



Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment

Region 33

(Henderson, Knox, Mercer & Warren Counties)



In Partnership with





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Region 33 Executive Summary

In 2021, the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Funding issued a report with findings that highlighted the inequities in ECEC funding in Illinois and the need to create a better statewide infrastructure to support ECEC professionals, expand services and programs for families and caregivers, and increase enrollment in ECEC programs. The report focused on the importance of addressing racial inequities and the need to include local voices in the conversation funders and decision-makers were having about ECEC.

The experiences and knowledge families, caregivers, and early childhood professionals gain while navigating the complexities of the State's ECEC system is valuable, and understanding their lived experience in the local context is vital for decision-makers to ensure communities have access to the programs, services, and supports they need. To this end, Birth to Five Illinois was created to harness family and caregiver voices in ECEC and serve as a bridge between the communities and policymakers so family, caregiver, and professional experiences can guide the decisions made to expand or enhance services across the State.

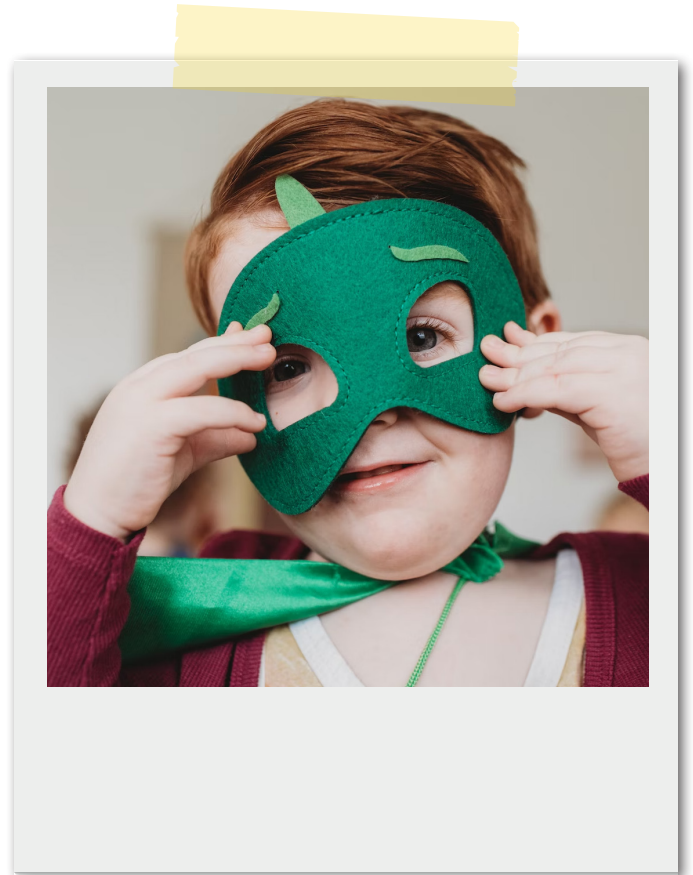
An Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment was created to present publicly available quantitative data and qualitative data from caregivers, ECEC professionals, and other community stakeholders collected through Action Council and Family Council meetings, focus groups, interviews, community meetings, and surveys. Throughout the process, regional barriers were documented, and recommendations were developed based on identified needs of families. This Executive Summary provides an overview of key findings from the development of the Region 33 Needs Assessment, which includes recommendations developed by our Action and Family Councils. Additional findings, analysis, and recommendations can be found in the full report.

Key Findings

Over the last year, Birth to Five Illinois has been researching the needs of children, their families, caregivers, organizations, and community leaders in hopes of improving systems that will make quality ECEC accessible to all families who want it.

Partnering with The Village Early Childhood Collaboration, Region 33 has gathered data and stories from our diverse community. We have learned that quality child care is critical to the success and health of children, families, businesses, and our community at large. We have learned that our community has great awareness of the challenges caused by limited access to quality child care and sees the need for "a better way."

We have identified challenges, including conflicting policies, unreliable funding sources, ineffective communication, limited or no access, a shortage of workers, high costs for families, and low wages for providers, all combining to deter families and providers from accessing the services they desire. We have



also discovered a committed, forward-thinking community of philanthropically minded advocates and leaders who have dedicated their lives to providing quality ECEC.

With families, providers, and community leaders working together, Region 33 has developed needs and recommendations to share with local and state decision-makers. It is our hope that this endeavor leads to a streamlined, high-quality, child-first system that benefits our community and establishes Illinois as the best State to nurture children.

Region 33 Needs

1. More Infant/Toddler care.
2. More ECEC employees.
3. Affordable child care options.
4. A unified policy, funding, and informational system.
5. Increased capacity for child care.

Region 33 Recommendations

1. Establish a reliable funding source for families and providers.
2. Launch a unified policy, funding, and informational agency.
3. Recruit, train, and retain more workforce, especially for infant/toddler care.
4. Create simplified Facility and Policy Governance.
5. Build trust between families and care providers.

For more information or to learn how you can become involved with Birth to Five Illinois, please contact:

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REGION 33 SNAPSHOT INFOGRAPHIC

Using a Collective Impact Model, between September 2022 and June 2023, we led our Action and Family Councils through data discussions to identify gaps and needs for children and families.

We coordinated focus groups, interviews, and surveys to gather input from community members across the Region.



5,490

Children Under
the Age of 6
in Region 33



2,833

Children 0-5
at 200% Federal
Poverty Level



1,389

Children 0-5
Without Publicly
Funded ECEC Slots

98%

Number of focus group and interview participants who indicated that there was a lack of infant/child care.

"With the lack of access to infant care, we are being forced to make the difficult choice between our work and career and our children's well-being!"

- Parent

After identifying the most common and pressing Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) needs of their communities, Regional Councils made recommendations for how best to meet them.

REGION 33 NEEDS

1. More capacity, especially for infant/toddler care.
2. More workers, especially director-qualified level employees.
3. Affordable child care options.
4. More home-based providers, especially in rural areas like Henderson and Mercer Counties.

REGION 33 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish a reliable funding source for families and providers.
2. Restart ECEC coursework and child care in area colleges and high schools.
3. Simplify access for families by creating a universal resource for information and communication.
4. Continue to support home-based providers through information and resources.



“The education and care for our children is not a luxury, it is a necessity. It’s an investment in our children’s future, our economy, and our society as a whole.”
- Community Member

Overview & Acknowledgements

Introduction

This Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment presents data on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) from multiple state and local sources throughout Illinois. It is a collaborative data report that relies on the expertise of entities that collect and analyze ECEC data, Birth to Five Illinois staff, Birth to Five Illinois Action Council and Family Council members, and a variety of cross-sector stakeholders in all 39 Regions across the State.

Through these Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments, Birth to Five Illinois seeks to amplify the voices of those who have historically been minoritized, marginalized, or not invited to the decision-making table. Each Regional Needs Assessment offers parents, families, caregivers, ECEC providers, and other community stakeholders a platform for sharing valuable insights about their experiences within their local ECEC system. Additionally, it provides local, regional, and state decision-makers with qualitative information about each Region, adding critical context to the quantitative data that is available.

This report will be used in a variety of ways.

First, each Region's Birth to Five Illinois Action and Family Councils will use it to identify gaps in data that is needed to best understand ECEC in their area. Birth to Five Illinois Council members and Regional Staff will also use this report as a basis for making recommendations on how to increase enrollment in, and access to, ECEC programs and services, as well as to determine what additional services/programs and resources may be needed to support families and caregivers throughout the Region.

Second, this report will be made available to parents and caregivers so they can have a fuller picture of what is happening in their community and Region. It is our hope that families will learn more about the available programs and services, share the resources with other caregivers with young children, become advocates for ECEC, and help to drive long-term, sustainable change in their communities.

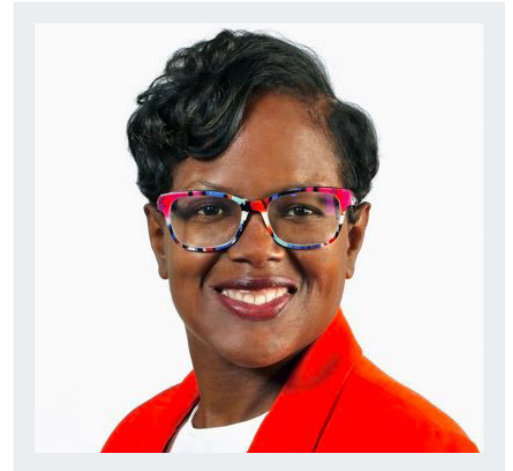
Third, policy makers, elected officials, and state agencies that administer ECEC programs will receive a copy of the report to give them a local view of the ECEC landscape in the areas they serve. The goal is to provide decision-makers with context from a community perspective so they can better understand data related to ECEC indicators and direct funding to the under-resourced areas across the State based on the feedback received from ECEC system users.

Lastly, the report will be shared with local government bodies, early childhood providers, and organizations so they can use the findings to assess and demonstrate the need for services as funding opportunities become available. Additionally, the data can be used to identify where ECEC services may need to be expanded to support the caregivers and children in the Region.



Letter from State Leadership

In under two years, I have had the privilege of partnering with the State's ECEC community to build Birth to Five Illinois, an extension of decades of foundational efforts that led to the creation of this statewide community system. In true collective impact modeling, we set out to design a system that respects and builds on the work of numerous local organizations that are working hard (often underfunded) to support children, families, and providers' access to our State's confusing and hard-to-navigate ECEC system.



While our work is not perfect, it is genuine and ever-evolving, and I am proud of the effort our Team has made to bring the vision of this equity-focused infrastructure to life. Birth to Five Illinois, while still in the development stage, has made great gains in bringing community members together under one goal, to make Illinois “the best state in the nation for families raising young children”. Our Team has gone above and beyond to make meaningful community partnerships and create space for the prioritization of family voices. My extended gratitude goes to each of the 128 people who shared the vision, brought their passion, and have worked tirelessly every day to improve ECEC experiences for the children and families in their communities.

In collective impact, nothing is done alone. We have many champions to thank, including:

- The Governor, staff in the Governor's Office and the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development (GOECD), and the dedicated members of the Early Childhood Funding Commission for their early childhood visioning and dedication to racial equity.
- The Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) and Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) for their generous funding and commitment to building this community system with families and caregivers at the center.
- Illinois Network of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) for providing the institutional, technical, and organizational support needed to launch the Birth to Five Illinois department and infrastructure.
- Illinois Action for Children (IACF) and the Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM) for training and technical support. Many of the visualizations in this report were developed by staff from both organizations based on data they collected and analyzed on our behalf.

Most importantly, I would like to thank the hundreds of community members who signed up to serve on their Region's Action and Family Councils. It is their perspective and passion that have inspired us and made this report possible. Thank you to the countless parents who trusted their Council peers with vulnerable stories; providers who emanate passion for the children in their care; business owners offering creative solutions for the identified needs; elected officials who are fierce advocates; faith leaders who opened their doors for care and are now encouraging others to do the same; and various ECEC systems partners who offer families step-by-step support through the enrollments process, blending together the supports families need.

These Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments are a compilation of community members' experiences; not ours. We thank them for sharing and hope we have represented them well.

Cicely L. Fleming (she/her)
Director, Birth to Five Illinois

Letter from Regional Leadership

On behalf of the Birth to Five Illinois: Region 33 Team, we would like to acknowledge and thank the families, providers, community members, organizations, and Birth to Five Illinois State Team for their dedication, passion, time, expertise, and stories that have made this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment useful and authentic.

Although we could never capture everyone who has rallied to the cause of caring for our youngest learners, we would like to extend our gratitude to thank Jodi Scott, Regional Superintendent of Schools for ROE #33, and the key leaders of “The Village”, Rhonda Hillyer and Tara Case. Region 33 has had the privilege of partnering with ROE 33/The Village Early Childhood Collaboration to create this Regional Needs Assessment with our Action Council and Family Council.

Our Action Council and Family Council members have unselfishly carved time away from their own families and careers to represent various voices throughout our Region. Child care providers and employees, parents, grandparents, foster families, extended family caregivers, business owners, community leaders, local elected officials, and community human resource organizations have shared stories of their challenges, solutions, and successes with Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), helping make the needs of our Region clear.

Birth to Five Illinois has been aided by agencies in the collection of data and knowledge that have driven our conversations with the people and groups listed above. We are grateful to the people at the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA), Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM), Illinois Action for Children (IAFC), and especially my coach, Christina Foster.

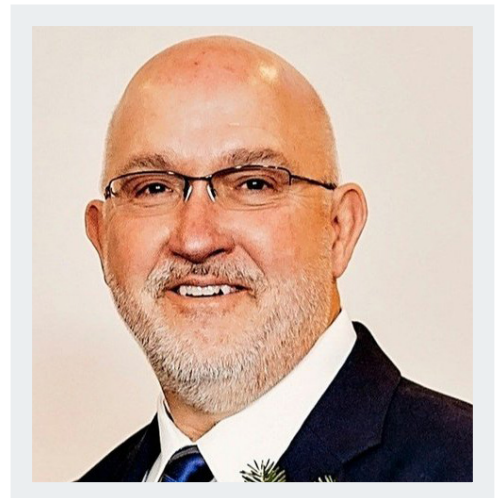
Within Birth to Five Illinois, our Regional Team is indebted to the Regional Managers around the State for their generosity in sharing ideas and knowledge; what a great team. Finally, thank you to our State Team for their focused vision and fearless guidance, forging something out of nothing, while honoring the family voice. Special mention to Cicely Fleming (Director), Sonja Clark (Director of Operations), and Leslie Price (Data Strategist).

Thank you,

Roy Van Meter (he/him)

Regional Council Manager: Region 33

Birth to Five Illinois



Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) in Illinois

ECEC in Illinois is made up of several programs, including publicly funded programs such as Head Start/ Early Head Start, Early Intervention, Early Childhood Special Education, home visiting, preschool, and center- and home-based child care. ECEC also exists within a larger system of services and supports for families, including pediatric health care, mental and behavioral health care, child welfare, and family-focused economic supports. When available, these services and supports can be confusing and difficult to navigate.

While programs and services for families and children exist across the state of Illinois, they are not accessed equitably. For example, families in rural areas oftentimes live in child care deserts and are forced to travel long distances to place their child in any program, regardless of its quality. Another example is families who speak a language other than English who may live in an area without programming in their home language, making it difficult to find educational options. A family that has little to no access to economic or material resources may live in a city with many programs but be unable to enroll their children due to the excessive cost of tuition and long waitlists for access to publicly funded slots.

Additionally, funding for ECEC has been siloed across multiple state agencies and has lacked a cohesive process for distributing funds to providers. Decentralized funding has led to unintended equity issues, leaving some areas of the State with nominal public funding for ECEC programming and others without enough funding to meet the demands of communities.



In 2019, Governor JB Pritzker declared, “Illinois will become the best state in the nation for families raising young children, with the nation’s best early childhood education and child care. My promise is this: our work won’t be complete until every child in this state enters kindergarten with the cognitive skills to think, learn, read, remember, pay attention, and solve problems, but also the social-emotional skills to communicate, connect with others, resolve conflict, self-regulate, display kindness and cope with challenges.”

To honor this commitment, the Governor’s Office formed the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding to study and make recommendations on funding that would provide more equitable access to high-quality ECEC services for all children ages birth to five. Work groups met throughout 2020 and published a report of findings and recommendations in March 2021.

The Commission made the following recommendations to address the racial, geographic, and economic inequities found in Illinois’ ECEC system:

1. Increase public investment to help better subsidize the cost families pay out of pocket.
2. Create a coordinated funding approach by centralizing state and federal funding and distribute funding in new, more targeted ways.
3. Provide a single source for information and funding for ECEC with designated regional structures to make the system easier for families and providers.

Following these recommendations, the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) established the Division of Early Childhood (DEC) to help centralize and streamline the State’s existing child care, home visiting, and Early Intervention programs.

Additionally, after the Commission report recognized, “community input and data can fuel distribution of funds more effectively and equitably” and urged for the creation of a community and regional infrastructure to ensure input from families and providers is included in the state level decision-making process, the State partnered with the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) to launch our equity-focused regional system. Named Birth to Five Illinois, the goal of this new infrastructure is to create a network of community Councils across the State tasked with identifying the service needs in each region.

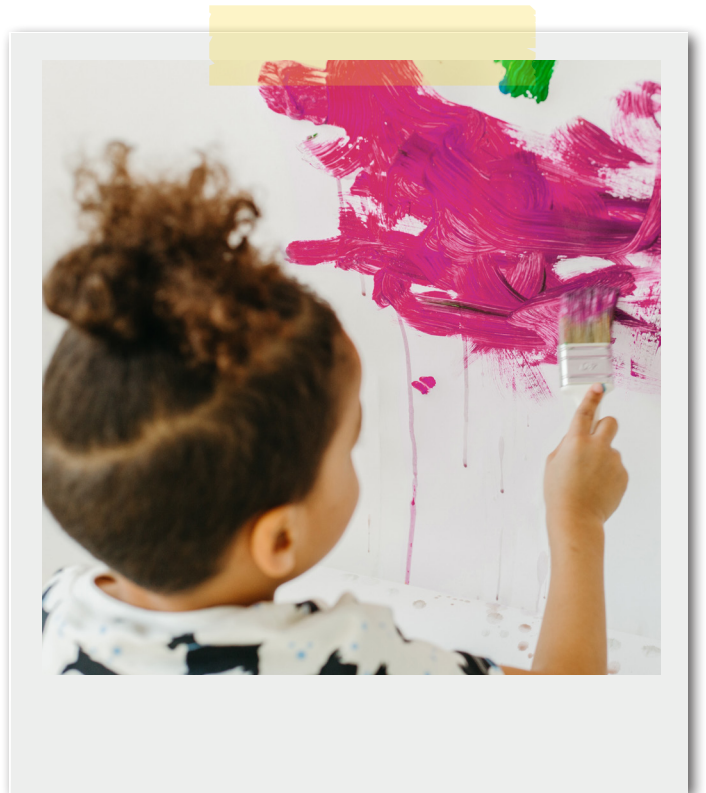
The **mission** of Birth to Five Illinois is to create a statewide regional infrastructure that will amplify input from communities in the development of policies and funding priorities. We support the mobilization of communities to build and sustain equitable access to inclusive, high-quality early childhood services for all children and families in the state of Illinois.

Our **vision** is reimagining a more equitable ECEC system that respects family and community voice and works to ensure it is centered and prioritized at every level of decision-making in Illinois.

Our **values and goals** are:

- **Family Voice:** Through this transformation centered on authentic family and community engagement, we will address the inequitable distribution of resources and services and rebuild our State’s ECEC system.
- **Racial Equity:** In an effort to move our ECEC system to one where racism no longer impacts a child’s success, we will work to dismantle barriers that have limited access to high-quality services for minoritized children in every corner of our State.
- **Collective Impact:** Birth to Five Illinois will build a system that harnesses knowledge directly from families and providers and encourages decision-makers to ensure new and/or expanded services are created to meet community needs. This community-driven framework will directly influence policy/funding at the local, regional, and state level.

Staying true to our mission and vision, Birth to Five Illinois has standardized the use of pronouns to affirm all genders and has included a land acknowledgement in each Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments to honor the Indigenous Peoples who were forcibly removed from their land.

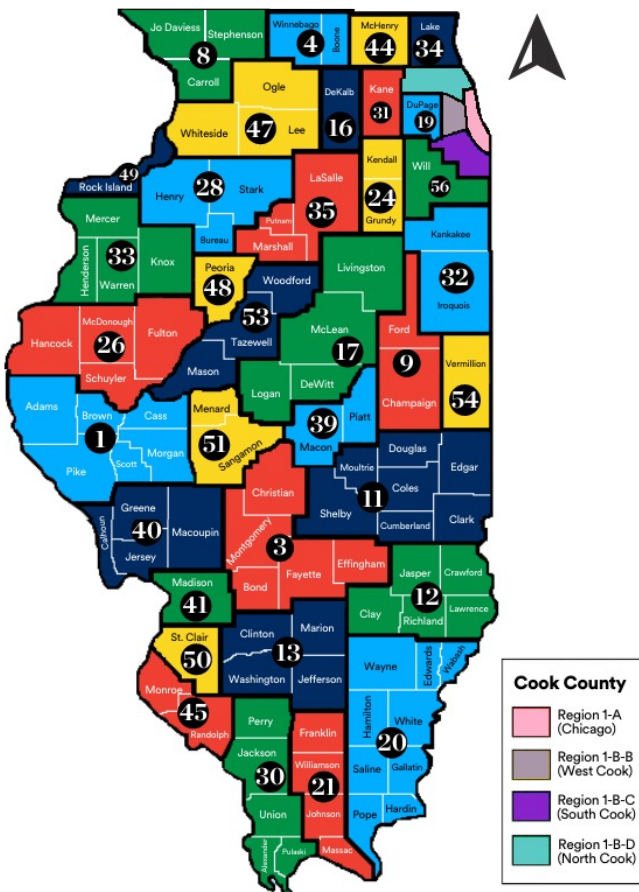


Timeline

- **March 2021**
Early Childhood Commission Report Published
- **September 2021**
Birth to Five Illinois Director, Cicely Fleming, Hired
- **February 2022**
Official Public Launch of Birth to Five Illinois
- **March 2022**
Held Regional Community Engagement Live Webinars
- **April 2022**
Established Partnerships with Existing Regional Early Childhood Collaborations
- **May – July 2022**
Hired 39 Regional Council Managers across the State
- **August – November 2022**
Hired Additional 78 Regional Support Staff
- **September 2022**
Awarded \$2.6 Million to 24 Implementation Grantees
- **October – November 2022**
Established 39 Birth to Five Illinois Action Councils
- **December 2022**
Established 39 Birth to Five Illinois Family Councils
- **January 2023**
Awarded \$575,000 to 9 Planning Grantees
- **January – April 2023**
Council Meetings & Ongoing Community Engagement (Focus Groups & Interviews)
- **June 2023**
39 Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessments Released
- **July – August 2023**
Report Dissemination & Public Input



Birth to Five Illinois Regions



To provide a structure for communities, families, and caregivers to engage with the data and share their experiences, our new statewide infrastructure was created across 39 Regions. The Regions align with existing Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) Regional Offices of Education (ROE) boundaries. To better match demographic data to the needs for ECEC programs, Illinois Action for Children (IAFC), along with the Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM), provided maps that reflect the true boundaries of the Birth to Five Illinois Regions. Birth to Five Illinois regional boundaries align with school districts instead of strictly following county lines, which can be a challenge for gathering and interpreting data because many early childhood services are provided by, or tied to, school districts.

After the Regions were established and staffed, Birth to Five Illinois Action and Family Councils were created by Regional Selection Committees. To ensure diverse perspectives, outreach efforts focused on community members who might be new to this type of work. Action Councils are comprised of ECEC professionals, healthcare providers, faith leaders, elected officials, and other community members. Each Action Council reserved two seats for parents/caregivers to ensure

family voices were included in every discussion. Family Councils are comprised of parents/caregivers from a wide variety of family types: single parents, adoptive and foster parents, caregivers of relatives, underage parents, two parent families, multi-generational families, and more. Each Regional Selection Committee reviewed Interest Forms, and recommendations were made based on a full consideration of a submitter’s role/sector, location within the Region, race/ethnicity, gender, and answers to open-ended questions.

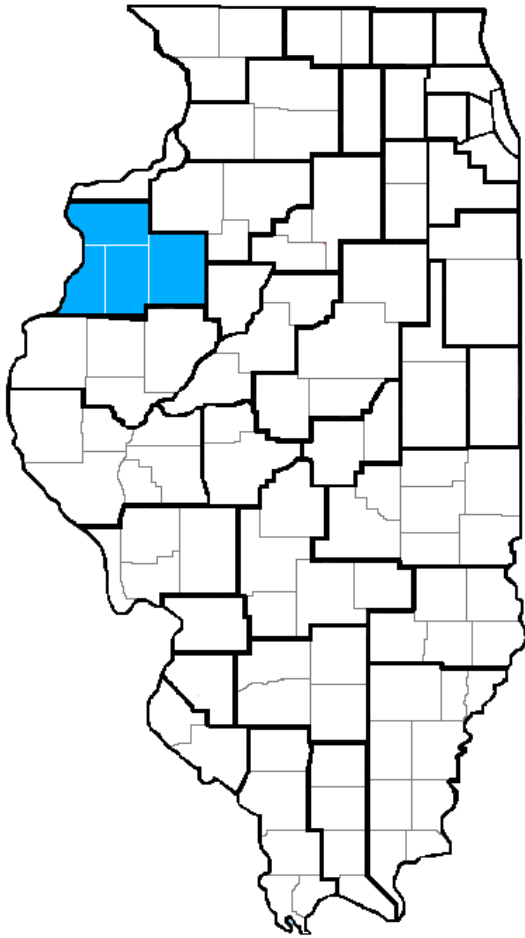
Regional Needs Assessment Methodology

Regionally based demographic, programmatic, and service provider data from IECAM and workforce data from INCCRRA were presented to Action and Family Council members during meetings and is included in the following section. The data comes from both IECAM (2020-2021) and INCCRRA (2021), unless otherwise noted. Some Regions included additional data collected during Community Based Planning or from state and/or local organizations and agencies. Action Council members were invited to bring additional aggregated data on programs and services provided by their agency/organization to complement IECAM data, while Family Council members brought their stories and experiences with the ECEC system to help contextualize quantitative data presented and discussed during meetings.

Additional qualitative data was collected community-wide through focus groups and interviews, and all Council members were invited to provide input on their Region’s report. Council members developed the strengths, needs, and recommended next steps that are unique to each Region. Regional Teams, along with the support of their Action and Family Council members, created a dissemination plan and are holding community meetings virtually and in-person to share their report’s findings. Throughout the fall of 2023, Regional Teams will lead their Councils through implementation planning based on the recommendations made in their report.

Spotlight on Region 33

Regional Community Landscape



Regional Boundaries

Region 33 is in west central Illinois and encompasses the counties of Henderson, Knox, Mercer, and Warren. Bordered by the Mississippi River on the west and Interstate 74 on the east, the topography is made up of rich farmland, rolling hills, and deciduous forests. Employment pursuits include agriculture, healthcare, education, railroad, and entrepreneurial service-based careers. The main population centers are Galesburg in Knox County, Monmouth in Warren County, and Aledo in Mercer County.

The four-county area boasts three colleges: Knox College and Carl Sandburg Community College in Knox County and Monmouth College in Warren County. The Army Corps of Engineers operate Lock and Dams #17 and #18 on the Mississippi River in Mercer and Henderson County and Burlington Northern Railroad operates the second largest rail hub in Illinois in Knox County.

Healthcare for the Region’s residents is provided by OSF Healthcare with hospitals located in Knox and Warren Counties, Genesis Healthcare with a hospital in Mercer County, and Eagle View Health Systems with two locations in Henderson County and one location in Warren County. Henderson County is also served by the Southeast Iowa Regional Medical Center.

Land Acknowledgement¹

Region 33 acknowledges that Henderson, Knox, Mercer, and Warren Counties are located on the traditional homelands of the Bodwewadmi (Potawatomi), ᏍᏌᏍᏌᏍᏌ ᏊᏊᏊᏊ ᏍᏍᏍᏍ ᏆᏆᏆᏆ (Osage), Myaami (Miami), Kaskaskia, Oθaakiwaki-hina-ki (Sauk), Meškwahki-aša-hina (Fox), Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo), and Peoria people. We acknowledge the historic and ongoing injustices experienced by all Native Peoples who came before us and who continue to contribute to the community.

Partnership with ROE 33/The Village Early Childhood Collaboration

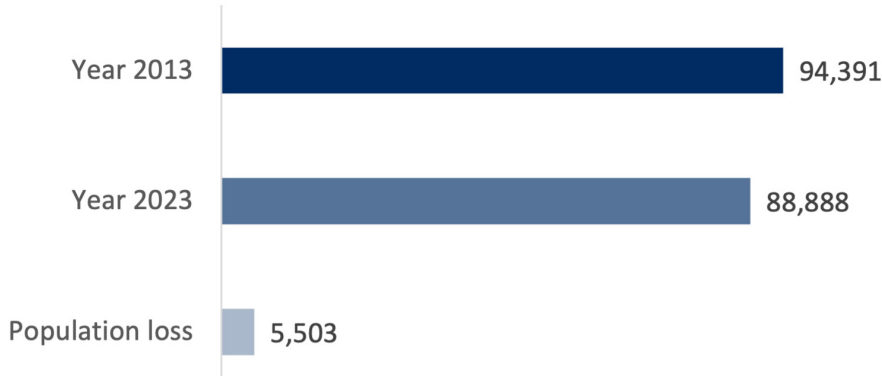
Region 33 has the privilege of partnering with ROE 33/The Village Early Childhood Collaboration. As part of the Regional Office of Education 33, The Village works to plan, provide, and promote a comprehensive and collaborative system that identifies, coordinates, and facilitates equitable access to early education and community services designed to help all children, prenatal through age five, and their families reach their full potential. The Village has been recognized as a leader for creating and facilitating a systemic approach to addressing Early Childhood needs in our Region. Through Community-Based Planning, The Village works with community stakeholders to address Early Childhood needs in our Region. Together, Birth to Five Illinois and The Village created this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment with our partnered Action and Family Councils.

¹ Based on information provided at <https://native-land.ca>

Regional Demographics

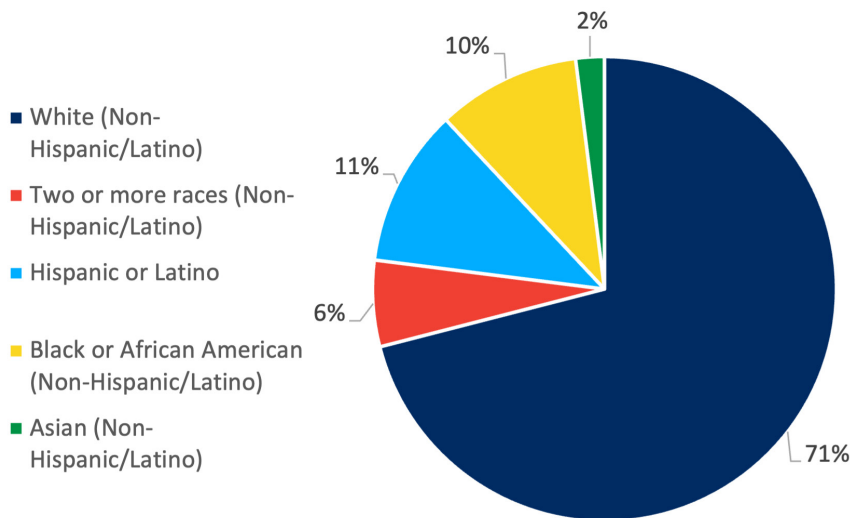
There are 88,888 people living in Region 33, with 5,490 children below the age of six. Most of the population self-identifies as white/Non-Hispanic, however, racial diversity is increasing throughout the Region, mainly in higher population areas (Figure 2). There are 170 households predominantly speaking Spanish and between 196-297 households using languages besides Spanish or English as a primary language.²

Figure 1: Overall Regional Population, 2013 and 2023



Source: U.S. Census
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 2: Overall Regional Race and Ethnicity



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

² 2020 Census data may be inaccurate due to participation rates effected by the COVID-19 pandemic and distrust of the federal government by immigrant populations.

The Illinois Early Learning Council (ELC) defines priority populations³ as children or families who have been historically underrepresented or underserved in and by State Agencies, programs, or services. Twelve priority populations have been identified by the ELC. While people from all identified priority populations may be present in Region 33, the following (some on the ELC list and some additional) were identified and discussed by the Region’s Action and Family Councils: families of children with special needs, foster families, families that work non-traditional hours, single parents, families just over the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) eligibility limit, immigrant families, and families headed by grandparents/extended families/guardians. Quantitative data on priority populations is limited, but qualitative data gathered from focus groups, interviews, and community meetings is included throughout this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment.

Galesburg CUSD #205 and Monmouth-Roseville CUSD #238 serve most of the English-language-learning (ELL) families in the Region. The Illinois Public School Report Card data shows 5% of the Region’s students receive ELL services. Monmouth-Roseville’s district serves 17 documented languages, 19% of their student population. Most Immigrant families come from the Democratic Republic of the Congo or Mexico and mainly live in Galesburg, Monmouth, and Aledo.

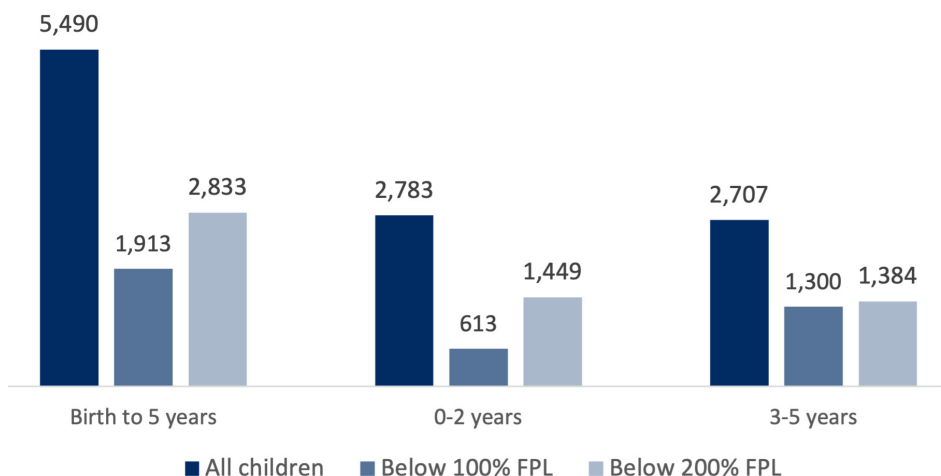
Figure 3: Federal Poverty Levels for Family of Four

	50% FPL	100% FPL	185% FPL	200% FPL
Family of 4	\$13,100	\$26,200	\$48,470	\$52,400

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) is a measure developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that calculates how much money a family needs on an annual basis to pay for housing, food, utilities, and other basic needs. Income bands are based on family size and what percentage of the FPL a family’s annual income falls within (Figure 3). FPL is also a measure used in some publicly funded Early Childhood programs as one way to determine eligibility. Approximately half of the families with children under six years old in Region 33 live on incomes at or below 200% of the FPL (Figure 4). Areas within the Region of lowest access to resources include more populated areas like Galesburg and Aledo and rural areas like Northern Henderson, Southern Knox, and Warren Counties. Fifty-two percent of the children ages birth to five in the Region live at or below the 200% FPL.

Figure 4: Children at 100% and 200% FPL by Age Group



Source: IECAM
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

³ <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/earlylearningcouncil/access/documents/priority-populations-updated-2021.pdf>

There are also children in Region 33 who have been identified as experiencing homelessness or unstable housing. Data from McKinney-Vento, the program that serves children who are experiencing homelessness or unstable housing, is limited, mainly because it relies on people to self-report their housing status. Many do not report due to the stigma related to homelessness. Other people go unreported because they do not realize they are considered “homeless or unhoused” according to the government definition; any child without a fixed, adequate, or regular place to sleep qualifies for McKinney-Vento services. In the Region, only about 1% of all public-school students were reported as experiencing homeless or unstable housing.

For communities and society to thrive, it is critical that all young children have opportunities to grow and develop in healthy, nurturing environments. Knowing and sharing the demographics of our Region helps funders, decision-makers, and elected officials make decisions from an informed perspective and empowers them to make decisions that can have the most positive impact on families.

The purpose of the priority populations list is to drive resources and attention toward improving access to high-quality, responsive services for children and families with limited to no access to economic or material resources. While the priority populations list addresses the access issue, Birth to Five Illinois strives to focus the attention of policymakers and early childhood stakeholders on identifying ways to engage these impacted communities to remove the systemic barriers causing the access challenges within each Region.

Local Community Collaborations

An ECEC Collaboration is formed when communities develop local partnerships to help enhance the lives of young children and families to ensure the healthy growth and development of Illinois' youngest learners. The Regional Office of Education #33, under the leadership of Jodi Scott, Regional Superintendent, has established a robust region wide ECEC Collaboration, called The Village.

Organizations in The Village include Head Start, Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R), Home Child Care Network, public services (housing, police, libraries), health providers, social service providers, community organizations, foundations, the faith-based community, businesses, local governments, and behavioral health services.

The Village actively seeks, and has received grant funding for, ECEC services from a variety of sources. Philanthropic donations through several organizations supplement ECEC programming and enrichment within the Region. Organizations investing time and treasure in ECEC opportunities include: The Galesburg Community Foundation, The United Way of Knox and Warren County, Discovery Depot, The City of Galesburg Parks and Recreation Department, Better Together of Mercer County, the YMCA's of Knox, Mercer, and Warren County, the Libraries of Henderson, Knox, Mercer, and Warren Counties, The Play Yard in Knoxville, Loving Bottoms Diaper Bank, Jamieson Center, and Faith-based organizations including Mt. Calvary, Costa Catholic, Galesburg Christian School, and Immaculate Conception.

The Village is using grant funds from the Birth to Five Illinois Implementation Grant to recruit, train, and employ more early childhood workers throughout the Region. They have made it a priority to license more home providers throughout the Region, including specifically: more immigrant home providers in Monmouth and Galesburg; increasing licensure at all levels of ECEC, including Directors; and finding a provider for Early Head Start in Mercer County.

The Youth Empowerment Services (YES) Council has partnered with other human service organizations in adopting the Integrated Referral Intake System (IRIS). The adoption of IRIS magnifies current efforts to foster a "no wrong door" approach for families, allowing collaborative wrap-around assistance by providers and resulting in the elimination of redundancy, confusion, and miscommunication. Since January 2023, 30 organizations have collaborated through IRIS to serve 40 families.

Other organizations working to increase the capacity for ECEC services within Region 33 include Knox County YMCA, The Jamison Center in Monmouth, Better Together of Mercer County, and Human Service Councils in all four counties. Human Service Councils facilitate collaboration between organizations, including child safety awareness, health services, legal services, food pantries, hygiene pantries, diaper banks, goodwill services, financial assistance, parenting supports, supports for substance use disorders, and many others.

Collaboration efforts have resulted in reaching priority populations who have been isolated by language and cultural barriers. Action Council member Gorette 'GoGo' Kupa, an immigrant from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is a multilingual, wife, mother, entrepreneur, and civic organizer. Using Birth to Five Illinois funding, The Village has teamed up with Kupa and Malia Owens from the Home Child Care Network and Skip-A-Long Community Services to empower 12 members of the immigrant community to receive training and licensure to become home providers. Together they have overcome language barriers caused by documents, policies, and procedures that have historically limited non-English speakers from becoming licensed. Kupa and Owens have opened a world of opportunity for the Congolese immigrants and are creating high-quality, culturally responsive child care services for children and families.



A pair of hands holding an infant's foot.

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Programs

There is an extensive network of ECEC services available to families in Region 33, including Head Start, Early Head Start, Preschool for All (PFA), Prevention Initiative (PI), Early Intervention (EI), Home Visiting, Early Childhood Special Education, doulas, and both licensed and license-exempt child care programs. Figure 5 provides an overview of the number, capacity, and ages served in publicly funded programs, and Figure 6 provides an overview of the number and capacity of licensed and license-exempt child care programs in the Region. Yet, with all these programs available, too many families do not know they exist or do not know how to access them. One mother said, “There are programs that are available, but you do not know of them unless someone you know has used them.”

“ There needs to be a better way to spread resources to families!
- Parent ”

Figure 5: Publicly Funded ECEC Programs, Capacity, and Ages Served

	High School/GED	Graduate Degree
Early Head Start	1	Birth to Three
Head Start	7	Birth to Three
Preschool for All	16	Three to Four
Preschool for All Expansion	12	Three to Four
Prevention Initiative	5	Birth to Three

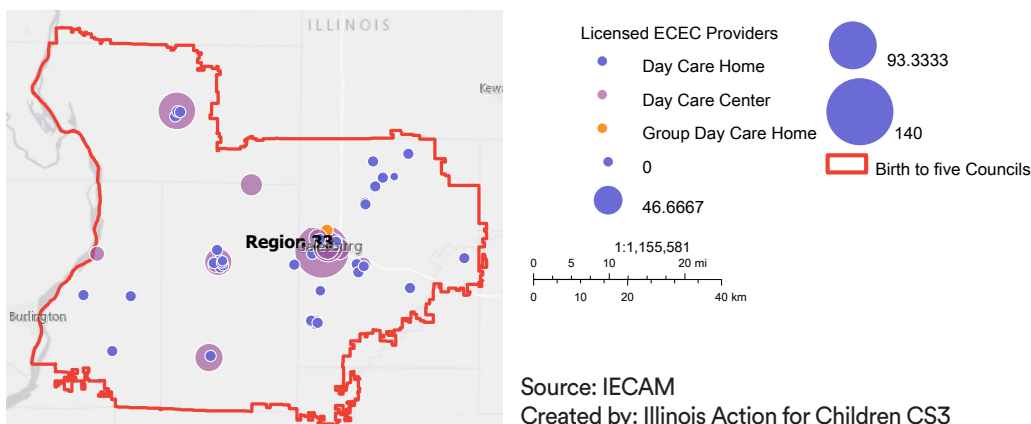
Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 6: Licensed and License-Exempt Child Care Centers and Capacity

Provider Type	Number of Programs
Licensed Child Care Center	8
Licensed Family Child Care Center	67
License-Exempt Child Care Center	2

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Figure 7: Map of Publicly Funded ECEC Sites



Source: IECAM
Created by: Illinois Action for Children CS3

Head Start Programs are federally funded through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and serves children ages three to five. Family income (185% FPL) is the primary determinant for eligibility. Some children from families above 185% FPL may qualify if they meet other requirements. Participation in Head Start is free to eligible families. Strengths identified by parents, providers, and community members include free cost, whole family support, and quality staff. Challenges for our Region include limited public transportation and the stigma associated with qualifying for a publicly funded program due to a family having limited access to resources.

Early Head Start (EHS) is also federally funded. Their services are similar to those provided by Head Start but serve expectant parents and children aged birth to three. Eligibility is the same as Head Start but also gives priority access to families experiencing other challenging circumstances, such as children experiencing homelessness and living in foster care.

Preschool for All (PFA) is funded by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and serves three and four-year-olds from families with who meet financial qualifications and need supports to be academically successful. Participation in PFA is free to eligible families. PFA programs are located within the Region's school districts. Advantages cited by caregivers are having a consistent schedule, access to special needs services, free cost, a smooth transition to Kindergarten, transportation, and qualified staff. Challenges experienced by families include half-day programming makes scheduling and transportation difficult for working caregivers, lack of information about the enrollment processes, and not enough spots for children.

Prevention Initiative (PI) provides child development and family support services for expectant parents and families with children from birth to age three to help them build a strong foundation for learning and to prepare children for later school success. The PI program provides center-based or home visiting services.

Early Intervention (EI) is funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS). Services provide support to families with babies and young children (ages birth to three) with developmental delays and disabilities. There is no cost for eligible families. Per IECAM Fiscal Year 2020 data, there are 214 children in Region 33 receiving EI services. Parents/caregivers appreciate that services are provided in the home. One family within our Region stated that the challenge they faced "was lack of services and a lack of therapists to provide those services".

Early Childhood Special Education is funded by ISBE. Services are free to families of children ages three through public school enrollment with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Region 33 services are divided geographically. The Galesburg School District provides its own Special Education services. The Knox Warren Special Education District serves Warren County and the part of Knox County not serviced by Galesburg Schools. The Black Hawk Special Education District serves Mercer County. The West Central Illinois Special Education Cooperative serves Henderson County. Services include speech, occupational therapy, and physical therapy. When possible, services are provided within the classroom setting. When not possible, services are performed during home visits. Caregivers shared that they have difficulty understanding the IEP process, especially early in the process.

Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) is funded by IDHS and assists families with the increasing cost of child care. Families below 200% FPL and employed or enrolled in high school, trade school, or undergraduate college qualify for CCAP. The family is allowed to use the financial assistance to offset the cost of child care. Data indicates many eligible families do not participate in the program. Barriers cited by families and providers include lack of information about the program, the difficult application process, and wanting to remain self-reliant. A more recent obstacle for families has been created by the new minimum pushing families just over the CCAP limits. This increase restricts their access to financial assistance, creating a scenario where it may be fiscally responsible or necessary to stay home with their children to forgo the cost of child care, decreasing the available workforce in the Region.

Figure 8: Licensed Child Care Facilities by County

County	Number of Licensed Child Care Centers	Number of Licensed Home Care Providers	Total
Henderson	0	4	4
Knox	3	40	43
Mercer	4	6	10
Warren	3	22	25
Total	10	72	82

Source: DCFS
 Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

The Region boasts 23 Licensed Centers that have achieved Silver Circle of Quality recognition from ExceleRate Illinois for surpassing Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) standards and providing exemplary developmental services for children and their families.

License Exempt Centers, also known as faith-based and/or private schools, are exempt from state licensure, health, and safety requirements. There are two in Region 33.

Licensed Exempt Family Child Care, also known as informal or Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care, may care for up to three children or the children from one family without being licensed.

To summarize, it is critical that programs and services surround children and their families, supporting their needs during the early years of development. When children and families who desire ECEC services do not have access to these programs, no matter the reason, the entire community is negatively impacted.

“
 It’s easier for my child to make friends and learn through play.
 - Parent
 ”

Slot Gap

“Slot gap” data demonstrates the difference between the number of children eligible for a service compared with the number of seats available for that service. Determining the slot gap in our Region is critical for determining where shortfalls of availability or extra services exist. This data allows decision-makers at the local, regional, and state level to formulate plans and allocate resources efficiently and effectively.

In Region 33, a publicly funded program slot gap exists. Publicly funded programs include Head Start and Early Head Start (both federally funded), Preschool for All, Preschool for All Expansion, and Prevention Initiative (Illinois State Board of Education funded), and Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) Home Visiting. While all publicly funded programs have different requirements, some use income as a determination for enrollment. Therefore, only children whose families live on incomes at or below 200% FPL are included in the publicly funded slot gap. Because different age groups qualify for different programs and services, the slot gap is divided into two age bands: children ages birth to two and children ages three to five.

Overall, there is a lack of slots available to families, if all wanted to enroll their child ages birth to five in a licensed child care center, licensed family child care home, or license-exempt child care center (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Overall Child Care Slot Gap



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Capacity across licensed and license-exempt providers varies, but licensed family child care homes have the largest number of slots (Figure 10).

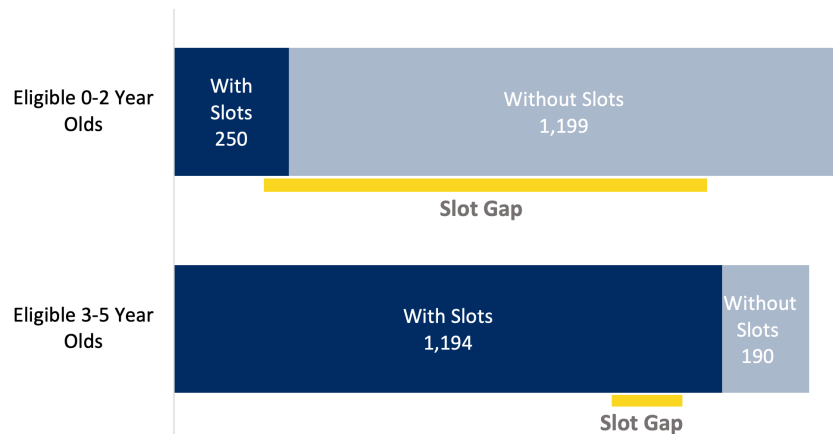
Figure 10: Licensed and License-Exempt Child Care Centers, Capacity

Providers	Programs	Capacity
Licensed Child Care Center	8	478
Licensed Family Child Care Center	67	585
License-Exempt Child Care Center	2	140

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

As shown in Figures 11 and 12, most children birth to two who might qualify for publicly funded programs or services do not have a spot for enrollment, with only 24 of the slots for Early Head Start. Children ages three to five have more spots available to them; however, 476 of the slots are for Prevention Initiative and IDHS Home Visiting which are not necessarily child care slots. The shortfall of availability results in families being on waiting lists, finding alternative care options with family and neighbors, or remaining in the home and being unable to work.

Figure 11: Publicly Funded Child Care Slot Gap



Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

“Without access to infant care, we are being forced to make the difficult choice between our work and career and our children’s well-being!”
- Parent

Figure 12: Publicly Funded Early Childhood Program Capacity

Providers	Capacity
Head Start	307
Early Head Start	24
Preschool for All	637
Preschool for All Expansion	250
Prevention Initiative	226

Source: IECAM
Created by: Birth to Five Illinois

Low wages coupled with challenging policies have created a shortage of ECEC providers, resulting in Region 33 having few options for infant and toddler care. This shortage in turn creates hardship on families to find enough care for their children, especially infants and toddlers. Families are additionally burdened by half day and full day programs that do not provide flexible hours or only meet certain days of the week, the high cost for care, and policy challenges that force parents/caregivers to navigate multiple funding streams. One parent stated, “Myself, I have had to miss work and turn to cash assistance programs and medical cards.”

The Governor of Illinois has recommended increasing the income threshold to qualify for enrollment in publicly funded programs to 400% FPL, which would allow over 90% of children in the Region to qualify for free, publicly funded ECEC programs and services. Region 33 providers would have to increase their capacity by at least 2,349 to fulfill the needs of qualifying families. ECEC providers in Region 33 are eager to meet the needs of families and caregivers and look forward to these improvements.

“We know the importance of quality child care and the impact it has not only on the child’s development, but also on the employability of parents and guardians. We’ve spent the last year and a half researching, learning, renovating, and finding potential staffing. Our goal is to ensure access to family-focused child care for the betterment of our community as a whole.”
- Community Member Working to Open a Child Care Center

Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) Workforce

Region 33's ECEC workforce is dedicated to nurturing and empowering the children and families of the Region. Their work is centered on best practices and data-driven research, supporting their passionate care for the Region's youngest learners. ECEC staff and teachers report facing daily challenges stemming from the unmet needs of priority populations, increasing mandates, and limited resources. Due to low wages, the ECEC workforce suffers from a shortage of workers at all levels, but especially for Infant/Toddler care.

The Region's providers shared stories of ECEC director positions going unfilled for months or years due to a lack of qualified applicants; shortages like these can result in centers not being able to open or totally shutting down. DCFS policy requires a director-certified person to be on-property when children are present. One Director, unable to hire an Assistant Director, shared he must close his center on days he has a doctor's appointment or personal emergency. Consequently, families are forced to make other arrangements for their children on days the center is closed. Adhering to a similar policy led to the closure of the only center in Henderson County due to staffing.



An adult reading a book to children.

In Mercer County, the funding existed for an Early Head Start program, but months went by before a provider could be found to run the program. In Warren County, the Jamieson Center has been seeking a Center Director for over one year while their building is being renovated. Centers in Mercer and Knox Counties would like to expand their capacity, and have space to do so, but are unable to find the employees needed.

Centers in the Region's most populated areas are located appropriately to serve our priority populations but are unable to employ enough workers to operate at capacity. Due to licensing and policy challenges, some centers choose to remain at their current capacity to avoid "red tape" from government agencies. The result is families languishing on waiting lists.

Families and community leaders cite several concurrent causes for the employee shortage:

- The amount of education required does not justify the wages earned.
 - Licensing for preschool teachers requires a bachelor's degree.
 - ECEC centers require an associate degree.
- Child care centers typically pay minimum wage with no benefits.
- There are many jobs available with few qualified applicants.
- The 0-3 age group of children is less cost effective.
 - More expensive to operate.
 - Lower ratio of providers to the number of child is required.
- Child care is so expensive for families, staying home to care for children may be a more fiscally responsible decision than working.
- Area colleges do not offer ECEC education programs due to low enrollment.
 - Low enrollment might be caused by low wages after graduation.
 - Graduates can make more in entry level non-ECEC fields.

Initiatives to recruit ECEC workers are led by agencies and individuals. Regional Office of Education (ROE) #33 has conducted multiple Employment Fairs throughout the Region. Despite many positions being available, few job seekers have attended. The ROE utilizes grant funding from Birth to Five Illinois to provide training, translation, and resources, including technology, to individuals interested in becoming licensed and employed in the ECEC field. Some of those assisted through their efforts include Congolese immigrants, under the leadership of a local community member. This individual collaborates with the Home Child Care Network, ROE #33, and INCCRRA/Birth to Five Illinois to recruit, empower, train, and license additional home providers within the immigrant community. This cutting-edge initiative to license immigrant populations has encountered challenges that stem from language barriers, both verbal and written, compounded by state and federal systems not yet accommodating the diverse number of languages spoken in the Region. To date, 12 caregivers are in the home provider training, and one has received their license.



An adult and a child smiling while hugging each other.

The Galesburg Area Vocational Center offers child care courses, contributing towards credentialing, to area high school students through the EdPathway's Grant, which area schools may participate in for a maximum of three years. There are currently ten students in the Region working toward ECEC licensure.

In addition to non-livable wages, the ECEC workforce is increasingly frustrated by inflexible government agency policy that is often redundant, contradictory, restrictive, and creates obstacles to expansion of services.

Parent/Family/Caregiver Voice

“ Rural Henderson County, has had little to no child care for the past 10 years.

- Parent (Henderson County)

Parents and caregivers face challenges in accessing ECEC in Region 33 due to many factors including availability, cost, quality, cultural responsiveness, language, transportation, hours of operation, special needs, learning/teaching styles, insurance limitations, and the pervasive acronyms that make it hard to understand what is available.

Parents, families, and caregivers share that finding ECEC services is challenging. Finding spaces for their children often results in being placed on a waiting list or having options that require long commutes. One family shared that they must take their children out of the county where they live and work, drop off their children off for child care, then pass their own house on the way back to where they work. Families find providers primarily through word of mouth, even though the Region has CCR&R and ROE services that assist families in locating ECEC services. Families hope for access to a simpler, more effective reference system, like 411.

Once families find a place for their children, they express frustration with the prohibitive cost of care, often matching or surpassing a family’s monthly income, mortgage obligation, or cost of college tuition. Families that qualify for State assistance do not always complete forms due to factors including stigma related to using services, low priority, need for support with the process, or unwillingness to receive assistance. Some providers will not accept children from families with State aid (CCAP) because they distrust the State to pay its bills on time. Families receiving aid report being frustrated that the quality of the care they seek is demonstrated by fewer providers. Families would like to screen providers for quality and teaching styles, but typically have few or no options. Instead, they must choose between taking their child to a provider with space available or staying home with their child and not going to work.

Immigrant families experiencing language and cultural barriers shared they find it easier to create their own informal systems of child care. Immigrant families often desire a culturally responsive child care setting for their children that offers familiar food options and language accessibility. Given no options, the immigrant population in Region 33 has been motivated to become licensed and provide these opportunities for their community. Unfortunately, when they seek training and licensure, they encounter obstacles caused by not knowing what resources are available to them and a lack of access to translated materials.



A child reaching up to touch a group of large bubbles.

Families want and need to build a trusting relationship with their ECEC providers. Building relationships and earning trust takes time. Families find that the high turnover in the ECEC profession prohibits nurturing connections between children and providers.

Families also encounter limitations when seeking healthcare for their young children. There are two pediatricians in Region 33. Appointments must be scheduled months in advance. When families do find a health

provider, their insurance does not always have the provider “in network”, requiring higher costs or the need to search for less expensive provider outside of the Region. In some cases when specialists are needed, families travel to Peoria, the Quad Cities, Burlington, Iowa, or even further to Chicago, St. Louis, Missouri, or Iowa City, Iowa.

Transportation is an obstacle for families utilizing both educational and health services. Bussing systems do not go into all neighborhoods, and rural areas have limited or no public transportation options. Transportation systems that exist rely on grant funding or philanthropy and are not always reliable.

The lack of availability of non-traditional child care options causes caregivers to be late or miss work. Repercussions for caregivers include the risk of losing income, paying fines to providers for late pick-ups, and termination of employment. Parents and caregivers report increased stress and frustration when seeking reliable, quality care for their children.

“The licensing program is very difficult. It is too long with all the material you have to cover. But my country was a bilingual country, teaching French and English classes. Reading the material has helped me understand English more, even though the process is too long!

- Congolese Parent & Family Council Member

”

“I have to travel to Wisconsin, St. Louis, and Chicago to see specialists.

- Parent of a Child with a Disability

”

A group of children playing with a parachute in an open field.

Parents/families/caregivers are also challenged by navigating the myriad of acronyms associated with ECEC. Although agencies dedicate job positions to providing information to families, the ECEC landscape lacks the familiarity families and society has with the K-12 education and higher education fields. The ECEC community’s over-reliance on acronyms and “jargon” alienates families trying to find affordable, quality programming.

The information contained in this section is vitally important when measured against the vision and mission held up by Birth to Five Illinois. Family/caregiver voice is

critical to providing solutions to generational problems in our societal and ECEC culture. Elevating family/caregiver and ECEC provider voices at the regional level honors personal and lived experiences rather than the traditional “top-down” or “one-size-fits-all” approach of the past.

Regional Strengths & Needs

The Family Council, Action Council, community members, The Village, and Birth to Five Illinois expressed that Region 33 has many strengths in the current ECEC system. While praising the existing programs, they also acknowledged that there were areas in which ECEC may be more accessible and equitable to families and where it may better support providers.

Strengths of the Region

- Regional Office of Education 33 has strengthened and expanded ECEC programming.
- The ECEC professional community works well together and communicates regularly.
- Community members, including families, business owners, community leaders, school officials, and elected officials, among others, share a common vision that child success should not be determined by race, gender, religion, income, or zip code and understand the need for achieving an improved ECEC climate.
- The Region's ECEC community has taken the initiative to expand, improve, and collaborate to increase the opportunities for children and families. They value Birth to Five Illinois' initiative that honors decision-making at the local level. Community members appreciate that Birth to Five Illinois recognizes communities have unique needs and challenges and allows for the sharing of solutions "across" Regions where applicable, but not as a universal "fix" for all situations. Region 33 has historically elevated family and provider voice and honors the partnership with Birth to Five Illinois in this important work.

Needs of the Region

- Continue to perform outreach to populations experiencing marginalization.
- "Hold harmless" funding and policy extended to ECEC Collaborations like the K-12 funding model.
- More capacity, especially for infant/toddler care.
- More workers, especially director-qualified level employees.
- More home-based providers, especially in rural areas like Henderson and Mercer Counties.
- Employee retention to encourage healthy relationships between providers and families.
- Government oversight that fosters increased ECEC programming opportunities.
- Improved ECEC system that decreases stress on families, providers, resources, facilities, and employers outside of ECEC.

Families and Community Leaders cite several concurrent causes of the employee shortage:

- The amount of education required does not justify the wages earned.
 - » Licensing for preschool teachers requires a bachelor's degree.
 - » ECEC centers require an associate degree.
- Child care settings typically pay minimum wage with no benefits.
- There are many jobs available with few qualified applicants.
- The birth to age three group of children is more expensive to serve and requires a lower provider/child ratio.
- Child care is so expensive for families that staying home to care for children may be a more fiscally responsible decision than working.
- Area colleges do not offer ECEC education programs due to low enrollment.
 - » Low enrollment caused by low wages after graduation.
 - » Graduates can make more in entry level non-ECEC fields.

Needs of Families

- Affordable child care options.
- Family income eligibility adjustment to allow families more access to ECEC services.
- Home providers that accept State aid.
- Culturally responsive child care options that value language, food, and customs.
- Choice among a variety of learning style/teaching philosophies.
- Child care for immigrants attending ELL classes.
- Increased capacity for “ELL for adults,” family literacy, and citizenship programs.
 - Existing programs:
 - » Are operating at capacity.
 - » Need more instructional levels, beginners through advanced skill levels.
 - » Need child care options for class times.
 - » Need ELL teachers to offer more levels and increase capacity for participants.
 - » Need funds to increase offerings.
- More local medical providers for children.
- Insurance programs that allow local medical personnel in preferred provider status.
- Special needs services within the Region.
- Transportation, especially in rural areas.
- Build trust with educational institutions, especially in marginalized communities.
- Universal source for providers, resources, and information (i.e., 411).
- Real-time “open seat” information based on age, service, location.

Needs of Providers

- Consistent monitoring practices by DCFS and the Fire Marshall for center and home-based providers.
- Uniform interpretation of policy monitoring within DCFS and the Fire Marshall.
 - Two different inspections from two different people/entities can yield two different outcomes and create barriers for the programs within those facilities.
- Expedited fingerprinting/background checks from Illinois State Police.
 - Currently taking six to eight weeks after hiring to allow employees to start work.
- Shorter time (currently two months to two years) required to achieve licensure.
- More reliable funding sources.
- Lower cost for CPR and First Aid training.
- Supplemented costs for facility upgrades.
- More accommodating timelines for structural remodeling compliance.
- Consolidation/elimination of redundant/contradictory policies between child and family-serving state agencies.
- More applicants for open positions.
- More workers at all levels in ECEC, but especially infant/toddler care.
- Universal, efficient data collection methods.
- Real-time, complete IECAM and IDHS data, especially for priority populations.
- Local college Early Childhood licensure options.
- Translated documentation from governing agencies for training and compliance (e.g., first aid/CPR/food program).
- Gain the trust of families, especially from minoritized communities.
- Unlicensed provider information sharing between DCFS and Home Child Care Network to facilitate supports for home-based child care providers.

Recommendations

Region

- Continue to increase awareness and value for early childhood development among all stake-holders through ongoing marketing and communication.
- Continue to prioritize building relationships with marginalized/minoritized populations.
- Continue efforts to recruit, train, and license a diverse ECEC workforce.
- Restart ECEC coursework and child care in area colleges and high schools.
- Extend Grow Your Own ECEC educational programming in area high schools to include:
 - Recruitment.
 - Dual credit programming in collaboration with area colleges.
 - Scholarships requiring five years of employment service in regional ECEC.
- Continue to support home-based providers through information and resources.
- Continue “wrap around” support of families through:
 - Parenting classes.
 - ELL for adults with multiple skill levels.
 - Recruiting ELL teachers and increasing availability and levels of courses.
 - Citizenship programs.
 - Economic classes.
 - Provided child care during classes.
- Increase child care providers for non-traditional work hours and adult growth opportunities.
- Simplify access for families by creating a universal resource for information and communication (e.g., 411 and “BabyHelp.com” - fictitious example).
- Explore public/private “matching fund” model to subsidize wages.
- Improve transportation options in populated and rural areas by:
 - Fostering flexibility in bus routing.
 - Partnering with rural agencies to share transportation.

State

- Honor the 2019 Early Childhood Funding Commission Recommendations.
- Create or assign a single agency for ECEC coordination that facilitates:
 - Funding.
 - Policy.
 - Monitoring.
 - Compliance, including facilities.
 - Training.
 - Licensure.
 - Translation.
 - Information.
- Extend “hold harmless” funding and policy to ECEC Collaborations, similar to K-12 Evidence Based Funding Model.
- Standardize policy, monitoring, compliance, training, inspection, accountability, requirements, and licensure throughout ECEC without creating new obstacles.
- Expedite translation of documents, training, licensing, or allow for regional translation.
- Eliminate barriers for non-English speaking communities.
- Expedite fingerprinting and background checks.
- Continue to support regional autonomy.
- Honor existing Collaborations and encourage continued growth.
- Move away from competitive grant-based funding model.
- Adopt one income eligibility threshold across all programs.
- Explore funding sources that benefit directly from high quality Early Childhood development:
 - Employers who utilize employees that are parents or caregivers.
 - Employers who utilize well trained and educated employees.
- Encourage non-ECEC employers/businesses/manufacturers to:
 - Partner with organizations like “Ready Nation” and “Better Together”.
 - Provide in-house/onsite child care for their employees.
 - Pay onsite ECEC employees on the same salary scale as existing non-ECEC employees to eliminate pay disparities and attract the most qualified ECEC staff.
 - » Rationale: employers would potentially gain:
 - Employee retention.
 - Employee loyalty.
 - More applicants for open positions.
 - Employee peace of mind- knowing their children are near while they are working.

In compiling this report, it is our hope that local and state leaders will use this information to advance ECEC services in the Region. We will continue our community engagement efforts to expand our understanding of the ECEC needs of local families and providers. If you have further questions about these recommendations or would like to get involved with the work of Birth to Five Illinois in Region 33, please find our contact information on the front inside cover of this Early Childhood Regional Needs Assessment.

Appendices

Appendix A: References

1. Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding (2021). *Commission Report Of Findings And Recommendations: Spring 2021*. Site name: <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/documents/early-childhood-funding-commission-full-report.pdf>
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Appendix B: Focus Group and Interview Questions

Throughout the development of the Regional Needs Assessment, focus groups and interviews were conducted with caregivers, providers, elected officials, and other community stakeholders. Below are questions developed for caregivers and others. In the interest of time and space, only select questions are included.

Caregivers

1. There are many Early Childhood services available in our Region. What Early Childhood services does your family use/has your family used?
2. How have you found out about Early Childhood programs or services, or found care for your child(ren)?
3. Do the child care services you're using now meet your family's needs? If not, please describe what would better fit your family's needs.
4. What, if anything, has been particularly helpful in making Early Childhood Education and Care work for your family?
5. What barriers or challenges has your family had with using Early Childhood services in your community?
6. Have any of the children in your care been referred to services? What was that process like?
7. What services don't currently exist in your community that you think would help families, in general? What services would help parent/caregivers, specifically?
8. Is there anything else you think I should know about Early Childhood education, care, or services in your community, our Region, or in the state?

Early Childhood Professionals and Others

1. What challenges do you think families have in accessing Early Childhood Education and Care programs and services?
2. What programs do you know of in the Region that serve children birth through age five and their families?
3. What services don't currently exist in your community and/or this Region for young children and/or their families that you would like to see?
4. What data do you think would be helpful in better understanding how priority populations access Early Childhood care and services, or the barriers/challenges they have accessing care and services?
5. Is child care readily available and close to employers in your community?
6. What accommodations has your business or company made for professionals with young children? How have these accommodations impacted your business or company?
7. Have you connected with child care providers in the community to build relationships and build relationships with partners to provide the care you need for employees?

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