More to come!

# Themes and Findings

FALL  
20  
24

## TRANSFORMING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN ILLINOIS

### Three family-focused themes emerged from the data

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

#### ACCESSIBLE AND AFFORDABLE SERVICES

Families' experiences accessing high quality child care, home visiting, early intervention and preschool services across the state vary and many communities face barriers to accessible and affordable services.

"Costs are so high! Private providers and CBOs are struggling, and parents who don't qualify for subsidies or HS can't afford to pay." – Parent in Cook County/Chicago

#### COMMUNICATION AND COORDINATION FOR COHESIVE SUPPORT

Families are more likely to receive the services that will support a child's healthy development when strong relationships exist between multiple providers, state and local agencies, and intermediary organizations.

"Continue community collaborations. It is not a single person's responsibility, it's a group effort to help serve our kids. It is bigger than one person." – Meeting convener form

#### CONSISTENT AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Some families experience supportive and culturally diverse environments while others expressed a desire for more inclusive and culturally competent services and relationships.

"I really value the caring staff in early childhood services. They make it easy for my child to learn and feel safe. The clear communication and helpful resources have been great. I hope these positive experiences stay the same for all families." – Parent in Cook County



# Three Family-Focused Themes

## 1 ACCESSIBLE AND AFFORDABLE SERVICES

Families' experiences accessing high quality child care, home visiting, early intervention and preschool services across the state vary and many communities face barriers to accessible and affordable services.

"Costs are so high! Private providers and CBOs are struggling, and parents who don't qualify for subsidies or HS can't afford to pay." – *Parent in Cook County/Chicago*

## 2 COMMUNICATION AND COORDINATION FOR COHESIVE SUPPORT

Families are more likely to receive the services that will support a child's healthy development when strong relationships exist between multiple providers, state and local agencies, and intermediary organizations.

"Continue community collaborations. It is not a single person's responsibility, it's a group effort to help serve our kids. It is bigger than one person." – *Meeting convener form*

## 3 CONSISTENT AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Some families experience supportive and culturally diverse environments while others expressed a desire for more inclusive and culturally competent services and relationships.

"I really value the caring staff in early childhood services. They make it easy for my child to learn and feel safe. The clear communication and helpful resources have been great. I hope these positive experiences stay the same for all families." – *Parent in Cook County*



TRANSFORMING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN ILLINOIS

# Barriers to Early Childhood Education and Care

The co-design workshops identified significant challenges that prevent children and families from accessing quality care and learning, as well as barriers providers face in delivering services that meet their unique needs. Co-designers identified 20 key challenges hindering access, quality care, and learning delivery. These challenges must be addressed to ensure the early childhood ecosystem fully meets existing needs, anticipates and provides interventions for future demands, and fosters trust and confidence amongst all stakeholders.



Information  
navigation and  
accessibility



Cross-collaboration  
and communication



Holistic  
well-being



Professional  
development and  
supports



Dynamic learning  
environments and  
diverse learning  
needs

## TRANSFORMING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN ILLINOIS

# Drivers

Illinois must continue its approach to reimagine high-quality early childhood education and care support services to achieve the desired outcomes. We propose five (5) drivers to enable the Department of Early Childhood to create equitable outcomes for children and families.



Bridge digital and  
physical  
infrastructure  
divides



Advance  
communication and  
information  
exchange



Strengthen  
cross-sector  
collaboration



Prioritize holistic  
family well-being



Invest in workforce  
excellence



## Families appreciate the mixed delivery system and experience barriers accessing services

Families in rural areas, multilingual families, and families with children who have special needs described difficulties with accessing services. Specific challenges include:

- **Finding information.** Families described challenges with navigating early childhood education and care services specifically related to finding information about services they may be eligible for, lengthy applications, repetitive information asked across multiple applications.
- **Services not available in their community and long waitlists.** Services may not be available or open during times of day that work for the family. Families frequently mentioned wait lists for child care programs or long wait times to receive EI services.
- **Lack of full day** around care is n
- **Lack of transpo** attend EI appoi

AFTON™

"Access to EI services can be extremely limited in rural areas. I ended up **driving about 200 miles per week for my two kids' therapy appointments** over the last four years. The EI system needs to better compensate its providers (including paying them for missed appointments) and incentivize them to serve rural communities by paying them for travel to more remote areas."

- Parent participant (County

## Theme

# 1



Information  
navigation and  
accessibility



Cross-collaboration  
and communication



Holistic  
well-being



Professional  
development and  
supports



Dynamic learning  
environments and  
diverse learning  
needs

# Questions for Parents

- What resonates with you? Have you experienced these issues?
- What is missing?
- What short-term solution(s) may address one issue?





## Families value continuity of services and want providers to work together

Parents and caregivers expect providers to work with one another to support their child and emphasized the value of parent or family support services or parent groups as important resources to support their children's healthy development. Specifically, parents appreciate:

- Smooth transitions between programs or collaboration with multiple providers to ensure continuity of services and prevent interruptions to their child's developmental progress.
- Parent support groups that help families learn about and connect to resources for their child's development

"Early Childhood/Home Visit programs are always great for a new parent. You learn new things to teach and provide for your child and they are always helping you get in touch to the program you may need for your child, whether its Early Intervention Services to a doctor's office who accepts your health insurance."

- Parent in Lake County

## Theme

# 2



Information  
navigation and  
accessibility



Cross-collaboration  
and communication



Holistic  
well-being



Professional  
development and  
supports



Dynamic learning  
environments and  
diverse learning  
needs

# Questions for Parents

- What resonates with you? Have you experienced these issues?
- What is missing?
- What short-term solution(s) may address one issue?



## FAMILY EXPERIENCE: RELATIONSHIPS

# Families emphasized the importance of positive relationships with providers and would like services available in their home language

When families shared about positive experiences, they often mentioned supportive and culturally responsive staff and robust communication. Specifically, parents value:

- Caring and responsive teachers in ECE settings
- Home visiting services and the resources their home visitor shares with them
- Consistency with providers/caregivers that enables trusting relationships to form
- Robust and consistent communication
- Services delivered in their preferred language

*"I've appreciated the supportive staff who truly care about my child's development and the strong communication among educators and families. The flexibility in scheduling has also been a huge help. I value these aspects and hope they remain the same as they make a real difference in our experience."  
- Parent in DuPage County*

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

## Theme

# 3



# Questions for Parents

- What resonates with you? Have you experienced these issues?
- What is missing?
- What short-term solution(s) may address one issue?



## Providers identified workforce challenges as a key factor to a lack of access to affordable care

Providers noted that a lack of adequate resources create challenges with serving children with disabilities, families living in rural areas, and those who speak languages other than English at home.

- Providers struggle to appropriately staff classrooms due to a lack of qualified staff and workforce shortages in their communities. Many providers described challenges recruiting and retaining staff, especially in rural areas of the state.
- Providers are struggling to meet the complex needs of children in their care and want additional classroom support or ratio adjustments, especially for programs serving priority populations.

"Waitlists and common use of virtual services (especially in EI) have created a barrier to access and lower quality services for many families. The way EI providers are reimbursed disincentivizes providers to be in person and to keep engaging families with multiple stressors in their lives." — EO

# Theme

# 1



Information  
navigation and  
accessibility



Cross-collaboration  
and communication



Holistic  
well-being



Professional  
development and  
supports



Dynamic learning  
environments and  
diverse learning  
needs



## PROVIDER EXPERIENCE: COMMUNICATION AND COORDINATION

### Providers benefit from collaboration with different services and elevated challenges with working across systems

- Strong local collaboration with early childhood intermediaries such as CCR&Rs and advocacy organizations have helped providers better meet the needs of families.
- ECE providers shared that Early Intervention therapists supporting in classrooms were helpful and highlighted the importance of establishing relationships with DCFS representatives.
- Providers **would like more collaboration with school districts and opportunities to shape the policies** and procedures that impact them.
- System communication and collaboration challenges include:
  - Tense relationships with DCFS licensing staff, citing process challenges, inconsistency with rule interpretation, and belief that DCFS reps were “not acting in the best interest of providers, children, or families.”
  - Slow background check clearance process which impedes hiring qualified directors and teachers.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

“Since COVID, it is impossible to hire teacher qualified and director qualified staff. Background check clearances take too long to clear.”

- Center based ECE provider, Menard County

We have a good variety of services available with child care, prek, birth to three, EI, etc. Continue with a focus on funding and quality. **Our services through the school district have good communication and relationships with community agencies to help support each other.**

- K12 Partner in Schuyler County

## Theme

# 2

## PROVIDER EXPERIENCE: RELATIONSHIPS

# Providers described the importance of relationships in their work and asked for more opportunities to develop their skills

Providers across ECEC services expressed fulfillment with building trusting relationships, including with families who need additional support. They are also eager to access professional development to build their instructional and relational skills.

- Providers with long-running centers noted how longevity in the community has built trust and strong relationships with families.
- Providers valued serving priority populations including teen parents, low-income families, and multilingual learners.
- Providers would like to see more opportunities for career growth and advancement and would like Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE), Smart Start Workforce Grants, Pyramid Model training to be expanded or continued.
- Home-based family child care providers are interested in more opportunities to access funding for small businesses or homes.

"Working one on one with families has been eye opening to me. The impact that we have with families as home visitors is visible daily."  
- Home visitor in Cook County/Chicago

"Access to credentials, professional development and academic advancement have been transformative and the sole reason I'm still in the field."  
- Center based ECE provider, Will County

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

# Theme

# 3



# Questions for Providers, Educators, etc.

- In your role, what resonates with you?
- What is missing?
- If applicable, what is one short-term solution your organization is doing to address these findings?



PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

## Participants recommended improving equitable access to ECE services, especially for historically underserved groups

Participants suggested opportunities that include:

- Providing services and resources in multiple languages
- Streamlining applications
- Offering navigators or other navigation support for families to understand available resources
- Addressing transportation barriers
- Providing more equitable distribution of resources and adequate funding
- Creating shared definition of quality across funding streams
- Prioritizing including children with special needs in high-quality classrooms

**"A streamlined referral process between agencies...** will eliminate the need for the families to do all of the legwork independently, as well as help providers know which concerns have been identified and which supports are already in place."  
*- PK-12 staff in Schuyler County*

# Theme

# 1



Information  
navigation and  
accessibility



Cross-collaboration  
and communication



Holistic  
well-being



Professional  
development and  
supports



Dynamic learning  
environments and  
diverse learning  
needs

## PRIORITIZING EQUITY: COMMUNICATION AND COORDINATION

RELIMINARY FINDINGS

Participants recommended creating a coordinated system that fosters collaboration across system levels

Participants suggested opportunities that include:

- Listening to families and engaging them in decision-making
- Partnering with trusted community organizations
- Leveraging local and regional strengths
- Using funding structures as a tool to incentivize collaboration
- Creating a family advisory board
- Embedding equity practices at the new agency including hiring diverse staff and leaders that reflect diverse communities and providing training on diversity, equity and inclusion, implicit bias, and cultural competency

"It's crucial to **train staff on cultural competency and bias** to ensure every family, regardless of background, feels respected and supported."

- Parent in Green County

# Theme

# 2



## PRIORITIZING EQUITY: RELATIONSHIPS

PRELIMINARY FINDING

### Participants recommended strengthening and compensating the ECE workforce

Participants suggested opportunities that include:

- Recruiting a diverse workforce
- Providing training on culturally responsive professional development supporting children with special needs
- Increasing the number of staff in classrooms
- Providing adequate funding that acknowledges the value of providers' work and effort
- Supporting providers in rural areas

**"Changing pay structures so that providers can be reimbursed at higher rates for working within historically disinvested and rural, isolated communities.** Training providers to focus on family strengths, emphasizing engagement strategies to relate with parents and see their abilities rather than a constant default to deficit and risk mindset."

*- Cook County Home Visitor*

# Theme

# 3



# Questions for State Staff, Legislator, etc.

- In your role, what resonates with you?
- What theme are you interested in knowing more about or what questions do you have?





# Public Comment

# NEXT STEPS





Illinois Department of Early Childhood