



Illinois Department of Early Childhood

SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS WORKGROUP

January 21, 2025, 5:00-6:00 p.m.



- Welcome, agenda & connector
- Early Intervention update
- Preliminary findings and December meeting ideas
- New themes and ideas
- 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
- Food you absolutely won't eat

Example:

Erin Arango-Escalante, celery

Connecting the Dots Across Workgroups and TAC

Vision: What do families want and need?
What do providers want and need to deliver for families?

- Family Service Work Groups ★
- Co-Design Workshops
- Focused Discussion
- Surveys and Interviews
- Listening Sessions



How do we get from current state to our vision?
What infrastructure is needed to make the vision possible?

- Support Work Groups
- Focused Discussions
- Surveys and Interviews
- Interagency Team

Current state: what are the pain points in family services?

- Family Service Work Groups ★
- Focused Discussion
- Surveys and Interviews
- Co-Design Workshops
- Listening Sessions

TAC

Modeling the Cost of Early Intervention in Illinois: Analysis and Recommendations

Prepared by Afton Partners for the Illinois Department of Human Services –
Division of Early Childhood

November 2024



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

Theme 2: Communication and coordination for cohesive support

Theme 3: Consistent and culturally responsive relationships

All Themes: General Feedback

↑

Themes and Findings



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

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2

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“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

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– *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

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**

Barriers for Families

- Navigating system and legal rights
- Lack of familiarity with Early Intervention by physicians
- Lack of familiarity with programs in early childhood system by those who work in system (e.g., Child Find)
- Communication gap between child care program and therapists
- Enrolling in schools
- Transportation

Ideas from Families

- Require communication between programs
- Require consistent/common communication, resources and collaboration in preferred language (e.g., navigating system)
- Provide local opportunities for Department staff to share information
- Streamline eligibility and enrollment in programs
- Provide a navigator for families
- Provide additional funding for programs who care for a child with a disability

PRELIMINARY FINDING

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 access points.”

Theme

1



Information navigation and accessibility



Cross-collaboration and communication



Holistic well-being



Professional development and supports



Dynamic learning environments and diverse learning needs

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

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

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

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



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

- What resonates with you?
- What's missing from your perspective?
- What is a short-term solution you/your organization is doing to address these issues?
- What theme are you interested in knowing more about or what questions do you have?





Public Comment

NEXT STEPS

