

# Supporting Multilingual Learners Workgroup Meeting Minutes

April 7, 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:***

- Luis Narvaez
- Maira Nava
- Edgar Ramirez
- Michelle Ramirez
- Marilyn Rodriguez
- Ashley Stoffel
- Rebecca Vonderlack-Navarro

### ***Absent:***

- Rep. Dagmara Avelar
- Marina Castillo
- Kate Estrada
- Leslie Perkins
- Charlotte Rivard-Hoster
- Justina Unachukwu
- Sen. Karina Villa
- Gaddys Ybarra

## 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 a few changes were made to the wording. The current 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

## Discussion

- A workgroup member liked the updated Draft Family Engagement Guiding Principles. They suggested we think more about the role of research and how we talk with families about research and helping them understand what is optimal for child development. A classic example is that many parents may arrive in this country wanting to fit in and adapt to the culture, hiding their culture and trying to switch to English and avoid their home language. However, if they were aware of the research, they'd know that is not the most beneficial in terms of child outcomes.
  - Paige responded that this is not in the current framework; we should add content about helping families understand research.
  - The member responded that this framework focuses a lot on families' access to programs, but we also need to think about quality including pedagogy and educator preparation.
- A workgroup member mentioned the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)'s videos on the benefits of bilingualism and biliteracy. Around the state, we would like to see common training videos and a continuous quality improvement opportunity to evaluate and improve the materials we have for parents, the translations that are needed, etc.
  - Paige emphasized that the continuous quality improvement process is embedded throughout the framework. We will need videos and short trainings that help people understand that CQI process.
- A workgroup member asked: is there a way we can ensure through this framework that IDEC will collaborate with ISBE around Kindergarten transitions? The member emphasized, "we know early childhood is not birth to 5, it's birth to 8!" and therefore, it's important to stay connected with the Bilingual Parent Councils and schools throughout the state.

## 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 and they want to hear how program standards have impacted workgroup members and their families.
- Beza Bulega from Afton Partners, a PSAW 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 work with the family to complete or obtain a current developmental screening. For multilingual learners, qualified staff must assess language skills in English and the child's home language, conduct screening in the language(s) that best capture the child's development, and ensure those conducting the screening know and understand the child's home language and culture.
  - Preschool for All/Preschool for All Expansion: The WIDA Early English Language Development Standards should be incorporated into the instruction of preschool English Learners. The WIDA standards will guide educators in the expectations of what young language learners can do in early learning content areas.
- 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 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 child and family needs, and families of multilingual children and children with disabilities face the most barriers.
  - Provider 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.
- 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 member of the workgroup asked if the PSAW covers all programs and families. They expressed that we aren't going to have the structure and support for all of this if we don't have an embedded expert on multilingual learners in IDEC to support implementation. That expertise exists at ISBE and is needed at IDEC. They felt that we can't take for granted that we will have that person with decision-making power in this transition and in future administrations for years to come.
  - Another workgroup member agreed and expressed a wondering around whether this workgroup body will continue to serve and hold IDEC accountable to the needs of multilingual children and families.
  - Paige mentioned the Advisory Workgroup efforts and the feedback we previously gathered from this workgroup around ensuring that we will have multilingual expertise in IDEC's advisory board structure. In the Advisory Workgroup's recent meeting, they affirmed that our feedback was heard and they intend to move forward with ensuring that representation in future processes.
- A workgroup member emphasized that we need a common way of identifying multilingual learners. They expressed that it needs to look different for birth to 3. There is an identification process for preschool we can learn from, but we should consider play-based, research-based, innovative ideas for birth to 3. They emphasized that a consistent identification process is needed for any of these programs to be implemented with fidelity and meet the standards.
- The same workgroup member raised the role of research on child outcomes and what's best for kids, including parent education that supports children. They explained that a lot of parents and families come here thinking English only is the best, so making them aware of the value of home language and culture is important. They stated, "How we interact with parents matters so much for how they will engage and think about the programs available to them. We need to make sure we go beyond access to programming and ensuring quality for them as well." They noted that Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC) is a great resource for that.
  - Another workgroup member who is Hispanic with multilingual children also utilized EI programs, as her children are diagnosed with multiple conditions. They noted that in sharing this research, there may need to be more nuanced understanding of the

common cultural view that families with children with disabilities experience these reservations about home language even more strongly out of fear that multiple languages will further impact their child's language delays. They noted that it's very misunderstood that even children with disabilities or language delays should be exposed to their family's home language.

- A member of the workgroup wondered about the word “comprehensive” in the Vision Statement and questioned whether this is attainable given that all programs are not under IDEC. For example, their child's health care is not under IDEC and that was a major effort for us to align health care goals and outcomes from that team with the services they received in early childhood. They stated, “It would be great if that was true that everything was seamless, coordinated, and comprehensive, but I don't see that as an attainable reality.”
  - Maya asked a follow-up question about what other programs the family engages with that would be important to connect.
  - The workgroup member responded that their family also navigates the Illinois Department of Children & Family Service because they are a licensed foster parent. Early childhood special education also impacts the family. There are probably other programs outside IDEC that we engage with but those are a couple.
- Another member suggested that the statement should not just mention Kindergarten readiness, but it should also align to K-12 expectations to create continuity for children and families. They then asked about the meaning of how standards are supportive of the workforce.
  - Beza responded that with whatever is expected of providers, there should be resources and preparation to support providers in meeting those expectations.
  - The workgroup member liked that and wanted to emphasize it more in the wording because it requires initial training *and* ongoing upskilling efforts.
- A member of the workgroup asked if “informed by families” could be reciprocal so that families give input and opportunities to grow their own knowledge base as they continue to influence programs.
- A workgroup member felt that higher education faculty should be included in the Vision Statement.
  - Beza asked if expanding how we think about community partners could address that?
  - The member thought that was a good idea.
  - Maya offered that there is representation from higher education on the PSAW.
- Another workgroup member felt that “fostering Kindergarten readiness” felt “a little light.” They argued that parents want a guarantee that programs will deliver that for all kids, and that Kindergarten readiness should be a right for all children.
- A workgroup member mentioned Guiding Principle 3 and felt that high quality was missing. They appreciate that there is flexibility to address individual needs and yet, they felt there should be assurance that quality will not decrease or expectations will not be lower just because a child is bilingual, for example.
  - Another member liked that and wanted us to emphasize connecting to the K-12 experience. One of the biggest worries for this workgroup member is that there will be a disconnect between early childhood and K-12 systems, which is not how families experience it. From an advocacy perspective, if we want to keep money flowing to IDEC programs, we will have to show that it's working. By maintaining the connection to K-12,

we can provide evidence that it is paying off in future test scores, etc. Legislators will ask for that evidence.

- In Guiding Principle 2, a workgroup member liked the bolded text: “Strengthen coordination across interconnected early childhood systems.” The end of that bullet ends in “smooth transitions across programs and into Kindergarten.” In early childhood, families can be enrolled in a lot of programs at the same time, so we need to capture that integration of programs and that they can all successfully lead up to Kindergarten readiness.

### **Public Comment**

- A member of the public suggested that we may need a definition of “needs” as described in Guiding Principle 3. They stated that needs may vary by program, age group, and priority population.
- A member of the public called out that many components of the draft guidance will be difficult to employ equitably if we don’t have the birth to 5 multilingual learner identification process really solid. They stated, “We can’t move forward on high quality supports for children who might be historically underserved if we don’t know their needs. We also need common, open resource trainings for all providers around that identification, support strategies, and family education opportunities.”
- Another public participant in the meeting called attention to the first section about the different standards that are applicable across different programs in the early childhood education spectrum. They appreciated that alignment doesn’t mean you go to the lowest common denominator. They are concerned that in trying to serve such a wide variety of programs with different administrative rules, that quality might get lost along the way. They also appreciate this workgroup’s continuing advocacy for a position--or multiple positions--at IDEC requiring expertise in multilingual learners and multilingual learners with disabilities.

### **Padlet Links:**

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

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