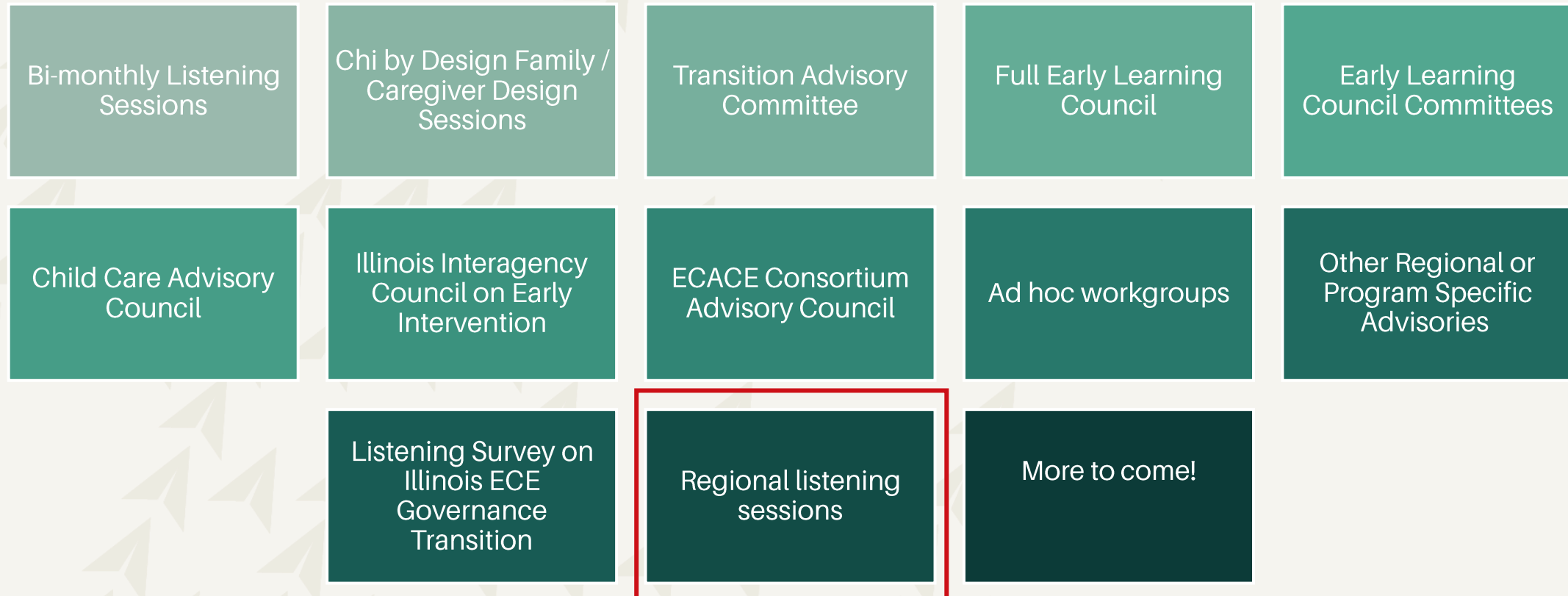


# Regional Listening Sessions are one of many community engagement opportunities to inform the new Department of Early Childhood





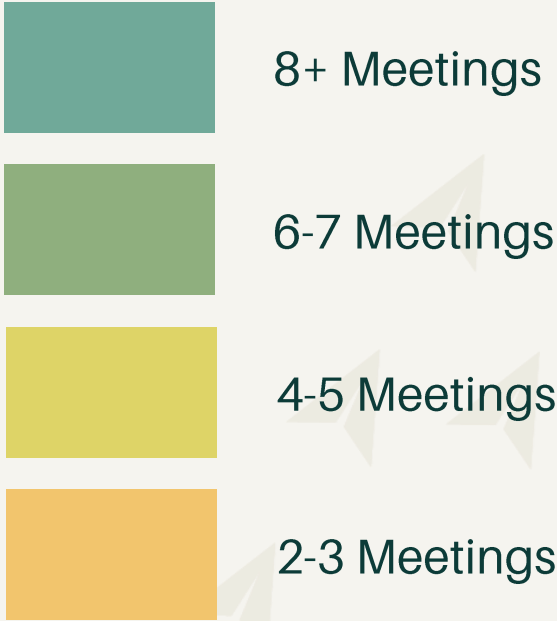
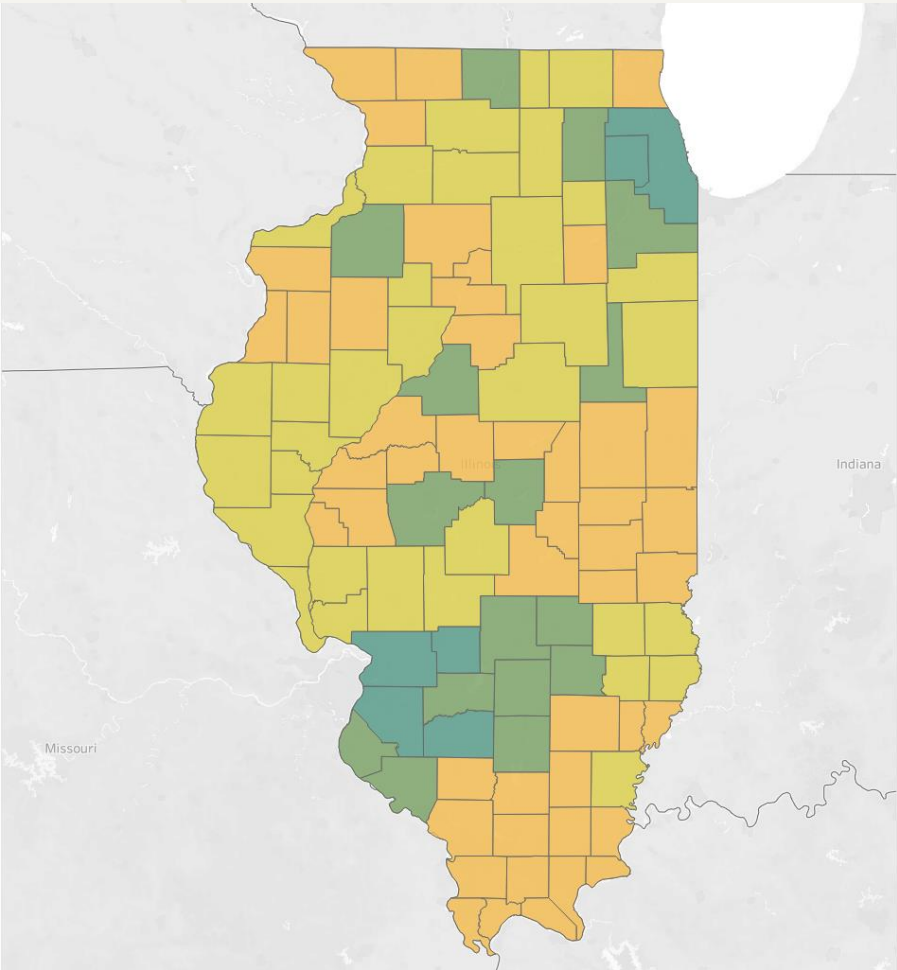
# Regional Listening Sessions Reported Participation

**72** individual meetings

**40** organizations hosted meetings

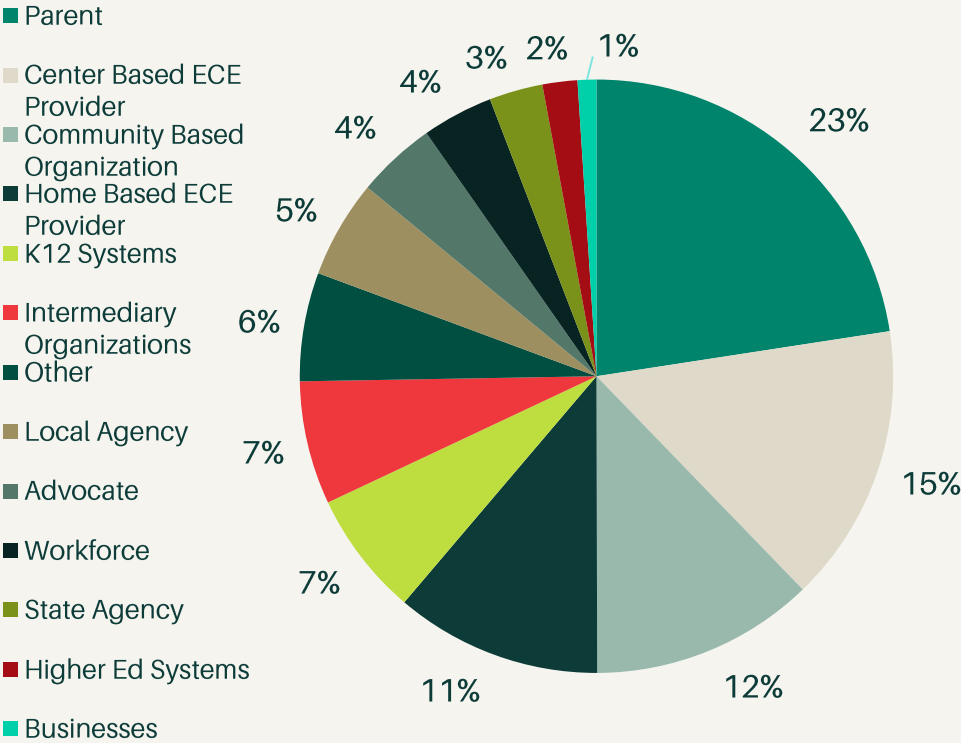
**1,689** participants

# Residents in every county of the state had the opportunity to participate in Regional Listening Sessions

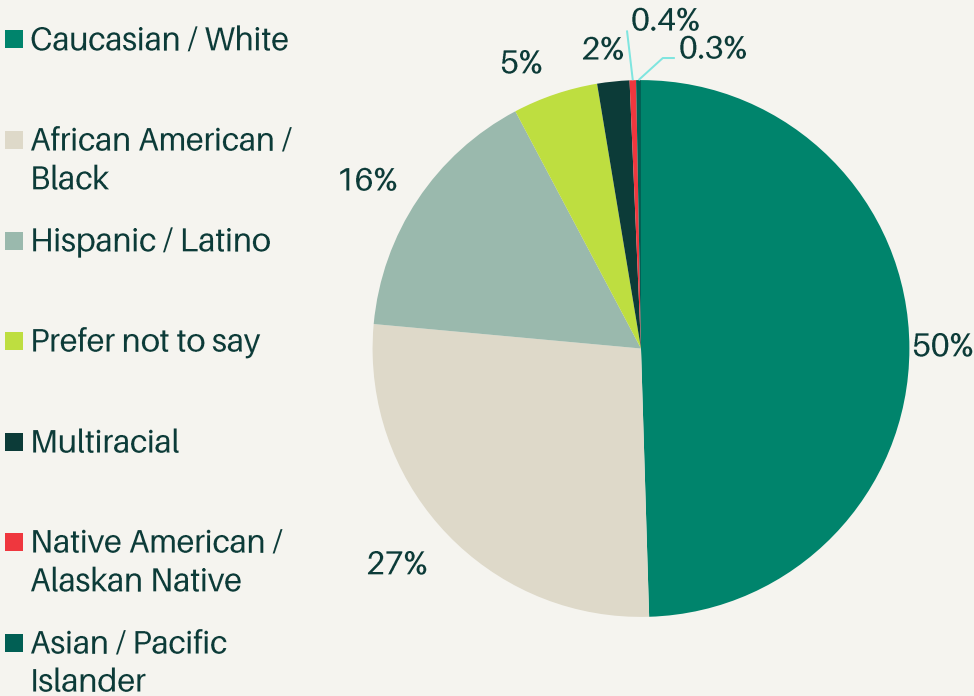


# Parents were the largest group we heard from, and overall listening session participants were racially diverse

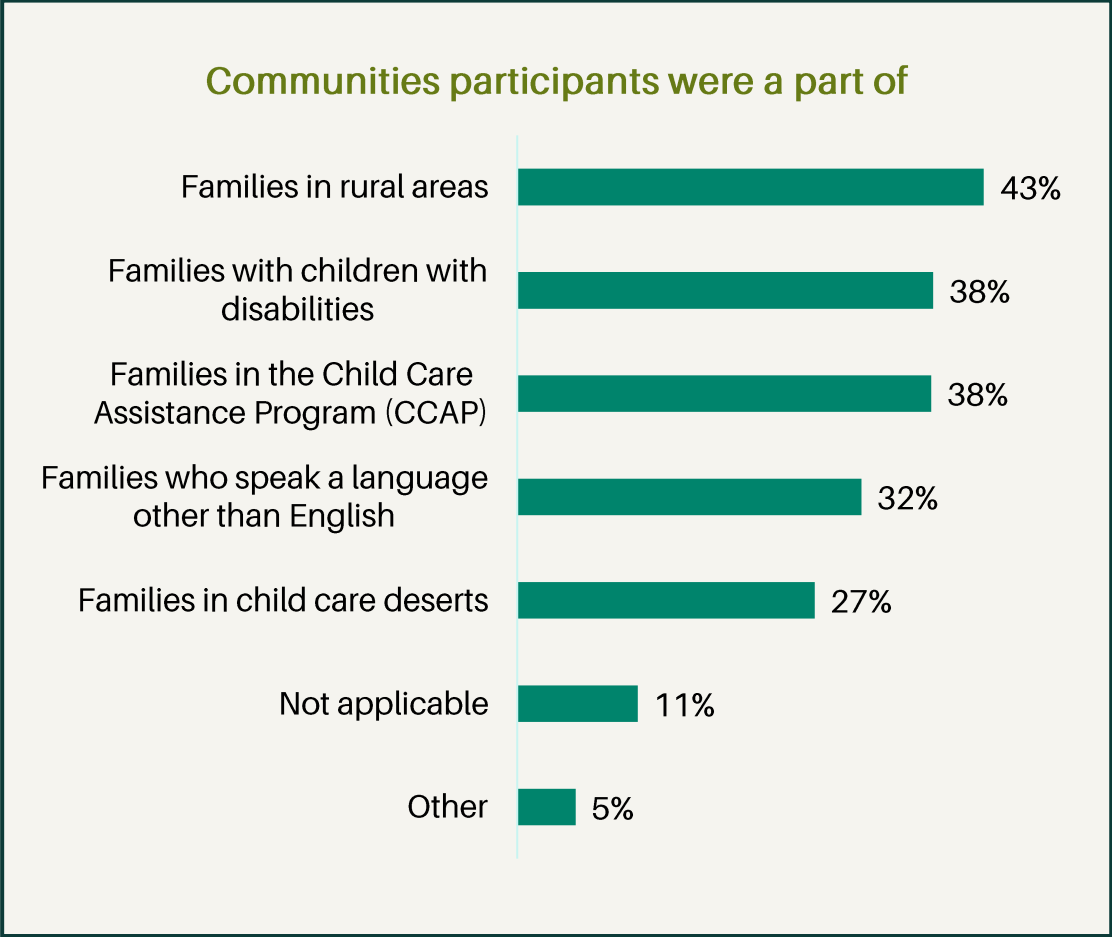
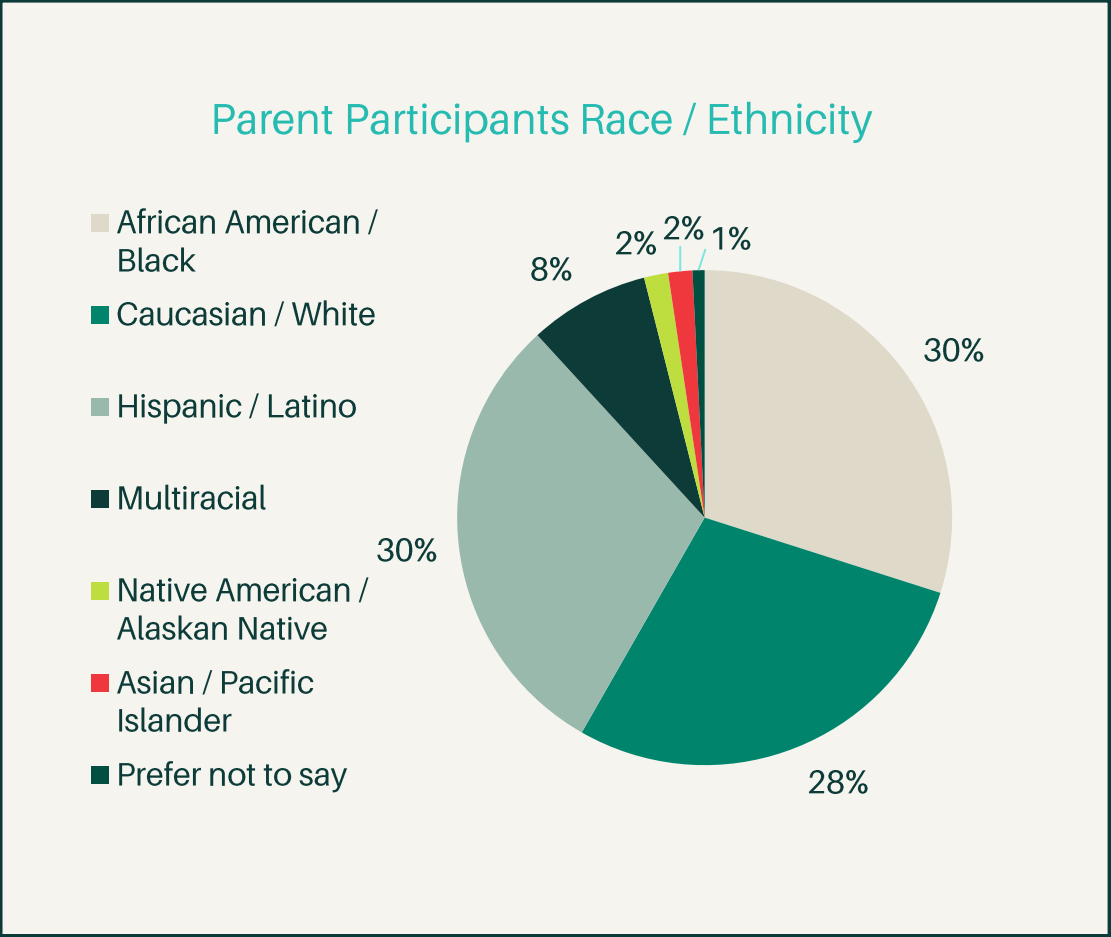
Participants Role in the ECE System



Participants Race / Ethnicity



# Parent participants were racially diverse and represented the lived experiences of many of our priority populations...



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“One challenge has been inconsistent availability of programs, which can disrupt continuity for my child. I've also noticed that some resources are difficult to access or understand. With the creation of the new agency, I'd like to see better coordination and clearer information, so families can easily find and utilize the services they need.”

**COOK COUNTY PARENT**



# Three family-focused themes emerged from the data

## 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*





”

“I've found that navigating the system can be confusing, with unclear communication about resources and eligibility. I'd like to see the new agency simplify the process and provide clearer guidance for families. Improved staff training on diverse needs would also be beneficial to ensure everyone gets the support they deserve.”

PARENT IN DUPAGE COUNTY





# 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 care.** Part day preschool is a challenge if after-care or wrap around care is not available at the same site.
- **Lack of transportation.** Parents named transition issues and long drives to attend EI appointments as barriers.

“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 unknown)



## 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 to support their children'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*



## 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



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“[We] can't open more classrooms if we don't have the workforce. Love making things easier for families but don't forget the workforce and the burden we will put on them.”

*CENTER-BASED ECE PROVIDER, COOK COUNTY*



## 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.**” – *EC provider in Cook County*



# 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



## 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.

“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







“I think the transition team should prioritize building trust with families, especially those who may have had negative experiences with previous agencies.”

LAKE COUNTY PARENT



## 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



# 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*



## 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*



# Questions and concerns about the transition

## SERVICE CONTINUITY

Families, providers, intermediaries and other system partners are all concerned with potential disruptions to services for children and families in the transition.

## COMMUNICATION

Families and providers requested clear and transparent communication throughout the transition to minimize disruptions and make sure that those who will be most impacted know what to expect.

## WHAT IS CHANGING?

Across all audiences, community members wonder what will change, asking broad questions such as: “what will change?” as well as specific questions like “where will IECMH [infant and early childhood mental health] be housed?”

“I’m hopeful about the potential for better services but concerned about maintaining continuity for families during the transition. Clear communication about changes is essential, so families know what to expect. I also want to ensure that staff are well-prepared to support children and families effectively as the new agency rolls out its programs. Keeping families informed and involved throughout the process is crucial.” – parent in DuPage County

