



Supporting Children with Disabilities & Developmental Delays Meeting Notes

April 14, 2026 12:00 p.m. - 1:30 p.m.

Agenda

Welcome, Introductions & Updates: 20 minutes

Introduce and Discuss Program Standards: 55 minutes

Public Comment: 10 minutes

Wrap-Up: 5 minutes

Workgroup Participants:

Present:

- Johnna Darragh-Ernst
- Kesha Harris
- Karen Heath
- Sanna Jesse
- Janice Moenster
- Maira Nava
- Michelle Olivarez-O'Shea
- Lakeesha Smith

Absent:

- Africa Anderson
- Meredith Barnes
- Mindy Brant
- Maura Hirschauer
- Senator Adriane Johnson
- Samantha Jolliff
- Berkley Julun
- Laura Lindsey
- Talibah Moore
- Kim Nelson

- Beatrice Nichols
- Yesenia Perez
- Destiny Snow

Welcome, Introductions & Updates

Erin Arango-Escalante (meeting facilitator) welcomed participants. Erin reminded members of the community agreements and shared the day's agenda which features a discussion around the Program Standards Vision and Guiding Principles. The meeting included a Spanish interpretation option for the first time in this workgroup.

Update on Family Engagement Framework

- Paige Greenwood, Director of Family Engagement at the Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC), gave an update on the Draft Family Engagement Framework that we discussed in our March meeting.
- The feedback provided has been incorporated and IDEC is grateful for all of the suggestions shared by this workgroup and others who reviewed.
- The document is structured with 7 Guiding Principles and each of those is broken down into policy guidance and practice guidance.
- The principles remain essentially the same, but few changes were made to the wording. The current Draft Guiding Principles are:
 1. Center parent/caregiver voice by respecting and honoring their lived experience and expertise in early childhood.
 2. Staff and facilitators are trained in equity and cultural humility principles to engage with parents/caregivers across Illinois to build stronger relationships and establish mutual trust.
 3. Embed parent/caregivers into programmatic leadership and governance processes to ensure they are at decision making tables.
 4. When engaging families across Illinois, resources and communications are family friendly, use positive and understandable language, and are accessible in multiple languages.
 5. Implement equitable strategies to continuously improve by centering family voice and strengthening feedback loops.
 6. Design programs and cultivate community partnerships that are informed by the needs of children and families.
 7. Provide compensation for parents/caregivers' participation, feedback, and contribution to IDEC workstreams and beyond as available.
- Some of the revisions include shifting the focus from
 - Participation to leadership
 - One-time training on cultural competency to cultural humility
 - Translation and interpretation to different ways of communicating
 - Outreach to trust and relationship-driven engagement
 - Input to transparency
 - Including parents to shared decision-making
 - Compensation to flexible and family-friendly compensation

- No definition of family engagement to a shared definition
- Isolated family engagement to a family-friendly ecosystem
- Use of jargon and acronyms to family-friendly language
- Overall accountability

Program Standards

- Maya Portillo shared information about the Program Standards Alignment Workgroup (PSAW), which is IDEC's newest workgroup. She shared that the workgroup leaders are joining today's meeting to answer:
 - What are program standards?
 - How are program standards used?
 - Which program standards do Illinois early childhood programs and services use?
 - What is the role of the Program Standards Alignment Workgroup?
- Maya shared that the PSAW leaders joined today's meeting to ask for feedback on the draft vision and guiding principles for program standards.
- Beza Bulega from Afton Partners, a PSA workgroup facilitator, shared that program standards are the rules, policies, and guidelines that outline expectations for what programs must do to support children's development. Some examples include things like staff credential requirements, class size requirements, how programs should engage families, requirements around data collection, how to collect and report that data, and other accountability requirements.
- Providers must meet various standards and requirements in order to
 - Operate legally
 - Receive public funding
 - Participate in quality systems
- In Illinois, state developmental standards provide research-based guidance on how children grow and develop, and how adults can support that development. These include:
 - Illinois Early Learning Guidelines (IELGs) for children birth to age 3
 - Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards (IELDS) for children ages 3 to 5
 - WIDA Early Years Standards, which focus on language development for children who are multilingual learners
- Beza shared two examples of program standards from early care and education. Home visiting and Early Intervention (EI) also have program standards.
 - Head Start/Early Head Start: A program must ensure that children with disabilities, including those with developmental delays, are identified, referred for evaluation, and provided services in collaboration with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). With key expectations outlined around:
 - Identification and screening

- Referral and evaluation
 - Collaboration with IDEA
 - Services
 - Family engagement
 - Ongoing monitoring and coordination
- Preschool for All/Preschool for All Expansion: PFA and PFAE programs are required to use an evidence-based curriculum aligned with the Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards (IELDS), which guide planning, instruction, and assessment.
- Beza shared a visual around the variety of program standards that exist across Early Care and Education, Home Visiting, and Early Intervention. She noted that there are various standards and regulatory processes that apply to each program, based on their funding stream(s) and the agency administering the programs.
- Beza noted that there have been many efforts to align program standards using crosswalks and other approaches. She also mentioned that some programs are guided by federal requirements and therefore, it is complex to influence or change how program standards are operationalized.
- Beza shared some takeaways about how providers and families experience the current situation and the impact of having inconsistent standards and expectations across programs.
 - Family challenges included having a hard time finding services that are inclusive, supporting, welcoming, safe, and culturally responsive. Providers are not always able to fully meet children and family needs, and families of multilingual learners and children with disabilities face the most barriers.
 - Providers' challenges included having multiple sets of administrative rules with different staff qualification requirements. They are subject to many different monitoring visits throughout the year and note that current standards can be interpreted many different ways. They would appreciate simpler, easier-to-understand language for rules and requirements, and consistency in how technical assistants interpret them and guide programs.
- The goal of the PSAW is to develop recommendations for aligning birth-to-five program standards and expectations for programs transitioning to the Illinois Department of Early Childhood, with a vision of a *continuum of quality* that supports all children's development and *successful transition to kindergarten*.
- Beza explained that alignment is the intentional coordination of program standards to ensure that expectations across programs are clear, without requiring programs to be identical. This supports smooth transitions for children and families and makes it easier for providers to operate across funding streams. It does not eliminate program-specific strengths or force all programs to operate the same way.
- Beza stated that the workgroup efforts have been informed by deep stakeholder engagement, research, landscape analysis and workgroup engagement.
- The PSAW launched in December and developed a draft of a vision and guiding principles for program standards alignment. In April through June, they will shift to discussing priority topics

such as program standards misalignments, the impact of misalignment on providers, children and families, and opportunities for aligning program standards.

- The PSAW draft vision is an aspirational statement describing the desired future state.
- The PSAW Guiding Principles represent a shared set of commitments and values that will guide discussions and recommendations.
- The draft Vision Statement for PSAW is, *IDEC envisions an early childhood system that provides children and families a **continuum of equitable, high-quality support, education, and care from prenatal to age five**. This continuum ensures **seamless, coordinated, and comprehensive services** that cultivate **learning** and foster **Kindergarten readiness**.*

The program standards and associated expectations, measures, and milestones that guide programs and services under IDEC are:

- ***Equitable, culturally, linguistically, and developmentally inclusive**, reflecting the strengths and needs of diverse communities.*
 - ***Informed by families, providers, workforce members, and community partners**, who share responsibility for continuous quality improvement and individualized outcomes for children.*
 - ***Grounded in research-based best practices** as a foundation, **alongside families' aspirations** for their child's growth, learning, and well-being.*
 - ***Supportive of the workforce**, enabling early childhood professionals to effectively deliver high-quality education and care programs and services.*
- Beza then shared the Guiding Principles for Program Standards Alignment:
 1. Center the child and family's experience and perspective.
 2. Strengthen coordination across interconnected early childhood systems.
 3. Prioritize developmentally appropriate progression and outcomes.
 4. Ensure inclusion and increase access of all children and families, particularly those who are least well served by our system.
 5. Streamline reporting and reduce administrative burden for families and providers.
 6. Pair quality expectations with support for providers.
 7. Advance equity through design and process centered on those who are least well served by our system.
- Finally, Beza asked the group to talk about what resonates or is missing in the vision and guiding principles and what needs to change for workgroup members to feel good about the drafts.

Discussion

- A workgroup member asked: will we be adding the Illinois comprehensive Literacy Plan?
 - Maya responded that a Numeracy Plan is also in progress and we will be sure to incorporate both.
- Another member asked, should the Pre-IPT screening for multilingual learners be part of the document?

- Beza explained that we start with standards and will then begin identifying the tools (e.g., for evaluation) and resources related to each, so that will be part of the next phase.
 - The member then pointed out that Illinois Code Title 23 part 228 is also followed closely by public schools and applies to all learners.
 - Siri from Afton Partners responded: “Thank you. We will make sure this is also on our list of standards to review.”
- A workgroup member asked: where does program monitoring fit in the program standards? There were many comments in listening sessions around the duplication over multiple monitoring visits. They added, “For programs that blend and braid funding to exist, there is a lot to manage with various sets of program standards, so we appreciate your attention to any opportunity we can pursue to reduce administrative burden.”
- A workgroup member asked, “In terms of research, is it clinician-specific?”
 - Beza responded that most of the research is organized by topic, not broken down by position type.
 - The member added that there are many services that impact a child. They wanted to know if development is considered through the lens of various types of clinicians like speech or occupational therapists. They noted that different types of clinicians view things differently but often come to the same result.
 - Beza responded that this is a level deeper than our current research, but we appreciate the comment.
 - Maya added that we are looking across programs in the mixed delivery system and note the administrative burden of many different requirements. The initial scan is to look at the similarities and differences between sets of standards.
- A workgroup member stated that they like the clarity and conciseness of the Guiding Principles. It covers many of the hot topics we have discussed in Transition Advisory Committee (TAC) meetings and community coalitions. They noted one thing that is missing are the infrastructure supports (Child Care Resource & Referral agencies, Birth to 5, All our Kids, coaching...). They asked: where do they fit?
 - Maya responded that we are trying to continually lift it up and there will be more time and space for that in the future.
- A member of the workgroup brought up the phrase “kindergarten readiness” and asked what do we mean by that exactly? Academics? Social emotional readiness? Readiness for the school setting? They asked, “how do we capture that more holistically and look at the whole child? Having worked at every level in the early childhood system, I recognize differences in how that phrase is used across the system.”
 - Another member agreed that they were also wondering if that needed to be broader.
 - Beza acknowledged that they have heard that feedback before and noted that it needs to be better defined and expanded to include readiness for kindergarten and success beyond that.
- Another member highlighted a strength in the Guiding Principles’ attention to inequity, particularly in principle 7 and how it’s connected to the Vision statement. They remembered the original equity statement and how intentional its creators were about naming individual groups. Similarly, they wondered if there is a benefit to naming inequities, so being explicit about

workforce compensation, demographic inequity, etc. at the level of specificity we've used in other documents, to ensure such things are addressed.

- Another member of the workgroup asked: is workforce specifically mentioned in one guiding principle or is it embedded across several?
 - Beza pointed out #5-6.
 - They noted that a lot of people are talking a lot about qualifications, credentials, degrees, and what is going to be required going forward.
 - Siri added that there will need to be a lot of attention to making sure providers are able to meet the expectations. She noted that this work has intersections with so many other workgroups and we need to coordinate with those who are talking about ensuring a prepared, compensated, adequate workforce, Funding Design, and more. She emphasized that this is not happening in isolation—it's part of that larger picture. She appreciates the idea to have it show up strongly in the Guiding Principles to help prepare everyone for those conversations.
 - The workgroup member responded, "Yes, I feel the workforce drives program quality and the ability to meet standards. We can't do any of this without our workforce."

Public Comment

- A member of the public wrote: "Perhaps the Illinois Department of Children & Family Services-required 15 hours of annual training should be more specific to include disability training requirements."
 - Maya responded: Thanks. We are still in the stage of understanding current requirements. The specific training requirements for child care licensing (and others) will be reviewed, and we can make recommendations like that in future phases.
- Another public participant asked: What input will the IDEC have over Early Childhood programs in school districts?
- A member of the public suggested that they would like to see developmental growth and kindergarten readiness in place of "developmental growth." We want kids to be developing at age level from birth to five.
- A public participant asked, "What are we doing to make sure educators are ready to serve children with intellectual and developmental disabilities? Many seem unprepared."
- A member of the public expressed that these are great general Guiding Principles. They asked, "Will they come with more specific requirements so parents know their options better and providers will know what is expected of them?"
- A member of the public suggested more trainings on the range of disabilities, such as trainings on autism. They said there are a lot of great providers out there, but they don't all know how to handle children with disabilities. The individual has a son on the spectrum. Everything we can do to help matters. You're doing great work, I appreciate it.
- Another member of the public wanted to reiterate what others were saying about the workforce. They said, "If we don't have a high-quality, trained workforce, we can't do it. It's the foundation. Are they well-trained and up to date on research, are they being monitored and do they know the expectations? And of course, are they paid adequately so they can do this for a living?" As a preschool teacher, they had to let a paraprofessional work with a child with a disability. The teacher was trained, the paraprofessional was not, but that was the

paraprofessional's role, so the teacher had to work with her and try to train her. They noted that making the paperwork and infrastructure understandable is also important because if professionals understand, they can work with the families.

- Another member of the public said that to them, equity means parents knowing what is available and where to find resources and support. In talking about standards of care, they would love for it to be a standard that all parents have a community that supports them. That's where they learn a lot of the questions they can ask or things they can advocate for, because without that, they don't know what to ask. There's a lot of work to connect pediatricians with non-profits in communities. There are existing communities of parents like this, and there should be a standard to help everyone know these communities exist so parents can be better informed and supported.
 - A workgroup member responded that we know peer-to-peer support is game-changing, especially if you have a child in priority populations. That's where [parents and caregivers] feel safe among others who look like them or have similar experiences to them.
 - Another workgroup member agreed and noted, "There is a lot of strength that comes from knowing others on a similar journey." They thought that is something that is needed and should be funded and supported for these families.
- The public participant added that especially because of the design of Early Intervention where programs happen in the home, many parents don't know others receiving the services because they're in their own home. They've heard parents call it "a desert." They all feel they are starting from square 1 by themselves. Without other parents helping them, they feel isolated.

Padlet Links:

For workgroup members- <https://padlet.com/erin674/SupportingMLs>

For members of the public- <https://padlet.com/erin674/MLsPublicComment>