



Policy Remix: Ideas to Strengthen the Early Childhood Workforce

BARBARA BOWMAN LEADERSHIP FELLOWS 2023-2024

Erikson Institute

Early Childhood Leadership Academy

2023-2024 Barbara Bowman Leadership Fellows



The Barbara Bowman Leadership Fellows program is designed to enrich the perspective and enhance the capacity of child advocates committed to advancing racial equity through early childhood policy and systems change.

Acknowledgments

Barbara Taylor Bowman

We are honored to have the program named after one of Erikson Institute's founders, Barbara Taylor Bowman. Barbara's legacy as an education activist, policy adviser, and early childhood practitioner matches the characteristics of the fellows participating in this program. Furthermore, her dedication to ensuring that diversity and equity are mutually reinforced provides the framework that supports the entire program experience.



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Pilot to Permanent: Illinois Early Childhood Apprenticeship

Problem

Research demonstrates the positive impact high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) can have on a child's development in their first five years and on their future academic and economic outcomes. Smart Start Illinois, an initiative championed by Governor Pritzker which aims to eradicate preschool deserts¹ statewide by 2027, is a key component of making "Illinois the best state in the nation to raise a family."²

To meet this goal, Illinois preschool providers for children ages three to five must recruit more qualified ECEC professionals, particularly in community-based settings that offer extended hours and year-round availability for working families. Unfortunately, the ability of these preschool programs to meet the demand is challenged by a lack of highly qualified and credentialed personnel who have both the capacity and desire to work in communities with limited access to resources.

¹ Illinois State Board of Education. (2024, March). *ECBG Preschool Deserts*. Retrieved from: <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/ECBG-Preschool-Deserts.aspx>.

² Office of the Illinois Governor. (2019, December 16). *Gov. Pritzker Calls on Illinois to Become Best State in Nation for Families Raising Young Children* [Press release]. Retrieved from: <https://www.illinois.gov/news/press-release.20950.html>.

Cause

Recruiting new professionals into the ECEC field is challenging due to compensation that is often so low workers qualify for public assistance.³ Additional barriers include unclear career pathways and high credentialing and education requirements for what are often difficult day-to-day working conditions. Therefore, the ECEC field is experiencing a long-standing, nationwide workforce shortage that preceded and was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴

In addition to wage disparities, retention of qualified educators in community-based programs is compromised by a 12-month schedule that lacks the paid time off and additional fringe benefits that school-based programs offer. Thus, qualified preschool teachers often leave community-based programs to work in the school system or leave the ECEC field altogether to pursue careers with more immediate and higher earning potential.

Community-based preschool programs are often better positioned to meet the diverse needs of families, particularly those in communities which have had historic disinvestment. One approach to strengthening these programs is to target recruitment of individuals who are from within the community and who reflect the culture, values, and lived experiences of the children and families served.

Solution

Governor Pritzker's commitment to addressing the ECEC workforce crisis resulted in the development of the Smart Start Illinois Early Childhood Apprenticeship Pilot in FY24, which was funded through the Illinois Department of Human Services Division of Early Childhood (IDHS-DEC).⁵ Given Illinois' diverse population with unique needs, the pilot should

³ Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding. (2021). *Commission Report on Findings and Recommendations*. Retrieved from: <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/documents/early-childhood-funding-commission-full-report.pdf>.

⁴ Khattar, R. & Coffey, M. (2023, October 19). *The Child Care Sector Is Still Struggling to Hire Workers*. CAP 20. Retrieved from: <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-child-care-sector-is-still-struggling-to-hire-workers/>.

⁵ Illinois Gateways to Opportunity. *Registered Apprenticeship Standards*. Illinois Early Childhood Apprenticeship Program. Retrieved from: <https://www.ilgateways.com/docman-docs/smart-start/iecap-public/3504-iecap-registered-apprenticeship-standards-fy24/file>.

become an established ECEC apprenticeship program and expand incrementally statewide.

To do so, IDHS should examine and identify commonalities across current pilot sites that allow them to be strong state partners and determine the markers of eligible community-based programs, including those that:

- Serve communities that have historically had less access to resources and are experiencing sizeable workforce shortages that prevent programs from operating at full capacity.
- Utilize multiple funding streams that require the provider to braid and blend public dollars to maximize the number of eligible children who can access affordable programming.
- Have the staffing structure that supports coaching opportunities and classroom coverage for the apprentices' professional development.
- Provide assurance that apprentices reflect or can adequately meet the needs of the population(s) of children served within their organization to uphold cultural competency (reference the racial diversity mission and targeted recruitment strategies of Grow Your Own Illinois).⁶
- Commit to establishing clear policies and practices promoting staff retention once an apprentice completes the program qualifications.

Concurrently, IDHS should firm the apprenticeship guidelines by:

- Setting clear parameters that determine apprenticeship completion (i.e., combined minimum number of hours of on-the-job experience and minimum level of coursework).
- Establishing data collection metrics that track completion rates across communities and degree/credentialing programs that can be used to determine success across sites.
- Encouraging utilization of scholarships such as the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) to support degree attainment so apprentices can receive “on-the-job/real world training and mentorship tailored to the context of the specific

⁶ Grow Your Own Illinois. (n.d.) *What We Do*. Retrieved from: <https://growyourownteachers.org/what-we-do>.

communities where apprentices work,”⁷ with the end goal of obtaining a Professional Educator License (PEL) to eventually serve as a Lead Teacher in a state-funded preschool classroom.

- Requiring that participating community-based programs provide adequate training and professional development opportunities to apprentices that prepares them to support the unique needs of children within the local community, such as those with learning or developmental disabilities, multilingual learners, migrant or immigrant children, and/or those who have experienced trauma.

By gathering best practices and success indicators, IDHS can develop key principles to guide implementation and growth.

The Illinois Early Childhood Apprenticeship Pilot provides funding that helps community-based providers address immediate staffing needs by supporting increased compensation for staff. Entry-level ECEC employees are introduced to a career path that integrates relevant previous experience with full-time employment and professional development. Concurrently, apprentices have an opportunity to pursue certificate completion and/or degree attainment ranging from the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential to a Gateways to Opportunity® ECE Credential Level 5 at the discretion of the apprentice and depending on the program needs.

Currently, four community-based program sites (Carole Robertson Center for Learning and It Takes A Village Family of Schools in Chicago; Heartland Community College Child Development Lab in Normal; and Skip-A-Long (SAL) Community Services in Moline) are participating in the pilot in partnership with six institutions of higher education.

Preliminary sampling from two of the four participating community-based providers indicates that, to date, the pilot has accelerated onboarding by at least 70 employees across several communities. These early success indicators support not only the pilot’s continuation in the current sites, but also the expansion to additional communities, which should focus on building workforce pipelines that align with preschool desert areas and Smart Start Illinois preschool expansion goals.

Upon the completion of the current pilot grant cycle, IDHS can utilize the readiness measures to identify four additional providers in preschool desert

⁷ Illinois Gateways to Opportunity. (n.d.) *Illinois Early Childhood Apprenticeship Pilot*. Illinois Department of Human Services Division of Early Childhood. Retrieved from: <https://www.ilgateways.com/smart-start/illinois-early-childhood-apprenticeship-pilot>.

areas to participate in the apprenticeship program. Systems partners, such as Birth to Five Illinois and the Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) Agencies, can help IDHS pinpoint eligible organizations that meet the criteria and express a willingness to commit to supporting apprentices' learning, professional development, and compensation to promote high-quality learning environments that meets the needs of families.

Illinois' current pilot utilizes state funding from child care program contracts to support participating apprenticeship sites. IDHS should also consider leveraging existing federal dollars earmarked for apprenticeship programs to supplement the investment.⁸

Early childhood education apprenticeship models exist in other states, and IDHS should assess those frameworks⁹ to outline reasonable conditions for incremental expansion to additional community-based providers. West Virginia, for example, has an early childhood apprenticeship program that dates back several decades. The program is supported by a collaboration between the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Apprenticeship, numerous state agencies, and higher education institutions to recruit and sustain a highly competent ECEC workforce,¹⁰ demonstrating that longevity is contingent on a state's ability to leverage various funding sources.

Because of the complexities that contribute to the ECEC workforce shortage, apprenticeship expansion in Illinois is also contingent on other ECEC workforce initiatives, such as the ECACE network and scholarships. As policymakers and advocates continue to address the workforce crisis, it is imperative that solutions are presented as multi-layered and interdependent. The undercurrent of the existing apprenticeship model is the ability for participants to lean on scholarship dollars to further their education, which leads to a more educated and qualified workforce.

Outcome

A pillar of Smart Start Illinois is to increase the number of publicly funded preschool slots by 5,000 seats annually (currently committed in FY24 and

⁸ Apprenticeship USA. (n.d.). *Open Funding Opportunities*. Retrieved from: <https://www.apprenticeship.gov/investments-tax-credits-and-tuition-support/open-funding-opportunities>.

⁹ National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning. *Early Childhood Education Apprenticeships: The Why, What, and How*. Retrieved from: https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/new-occ/resource/files/ece_apprenticeshipbrief_0.pdf.

¹⁰ West Virginia Apprenticeship for Child Development Specialist. Retrieved from: www.wvacds.org.

FY25)¹¹ so every three- and four-year-old has access to a high-quality early learning program. The expansion of the Illinois Early Childhood Apprenticeship can help to increase Illinois' ECEC workforce pipeline to meet the diverse needs of the state's children and families.

Strengthening the parameters of the current pilot and establishing it as a long-term, statewide initiative will enable IDHS – and eventually, the Department of Early Childhood – to provide permanent career pathways and paid opportunities to local community members while serving more children at a critical time in their development. Future apprenticeship initiatives can also include expansion to family child care providers, home visitors, early interventionists, infant/early childhood mental health consultants, and others that would allow Illinois to uphold the current mixed-delivery system.

The National Early Care & Education Workforce Center is urging communities nationwide to rethink recruitment and retention strategies to address the drastic shortages of early childhood educators. ECEC program leaders and higher education institutions are encouraged to embrace Grow Your Own (GYO) initiatives like the apprenticeship pilot that are “equity-centered, community-driven strategies aimed at supporting and sustaining a robust, diverse early education workforce from within communities.”¹²

Similarly, the UIC Collaborative for Young Children and Families notes that early childhood apprenticeship programs are a key component of a multi-layered approach to cement a viable ECEC workforce pipeline in the long term.¹³ With the apprenticeship pilot, Illinois is already on that path to providing flexibility to both the apprentices and the participating programs.

By utilizing the apprenticeship pilot to establish benchmarks for incremental expansion and, ultimately, broadscale participation and success, Illinois is well positioned to increase its ECEC workforce and make Illinois the best state for young children.

¹¹ Illinois State Board of Education. (2024, March 14). *ISBE Releases the Fiscal Year 2025 Block Grant Request for Proposal to Award \$75 Million in Smart Start Illinois Funding to Expand Access to Preschool* [Press release]. Retrieved from: <https://www.isbe.net/Lists/News/NewsDisplay.aspx?ID=1491#:~:text=The%20inaugural%20year%20of%20the,to%20preschool%20by%20FY%202027>.

¹² The Build Initiative. (2024, March 29). *Join the Grow Your Own Webinar Series*. Retrieved from: <https://buildinitiative.cmail20.com/t/t-e-etymilt-jyjlttdtk-k/>.

¹³ Main, C, and Yarbrough, K. (2024). *Strengthening the Early Learning Workforce: A Prerequisite for Expanding Access to High-Quality Early Childhood Care and Education*. Retrieved from: [ECE_PolicyBrief_2024_HI_linked_032024.pdf \(uic.edu\)](#).

Workforce Pipeline Development

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Reviving and Sustaining the Early Childhood Teacher Pipeline

Problem

Practical experience is a critical part of teacher education. Yet, the way student teaching is implemented creates prohibitive financial burdens for teaching staff in licensed early childhood care and education programs. Student educators point to the financial hardship that comes with unpaid student teaching requirements as the reason for their decision to discontinue their educator preparation programs.¹ This hinders the recruitment and retention of early childhood educators and exacerbates Illinois' teacher shortage as these students cannot afford to leave their jobs to student teach.

The incumbent early childhood workforce in early childhood education preparation programs must fulfill student teaching obligations by engaging in early learning experiences for a prescribed amount of time, often unpaid. This requirement may be partially met with credit earned through previous teaching experiences or experiences in their current place of employment in

¹ Teach Plus. (2023, December 5). *Student Teaching Is Unpaid & That's How It's Always Been": Barriers to Illinois Early Childhood Educator. Licensure*. Retrieved from: <https://teachplus.org/resource/student-teaching-is-unpaid-thats-how-its-always-been-barriers-to-il-early-childhood-educator-licensure/>.

high-quality early learning programs.² Not all four-year educator preparation programs allow this alternative.³

Educators entering early childhood-focused bachelor's degree programs are primarily employed full-time as early learning professionals, earning an average of \$13.85 per hour and with limited access to resources. While earning wages at or below poverty level, they are often responsible for supporting and caring for family members.^{4,5} These educators already experience financial strain; they cannot afford the income loss that comes with leaving their employment to obtain the student teaching experience currently required.⁶ To prevent the pipeline from drying up, employers and institutions of higher education need to develop creative ways to invest in early childhood education by providing student teachers with financial support and reducing their financial strain.

The lack of financial support for student teachers pushes them out of licensure programs, preventing incumbent early childhood educators from advancing their professional teaching careers. An inadequate number of qualified teachers available to fill vacant teaching roles limits the number of children benefitting from high-quality early learning environments, which have been proven to yield high economic short- and long-term returns, as evidenced by higher earned income for families and increased tax revenues for the state.⁷

² "High-quality" early learning programs are those that meet the same quality standard of achieving ExceleRate Silver or Gold Circle of quality, required of Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) Preschool Education and Prevention Initiative funded programs. Section 235.65 ExceleRate Illinois: Quality Rating and Improvement System. Retrieved from: <https://www.exceletrateillinoisproviders.com/resources/standard-and-evidence-requirements>.

³ Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity. (2023, December). *Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity First Annual Report 2023*. Retrieved May 04, 2024 from: https://www.ecace.org/assets/documents/2023/ECACE_First_Annual_Report.pdf.

⁴ Zinsser, K.M., Main, C., Torres, L. and Connor, K. (2019). Patching the Pathway and Widening the Pipeline: Models for Developing a Diverse Early Childhood Workforce in Chicago. *American Journal of Community Psychology*. 0:1-13.

⁵ See footnote 3.

⁶ Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development. (August 2019). *ECE Educator Compensation Consensus Statement*. Retrieved May 4, 2024: <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/documents/7-ece-educator-compensation-consensus-statement-190726.pdf>. p.3.

⁷ Center on the Developing Child. (2007). *Early Childhood Program Effectiveness* (InBrief). Retrieved from: www.developingchild.harvard.edu.

Cause

Those seeking to advance their early learning careers by enrolling in educator preparation programs often face several barriers, including conflicting educational requirements within the fragmented early childhood system. Incumbent early childhood educators face additional barriers and challenges when trying to obtain their Professional Educator's License.⁸ Alternative educator preparation programs, including Grow Your Own initiatives, have been developed to help students overcome these barriers. While such programs have been successful in helping these students progress through their educator preparation programs, they are not without challenges.⁹

One challenge with educator preparation programs wanting to provide stipends for student teachers not currently employed in approved settings is that student teaching must occur during the final year of the educator preparation program. By this point, students may have reached the maximum limit for financial aid. Stipends provided to students by educator preparation programs to offset the financial strain of unpaid student teaching would exceed this limit, thus violating financial aid policies. Student eligibility for need-based financial aid relies on the expected family contribution calculation, which depends on the student's household income. When students leave their jobs to student teach, they lose the income used in this calculation. Yet, their eligibility for need-based financial aid is not recalculated.

Conflicting specifications of acceptable student teaching environments complicate or prohibit the ability of students to apply their existing employment to meet these qualifications. The Illinois Administrative Code (Code) indicates that student teaching may occur in a community-based early childhood education setting, without stipulation. Another section states that the student teaching requirement may be fulfilled in settings including children from birth through second grade, yet another allows student teaching in a community-based early childhood setting. Other parts of the Code state that experience as working in programs funded by the Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG).¹⁰ This funding specification seems to negate the flexibility of other parts of the Code. Illinois' rules and regulations on this issue seem to contradict themselves. The current methods of meeting the teaching experience requirement create a barrier

⁸ The Professional Educator License is formerly known as the Illinois State Board of Education Teacher License.

⁹ See footnote 4.

¹⁰ 23 Illinois Administrative Code. Amended at 46 Ill. Reg. 12973, effective 7/13/22.

for aspiring early childhood educators, and alternative ways to demonstrate this must be considered.

Although section 25.620(f) of the Code states, “Student teachers may be compensated for their services,”¹¹ some teacher preparation programs in the state of Illinois still do not allow student teachers to receive compensation for their time spent in the classroom.¹² Student teachers currently working in the early childhood field are challenged by the inconsistent practices between the Code and its application. They are often unable to use their existing employment to satisfy student teaching and field experience requirements. This means that students employed in early childhood programs not funded through ECBG must leave their jobs to fulfill student teaching requirements, which has financial consequences for them and their families.

Solution

The Illinois General Assembly should fund stipends for student teachers and cooperating teachers¹³ who support and supervise student teachers. In combination with direct financial support, educator preparation programs should consistently allow credit for teaching experience acquired through current employment in high-quality, non-ECBG funded early learning programs to count towards meeting field and classroom experience requirements. This would reduce or eliminate the amount of time students would need to spend gaining additional classroom leadership experience and reduce the amount of financial assistance needed to support early childhood students through the student teaching phase of their educator preparation program.

To accomplish this, the Illinois General Assembly should create a two-year task force under the Illinois State Board of Education charged with setting guidelines for institutions of higher education and early care and education employers on designing and implementing educator preparation programs. These programs will leverage established relationships with early care and education employers to expand the range of high-quality settings eligible for earning student teaching credit. These changes would make it more efficient for more incumbent early childhood education students to earn credit for paid work at their current or any future places of employment.

¹¹ See footnote 10.

¹² See footnote 1.

¹³ Senate Bill 3215 of the 103rd Illinois General Assembly. (2024). Pg. 1, lines 12-17. Retrieved from: <https://ilga.gov/legislation/103/SB/PDF/10300SB3215lv.pdf>.

This will result in more incumbent educators fulfilling the student teaching requirement with fewer financial ramifications caused by leaving their current place of employment to student teach elsewhere.

This guidance should:

- Maintain a standard of high-quality student teaching experiences.
- Align Illinois educator preparation policies and expectations with special attention paid to creating additional opportunities for incumbent early childhood educators to earn credit applicable toward student teaching through current or prior employment experience in high-quality early learning environments.
- Ensure that any policy enacted to align existing policy and expectations, which allow student teachers in early childhood settings to receive financial support or credit for their student teaching experience, includes:
 - All early childhood student teachers, regardless of the age, grade level (birth through grade 2), and particular needs and abilities of the students they are teaching.
 - All high-quality early childhood program types, regardless of how they are funded. (e.g., Head Start, Early Head Start, Preschool for All, Prevention Initiative, community-based Department of Children and Family Services licensed or license-Exempt center-based or family childcare programs, etc.).

Outcome

Student teaching in early childhood settings will be a paid experience. By 2030, all pre-service¹⁴ and incumbent early childhood teachers will complete teacher preparation programs without the financial burden of unpaid student teaching.

Students pursuing a Professional Educator’s License with an early childhood endorsement will be allowed to student teach in their current or other paid employment in various high-quality early childhood settings to fulfill the requirement for working with preschool children ages 0-5. They will also

¹⁴ For the purpose of this policy memo, pre-service teachers (PSTs) are students in the process of attaining their professional educators license but are not working in the early childhood field.

receive a stipend to support their completion of all remaining student teaching requirements, gaining experience with kindergarten through second-grade students. This policy will apply to all students in Professional Educator License programs seeking early childhood endorsement who work in early childhood care and education programs, regardless of the age of the children served (6 weeks to 5 years old), whether the program is public (i.e., school district affiliated), private (i.e., community-based organization operated), or how it is funded.

This transformative policy ensures that financial constraints will no longer hinder aspiring early childhood educators from achieving their professional goals. Thus, the pipeline of qualified teachers in early childhood education across Illinois will be strengthened, increasing access to high-quality programs for children and families.

Workforce Pipeline Development

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A Framework to Address the Low Retention of Center-Based Bilingual Educators

Problem

Illinois is experiencing a significant shortage of educators to support multilingual learners (MLs). Low wages contribute to high turnover among bilingual educators in early childhood settings, compromising the quality of early childhood experiences for MLs.¹ This memo presents a policy framework to address the low retention of center-based bilingual educators.

While there is a shortage across the entire system, bilingual educator shortages in the early years are particularly critical because the majority of MLs are concentrated in the early years.² Given that the majority of early childhood education (ECE) educators are women under the age of 35,³ it is important to look closely at the bilingual educator shortage to: identify potential candidates for upskilling, support their career growth, and ensure they remain in the profession, bringing stability to the field. Illinois must do

¹ While many terms describe children from diverse linguistic backgrounds, for the purposes of this memo, "Multilingual Learners (MLs)" will be used to describe English Learners (ELs). ELs are children with a home language other than English who are learning multiple languages and require services like Bilingual Education or English as a Second Language. The term EL upholds the legal protections and educational support to which English learners are entitled.

² Consortium on School Research. (2021). *English Learners in CPS Executive Summary* [PDF]. Retrieved from: https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/2021-09/English%20Learners%20in%20CPS%20Executive%20Summary-Sep2021-Consortium_0.pdf.

³ Illinois Network of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies. (2020). *Illinois Early Childhood Education Workforce 2020 Report* [PDF]. Retrieved from: https://www.inccrra.org/images/datareports/Illinois_Early_Childhood_Education_Workforce_2020_Report.pdf.

more to attract and retain these teachers as the number of MLs are on the rise.⁴

Growth of Multilingual Learners (MLs)

Over the years, the ML student population has increased significantly, with no signs of slowing down, given the influx of new arrivals from countries like Venezuela.⁵ In 2023, MLs represented 14.6% of the student population, a jump from 11.7% in 2018. The majority of MLs are concentrated in birth to third grade. Expertise in building both the home language and English languages during these early developmental years is essential for kindergarten readiness and beyond. Research demonstrates that teachers are the single most important factor for multilingual learners' academic success.⁶

Bilingual Educator Data

Women under the age of 35 make up 96% of the early childhood workforce. A great percentage of teaching staff are persons of color (47%), which includes Black, Latinx/Hispanic, Asian and multiracial. While 89% of practitioners report speaking English, there is a diverse linguistic landscape with representation from 20 different languages. These young professionals can grow within the field or pursue other opportunities with better pay.

Cause

Early childhood professionals acquire credentials through training and degrees to provide high-quality learning support, and this workforce has subsidized the system by being paid significantly lower than the market

⁴ FitzPatrick, L. (2024, May 21). Chicago's new migrant students are finding little support in segregated schools. *Chalkbeat Chicago*. Retrieved from: <https://www.chalkbeat.org/chicago/2024/05/21/migrant-students-lack-bilingual-support-in-segregated-schools/>.

⁵ See footnote 4.

⁶ Gándara, Patricia and Maria Estela Zarate. (2014). *Seizing the Opportunity to Narrow the Achievement Gap for English Learners*." Retrieved on November 14, 2019: <https://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/language-minority-students/seizing-the-opportunity-to-narrow-the-achievement-gap-for-english-learners-research-based-recommendations-for-the-use-of-lcff-funds-1>.

rate for their level of education and skill.⁷ In Illinois, 20% of ECE educators reported living in poverty, forcing them to leave the field to seek better working conditions and a living wage. Low wages and stressful working conditions are the main drivers of staff turnover.⁸ To compound the issue, specialty areas like bilingual education face additional hurdles that negatively impact educator retention. Bilingual educators face higher workloads, often with little to no increase in pay, and carry out additional responsibilities, including:

- Translation/interpretation services.
- Resource referrals for families.
- Helping families fill out social service applications.
- Administering assessments.
- Creating instructional materials for students in their native language.
- Communicating with families regarding immigration-related questions.
- Supporting, coordinating, or running Bilingual Parent Advisory Council (BPAC) efforts.⁹

These extra, unpaid duties lead to high turnover among bilingual educators.

Solution

Illinois should establish a compensation framework that aligns with the offerings of bilingual/English as a Second Language (ESL) credentials,¹⁰

⁷ Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding. (2021). *Early Childhood Funding Commission Full Report*. Retrieved from: <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/documents/early-childhood-funding-commission-full-report.pdf>.

⁸ UIC Collaborative for Young Children and Families. (2024). *Strengthening the Early Learning Workforce: A prerequisite for expanding access to high-quality early childhood care and education*. Retrieved from: https://earlychildhood.uic.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/911/2024/03/ECE_PolicyBrief_2024_HI_linked_032024.pdf.

⁹ Latino Policy Forum. (2021, January 13). *Latinx Early Childhood Educators: Opportunities and Challenges*. Retrieved from: https://www.latinopolicyforum.org/issues/body/elbrief_1.13.21.pdf.

¹⁰ Gateways ESL & Bilingual Credential (foundational training): serves as an extension to the ECE Credential and is tailored for early care and education professionals with formal college

incorporating multiple tiers of enhancement, along with monetary incentives, to promote both retention and upskilling in the ECE field. This would ultimately enhance the quality of educational experiences for the growing birth-to-five ML population.

Illinois is undergoing a transformation in the early childhood system by establishing a unified early childhood agency, accompanied by investments aimed at addressing workforce pay through Smart Start Workforce and Quality Supports Grants.¹¹ The new Illinois Department of Early Childhood is making MLs a priority by establishing an ML workgroup to identify MLs birth to five. Linked to this change is the potential to compensate teachers with these linguistic assets through the quality support lever within Smart Start Workforce Compensation Grants. Higher pay is critical to retain bilingual educators and these grants are an avenue for potential funding to make meaningful investments in the bilingual workforce.

Illinois has the opportunity to become the first state in the nation to compensate bilingual staff for their credentials and skillsets by correlating a percentage of increased pay to the varying levels of credentials in Illinois. While some states have factored bilingual pay into their cost models, they have primarily focused on increasing lead teacher salaries with small pay bumps.¹² However, Illinois data reveals that the most significant diversity lies among teacher assistants.¹³ By aligning a percentage increase to the different bilingual/ESL credentials, we can ensure bilingual staff are compensated more thoughtfully.

This bilingual compensation framework has beneficial spillover effects by creating a pathway of economic mobility for women of color to be valued

education, training, and experience in multilingual/multicultural settings, acquired through supervised observation/experience or direct work experience. English as a Second Language (ESL) Endorsement: This endorsement complements teacher licensure, enabling licensed teachers (or those in the licensure process) to instruct English language learners. To attain this endorsement, students typically complete 18 to 20 credit hours, focusing on ESL and bilingual education pedagogy, coupled with 30 hours of in-classroom practicum per course. Bilingual Education Endorsement: This endorsement supplements teacher licensure, permitting licensed teachers (or those pursuing licensure) to teach English language learners within bilingual education programs. Fluency in a language other than English is required, and individuals must pass an additional state-administered Target Language Proficiency test to achieve this endorsement. Those who obtain the Bilingual Endorsement have already fulfilled the prerequisites for the ESL Endorsement and will receive it concurrently.

¹¹ Illinois Department of Human Services. (n.d.). Early Intervention Services. Retrieved from: <https://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=31667>.

¹² Prenatal to 5 Fiscal Policy Framework & Interactive Fiscal Modeling Tool." (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://www.prenatal5fiscal.org/fiscal-modeling>.

¹³ See footnote 3.

for their current linguistic contributions to the workforce and creating a pay ladder to incentivize upskilling.

The adjustments in wage scale percentages were based on state and national cost models for bilingual pay, with percentages varying between 5% and 10% (see Figure 1). This framework incorporates teacher assistants utilizing the Illinois Gateways credential and bilingual credential model. It assumes four lead teachers and four teacher assistants as noted in the FY23 SMART START Workforce Compensation Grant Cost Model.

As an interim measure, based on the current supply of bilingual-credentialed ECE staff, the Department of Human Services should allocate \$500,000 from the \$10 million in FY25 quality-support funding to initiate a pilot bilingual pay program for licensed centers to facilitate the implementation of bilingual compensation in approximately 20 programs. The average cost per program to compensate four lead teachers and four bilingual teacher assistants is estimated at \$25,000 (see Figure 2).

Therefore, this \$500,000 investment would sufficiently support 20 programs. Fifteen pilot sites should be in Chicago and the collar counties, as these areas have the highest concentration of multilingual learners, with the remaining five distributed across the rest of the state. With credential and workforce developments underway, this framework can be scaled out as the number of bilingual workforce members grows.

Figure 1: Bilingual Pay Wage Scale Using Smart Start Wage Scale

Position	Base Salary	Bilingual Pay Increase	Total Salary (with Bilingual Pay)
Lead Teacher <i>Chicago</i>	\$19.25	\$1.92 (10%)	\$21.17
Lead Teacher <i>Rest of the state</i>	\$18.38	\$1.83 (10%)	\$20.21
Teacher Assistant (Gateways level 5) <i>Chicago</i>	\$18	\$1.44 (8%)	\$19.44
Teacher Assistant (Gateways level 4) <i>Chicago</i>	\$18	\$1.26 (7%)	\$19.26
Teacher Assistant (Gateways level 3) <i>Chicago</i>	\$18	\$1.08 (6%)	\$19.08
Teacher Assistant (Gateways level 2) <i>Chicago</i>	\$18	\$.90 (5%)	\$18.90
Teacher Assistant (Gateways level 5) <i>Rest of the state</i>	\$17.13	\$1.37 (8%)	\$18.50
Teacher Assistant (Gateways level 4) <i>Rest of the state</i>	\$17.13	\$1.20 (7%)	\$18.33
Teacher Assistant (Gateways level 3) <i>Rest of the state</i>	\$17.13	\$1.03 (6%)	\$18.16
Teacher Assistant (Gateways level 2) <i>Rest of the state</i>	\$17.13	\$.86 (5%)	\$17.99

Figure 2: Estimated Program Cost* for Bilingual Pay

Position	Details	Estimated Cost for Bilingual Pay
Lead Teacher <i>Chicago</i>	4 lead teachers per program (\$1.92 bilingual pay increase)	\$15,974.40
Teacher Assistant <i>Chicago</i>	4 Teacher Assistant (using an average of 6.5% percentage increase or \$1.17)	\$9,734.40
	Total Chicago	\$25,708.80
Lead Teacher <i>Rest of state</i>	4 lead teachers per program (\$1.83)	\$15,225.60
Teacher Assistant <i>Rest of state</i>	4 Teacher Assistant (using an average of 6.5% percentage increase or \$1.11)	\$9,235.20
	Total Rest of state	\$24,460.80

*Program cost is based on annual wages, assuming a 40-hour work week over 52 weeks.

Outcome

By increasing the pay for bilingual educators to reflect their knowledge and skills, Illinois can expect to expand quality early childhood experiences for MLs across the state, as more bilingual educators will be incentivized to stay in the field. This increase in pay for upskilling will also encourage more educators to pursue higher education and additional credentials, knowing they can anticipate higher wages. Strengthening career paths for bilingual educators keeps them in the ECE field and helps with economic mobility, particularly for women of color. More bilingual educators in the field will also mean that MLs across the state will benefit from an educator who can support their language growth in both their native language and English.

Workforce Pipeline Development

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Streamline Staffing Procedures to Maximize Workforce Capacity

Problem

In the midst of a prolonged workforce crisis and with no immediate end in sight, Illinois' child care providers are plagued with staffing issues that impede their ability to hire and maintain qualified educators. As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, the nation has collectively grieved the loss of more than 100,000 child care workers.¹ Not exempt from the impact of COVID-19, Illinois experienced workforce shortages which forced classroom and center closures and caused an abrupt decrease in the supply of child care that providers could offer. These interruptions severely impaired the broader workforce of parents who were dependent upon child care to work and support the growth and development of their little ones who could no longer receive care.

Four years after the pandemic, Illinois child care providers and parents remain affected by a workforce crisis. The crisis is fueled by a lack of early

¹ Goldstein, D. (2022, October 13). Why You Can't Find Childcare: 100,000 Workers are Missing. *New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/13/us/child-care-worker-shortage.html>.

childhood education and care (ECEC) teaching staff due to professionals leaving the field and not enough joining the field.

Child care providers throughout Illinois continue to face workforce issues such as a lack of substitutes/classroom coverage, an overwhelming need to address students' behavioral challenges —exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic— and low wages leading to personal stress for ECEC educators, among many others. These issues significantly impede child care centers from providing access to high-quality care for children and their families.

When child care providers receive funding without guidance and resources to acquire and sustain educators, the solutions typically focus more on addressing the issue of **capacity** (the number of children centers can serve), thereby minimizing the issue of **ability** (the center's capability to operate).

A more profound implication of COVID-19 on ECEC is the severe divergence it created between the number of children and families who need child care and the actual number of qualified educators available to care for them. Eliminating the gap between capacity and ability is the solution to Illinois' workforce crisis. If we commit administrative guidance, support, and resources, we can increase the ability of Illinois child care providers to hire and maintain qualified staff.

Cause

Historically, during slavery, Black women were caregivers for other peoples' children **without** receiving compensation and today, post-slavery, they make up a significant percentage of workers providing child care without **proper** compensation. The history of undervaluing the labor of Black women created the foundation for the inequities that exist in the ECEC field today and has led to it not being regarded as the profession that it is.²

Inequitable systems, policies, and resources create disparities between Illinois public and private ECEC programs. While public early childhood programs governed by the State's school districts share a collaborative human resources system that includes the reinforcement of trained

² Roberts, V. (February 15, 2024). Providing Generations: The Influence of Black Women's Activism on Progressing Early Childhood Education. *Early Care and Learning Council*. Retrieved from: <https://earlycareandlearning.org/providing-for-generations-the-influence-of-black-womens-activism-on-progressing-early-childhood-education/>.

substitutes (i.e., regional educators able to be disbursed to districts as needed), private early childhood programs run by community-based organizations, small business owners, and home child care providers do not have such a network. Additionally, public early childhood educators can carry their licensure—a state requirement to educate children—to whichever regional district they are approved to teach within. However, private early childhood educators wait an extended period of time before receiving background check processing and clearances needed to be hired each time they seek employment with a new center.

Antiquated and segregated systems for background check clearances and other workforce supports are barriers for community-based child care providers and centers. The absence of a swift, more seamless hiring and onboarding process impedes providers' ability to resolve staffing solutions to keep classrooms operational. Staffing issues, lack of classroom coverage, and distressed operations create barriers for children to receive the high-quality early care and education they deserve. When combined, these issues create an inescapable web of challenges for parents, leaving them without the ability to trust the system that should be designed for their child's optimal education in the earliest years. This sets the stage for inequities that could persist throughout the child's educational experience.

Solution

The new Illinois Department of Early Childhood, as it takes over licensing and background checks for child care centers, should create a system to process ECEC professional paperwork (i.e., background checks, medical reports, professional educator licensing, credentials, and professional development) that attaches to the ECEC professional during their application process. These documents are currently furnished to providers from various state and local agencies with differing processing times and levels of complexity. This new process aims to connect the authorization to work in the ECEC field to the educator instead of the employer. Currently, ECEC professionals or child care providers must request these documents from different agencies and provide them to the employer, who then submits them to the Department of Children and Family Services for a background check before the employee can work at an ECEC center.

As a secondary support to child care providers, the new Illinois Department of Early Childhood should create a statewide substitute system for ECEC educators. This system could be implemented regionally through the Child Care Resource and Referral System, deploying qualified and trained substitutes to providers on a short- or longer-term basis. This would create

a systematic and consolidated pathway for providers to access substitutes and address their classroom coverage needs. The Illinois Department of Early Childhood can “certify” substitutes and deploy them via a web-based or digital platform to the state’s provider network.

Eliminating barriers impeding the hiring and onboarding processes and meeting staffing needs of child care providers in today’s deficient employment landscape is key to resolving ECEC’s workforce issue.

Outcome

By making it easier to access work-related clearances and attaching them to the professional and not the center, the State of Illinois can ease some of the workforce pressures the ECEC field is currently experiencing. ECEC professionals could return to the workforce or move from one job to another more quickly. This more expeditious way of providing work clearance would reduce the compliance processing time burden experienced by providers, allowing efficient hiring and onboarding processes to place educators in classrooms immediately.

The substitute pool for ECEC teachers would allow more of the workforce to feel assured about taking vacation or sick time. By providing a substitute program, more individuals will be available to cover staff shortages, which would mean fewer closed classrooms, and a workforce that has confidence in a child care system that enables them to work. An additional benefit is that providers could onboard long-term, permanent teachers more swiftly, as the transitory clearance would allow for faster hiring processes.

Workforce Pipeline Development

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Renewing the Workforce Through Equity

Problem

The early childhood education (ECE) workforce plays a critical role in shaping the lives of young children and stabilizing the availability of the wider workforce, yet it is hemorrhaging staff. The ECE industry has experienced a substantial disparity between demand and supply. High turnover disrupts continuity of care for young children and makes it challenging to retain qualified staff, leading to less experienced staff and a reduced investment in professional development. Studies show that childcare providers in Illinois experienced turnover rates of up to 32%, which disrupts the stability and consistency children need for optimal development. Unfortunately, things have only worsened as the turnover rate for early childhood teachers increased to 39.5% as of 2021.¹

Cause

When considered a function of social welfare, child care was stigmatized by the stamp of poverty. When supported by the federal government, the

¹ Norton, J., Salrin, R., Lee, C., Whitehead, J. (2021). *Illinois Salary and Staffing Survey of Licensed Child Care Facilities*. Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, Illinois Department of Human Services, Division of Early Childhood. Pg 5.

provision of child care was deemed a temporary emergency measure in response to national labor crises (Civil War, Great Depression, World War I, World War II). When the crises ended, so did public support for child care. This association led to low wages and societal undervaluation of the profession.² Similar challenges persist today: the current ECE system struggles to retain teachers due to persistently low wages—which create financial barriers to obtaining credentials—limited professional development opportunities, and unclear career advancement paths within the field.³

Considering recent studies, the pivotal importance of early childhood education in fostering cognitive, social, and emotional growth has been increasingly highlighted.⁴ The role of an early childhood educator demands a comprehensive grasp of child development, and it is a profession that is both physically and emotionally taxing. Yet, these educators — predominantly women, including many women of color— face restricted opportunities for career progression and insufficient professional acknowledgment.⁵ Despite a growing awareness of their crucial influence, early childhood educators continue to be amongst the most under-compensated professionals.⁶

The State of Illinois has made efforts toward improving pay equity and the workforce shortage. Since the year 2000, the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) has implemented the Great Start Initiative, aiming to reduce high turnover rates. This program rewards eligible educators with a wage supplement for pursuing educational qualifications beyond their role's requirements and their commitment to staying with their current employer. More recently, in State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2024, Illinois launched the Smart Start initiative. It provides additional funding for apprenticeship opportunities, programmatic quality improvement, and workforce grants. However, even with these initiatives, Illinois still encounters substantial

² Cahan, E.D. (1989). Past caring: A history of U.S. preschool care and education for the poor, 1820–1965. National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University.

³ Whitehead, J. (2021). *Illinois' Early Childhood Workforce 2020 Report*. Bloomington, IL: INCCRRA, Pg. 45.

⁴ Council of Economic Advisers (U.S.). (2015). *The Economics of Early Childhood Investments*. Executive Office of the President of the United States. Retrieved from: https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/early_childhood_report_update_final_non-embargo.pdf.

⁵ Farewell, C. V., Quinlan, J., Melnick, E., Powers, J., & Puma, J. (2022). Job Demands and Resources Experienced by the Early Childhood Education Workforce Serving High-Need Populations. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 50(2), 197–206. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-020-01143-4>.

⁶ National Women's Law Center. (2023, May). *The child care and early learning workforce is underpaid and women are paying the price*. 4-5. Retrieved from: <https://nwlc.org/resource/the-child-care-and-early-learning-workforce-is-underpaid-and-women-are-paying-the-price>.

challenges in remedying wage deficits and high turnover within early childhood education.

Solution

In collaboration with the Department of Early Childhood and the Illinois Network for Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA), IDHS shall utilize Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds to create and provide subsidized training and education programs designed for TANF recipients to become qualified ECE professionals (assistant teacher, lead teacher, director). Welcoming TANF recipients into the ECE workforce can bridge the staffing shortage until a permanent solution is identified. Illinois should continue complementary initiatives to improve compensation and other working conditions for the early childhood workforce through legislative efforts.

Collaborations between TANF programs, early childhood agencies, and educational institutions will be essential in providing effective support and career development opportunities for the early childhood workforce.⁷ This dynamic allocation of funding can lead to long-term benefits in terms of education, health, and economic outcomes.⁸ A larger and more qualified ECE workforce can contribute to Illinois' overall economic well-being.

Outcome

Illinois can leverage TANF funds to address the shortage of qualified ECE professionals. By equipping TANF recipients with ECE skills and qualifications, the state enhances their employability and career prospects in this growing field. ECE skills lead to increased earnings, financial stability, and reduced reliance on TANF benefits, resulting in higher tax revenue and

⁷ Illinois Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development and the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Education. (2018). *Transforming the Early Childhood Workforce: A Call to Action for the State of Illinois*. 8-28. Retrieved from: <https://oecd.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/oecd/documents/transforming-the-early-childhood-workforce-il-report.pdf>.

⁸ National Women's Law Center; authors: Hartley, Chaudry, Boteach, Mitchell, and Menefee. (2021). *A Lifetime's Worth of Benefits: The Effects of Affordable, High-quality Child Care on Family Income, the Gender Earnings Gap, and Women's Retirement Security*. 18-28. Retrieved from: <https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/A-Lifetimes-Worth-of-Benefits-Compliant.pdf>.

reduced social service expenses. Supporting a more qualified ECE workforce leads to better learning environments for children, improved school readiness and long-term academic success.

Implementing this bridge program is twofold:

1. It aligns with TANF's work and training requirements.
2. It addresses the ECE workforce shortage, fostering lasting careers and improving quality for children and families. TANF recipients receiving ECE training gain confidence in their parenting skills and are empowered to advance their education and careers, potentially increasing their income.

A more stable workforce that includes TANF recipients can lead to lower turnover rates and better opportunities for advancement, and help educators and children form consistent relationships crucial for early development. A vibrant early childhood workforce contributes to the overall well-being of communities by supporting families and fostering child development.

Workforce Pipeline Development

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Diversify the Workforce Through Fair Educator Licensing Practices

Problem

Illinois has a shortage of educators in early childhood education (ECE) programs who have the required level of education to become lead teachers. There is high turnover statewide and nationally, across all grades. When children experience teacher turnover, it impacts the quality of their care and education, particularly in early learning settings. In the early childhood workforce, the shortage is partially due to barriers posed by the Illinois Licensure Testing System's Early Childhood Education content area test or "content exam,"¹ the test sanctioned by the State of Illinois to qualify teachers for licensure.

Becoming a licensed teacher is a multi-layered process. Current policy for completing a teacher preparation program requires passing the Illinois Licensure Testing System for Early Childhood Education content exam, which evaluates a teacher's knowledge of ECE content.² Prior to taking the content exam, a licensure candidate must complete all of the required coursework for an approved educator preparation program, spend a semester as a student teacher and then submit an involved application to receive a Professional Educator License.³ Some researchers argue that regardless of their intended purpose, standardized tests may perpetuate a

¹ Whitehead, J. (2021). Illinois' Early Childhood Workforce 2020 Report. Bloomington, IL: INCCRRA. Retrieved from: https://www.inccrra.org/images/datareports/Illinois_Early_Childhood_Education_Workforce_2020_Report.pdf.

² National Council on Teacher Quality. (n.d.). Illinois: Using licensure tests to build a strong, diverse teacher workforce. Retrieved from: <https://passrates.nctq.org/state/illinois/>.

³ Illinois State Board of Education. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://www.isbe.net/>.

segregated teacher workforce and that the tests and testing environments may be biased against people of color.⁴ Black and Latino students pass these exams at considerably lower rates than their white peers, resulting in fewer candidates of color and fewer teachers that look like the students they are teaching.⁵ The current process in which the content exam is used to obtain the Professional Educator License (PEL) is not equitable and creates an added barrier for educators to enter the workforce or advance in their careers. A diverse workforce has a direct impact on many student outcomes such as attendance, student gains, and student behavior. To provide the education children need to be successful in our increasingly diverse society, we have to do what we can to remove barriers for a more diverse teacher workforce.⁶

Cause

The Illinois licensure content exam does not measure a teacher's competency as an educator but rather demonstrates competency at test-taking and creates a system of unnecessary gatekeeping for teachers who have already proven their capacity through coursework and student teaching. Standardized testing does not properly reflect teacher preparation. The content of the exam supersedes the expectations and materials than the courses people are taking. Many incumbent ECE professionals trying to obtain their PEL have been in the field for many years, have many years of experience in the classroom, and simply struggle with test-taking. Paraprofessionals and teaching assistants often strive to become lead teachers, and the competencies gained through their professional experience deserve recognition.

Wages are also a leading factor influencing turnover. A licensed center teacher with a bachelor's degree made \$15.00 per hour compared to \$12.50 for a teacher with a high school diploma or GED.⁷

⁴ Rogers-Ard, R., Knaus, C. B., Epstein, K. K., & Mayfield, K. (2013). *Racial diversity sounds nice: Systems transformation? Not so much: Developing urban teachers of color*. Urban Education, 48(3), 451-479.

⁵ Nettles, M. T., Scatton, L. H., Steinberg, J. H., & Tyler, L. L. (2011). *Performance and Passing Rate Differences of African American and White Prospective Teachers on Praxis[™] Examinations: A Joint Project of the National Education Association (NEA) and Educational Testing Service (ETS). Research Report*. ETS RR-11-08. ERIC. Retrieved from: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED523733>.

⁶ Advance Illinois. (n.d.). Strong & diverse educator pipeline. Retrieved from: <https://www.advanceillinois.org/policy-areas/strong-diverse-educator-pipeline>.

⁷ See footnote 1.

Another issue at the source of this problem is that the testing structure itself can also become a financial barrier. The content exam is assessed in three parts and requires a score of 240 for a passing grade. The exam fee is \$122, plus \$130 for residency entitlement. If someone fails, they must take the exam again and pay out-of-pocket. If a student passes one or two sections of the exam, they must re-take all three sections. Some institutions of higher education (IHE) provide fiscal support around the content exam; however, it is typically offered only once. Through the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) and Chicago Early Learning Workforce Scholarship (CELWS) funds, IHE's can receive funding and provide supports to prepare for the content exam. These scholarships provide quality teacher preparation programs with intentional supports; however, funds are limited, therefore unsustainable for those who need to take the content exam and receive their PEL.

So many people want to teach in the early childhood field and are eager to serve our youngest children, and the need to sit for the exam more than once is often cost-prohibitive. The CELWS has provided evidence that scholars have taken the exam more than five times. That amounts to over \$600 in fees when most of these students currently work in the ECE field and earn minimum wage. Not only is this a fiscal barrier to licensure, it also has pushed people out of the ECE workforce altogether. ECE professionals cannot grow in the field and access promotions (and higher wages) if they are not able to take and pass the content exam and obtain their PEL.

Just as we expect quality care for our children and families, it is imperative we care for our teachers in the same way. They deserve to make a living wage serving our children and families at a developmentally critical time.

Solution

A standardized exam is not the only way to determine whether a student is qualified to become a teacher. The Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies is exploring competency-based teacher preparation pathways and assessments of prior learning, which is the first step to providing ECE professionals with alternative paths to grow professionally. While the matter of assessing competency is being worked on, the Illinois State Board of Education should change the current scoring method for the content exam to stem the loss of qualified ECE educators. By allowing students to bank test scores and receive credit for any sections passed, the risk of failing one section is more manageable. They can then focus on passing the sections they failed and reduce the risk of spending so much on

retakes. By banking the scores, students could take the test fewer times, eliminating the financial burden incurred by taking the test multiple times.

The Illinois General Assembly should continue to support programs like the ECACE that aim to eliminate the ECE teacher shortage by providing assistance to those who already have a wealth of classroom experience and want to become lead teachers. In Fiscal Year 2025, ECACE received \$5 million to help recruit more teachers at every level in the classroom.

In Illinois, the contest exam is a required form of assessment that needs to be completed. Professionals seeking certification go through rigorous hours of credit-bearing courses and observations, meeting all the requirements to successfully complete their degree. Then they put together a thorough application for licensure. Educators working in community-based organizations must adhere to the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies' Gateways credentialing system, which creates additional mandates for ECE teacher credentials.⁸ The content exam is just one way to ensure teachers are ready for the classroom. Allowing students to bank their scores so they do not have to retake the exam multiple times would help Illinois get more qualified teachers into the classroom faster.

Outcome

By allowing students to bank their scores and investing in their ECE teacher preparation programs, we will see more licensed teachers in the classroom. In the state of Illinois, we must prioritize building sustainable, culturally appropriate supports for our teachers that reflect the diversity of our youngest children and families.⁹ Adjusting the scoring method to the content exam will alleviate the financial burden on our ECE teachers, who are making minimum wages, and give them opportunities to grow and become certified with more ease.

⁸ See footnote 7.

⁹ See footnote 6.

Workforce Training and Supports

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Enhancing Early Childhood Transition Efficiency with Data

Problem

The City of Chicago Public Schools District 299 (CPS) is the largest school district in Illinois. In the 2022-2023 school year, the district enrolled 15,363 students aged 3 to 5 from different educational settings, including Early Intervention Services, Child Find, child care providers, or from home.¹ The enrollment process begins with either Chicago Early Learning or the CPS Office of Diverse Learner Supports and Services (ODLSS), which can differ based on the child's previous learning setting.

Navigating the two distinct enrollment processes can pose challenges for families transitioning from Early Intervention to Early Childhood Special Education. All families are entitled to apply to Chicago Early Learning. This online portal serves as a one-stop shop to help parents find programs, assess program quality, and understand their child's eligibility for programs offered by the City of Chicago. Children transitioning from Early Intervention to Early Childhood Special Education who have met transition requirements do not need to apply to Chicago Early Learning and are automatically sent a school assignment.

However, children who have not met the transition requirements must apply through Chicago Early Learning for a school assignment. If evaluation data from Early Intervention indicates a child needs a special education

¹ Illinois State Board of Education. (2022). *Illinois Report Card 2022-2023. Chicago Public Schools District 299 / By Grades*. Retrieved from: <https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/district.aspx?source=studentcharacteristics&source2=enrollmentbygrades&Districtid=15016299025>.

placement, the CPS ODLSS will reassign the child to a different school if the original placement cannot meet the child's needs. This reassignment often results in delays in finalizing enrollment and specialized services. However, if the child is found ineligible for specialized services or qualified for speech only, they can keep the original Chicago Early Learning school placement. These complexities create barriers for families and prevent the immediate identification of students who could benefit from specialized services.

For years, families of children with disabilities faced barriers in accessing appropriate early childhood educational services due to a lack of coordination and inefficient communication between the Child Family Connection (CFC) Office, which is the Early Intervention point-of-entry for children and families, and Chicago Public Schools. As a result, children transitioning face delays in receiving the necessary support in Early Childhood Special Education programs.

In Chicago, children receiving Early Intervention Services from birth to age three are not automatically eligible for Early Childhood Special Education services from ages 3 to 5. The effectiveness of these systems in facilitating smooth and successful transitions varies. The transition process includes multiple steps, such as notifications and planning conferences. However, in Chicago, the number of children successfully transitioning from the CFC offices to the Local Educational Agency (LEA) is low. The LEA, typically a school district, manages a child's transition into special education and related services once the child turns three.

Included in its Annual Performance Report, the Illinois Department of Human Services uses multiple indicators to assess performance. Specifically, two key indicators, Indicators 8B and 8C, collectively measure the percentage of notifications to families and successful transition progress from Illinois Early Intervention (Part C) to Early Childhood Special Education (Part B) within the City of Chicago.

The data presented in Table 1 highlights that while notifications to families by the CFC offices are successful, there is a gap in the completion of transition conferences. Addressing this gap requires additional data to understand why the percentage of completed conferences is low.

Table 1: Percent of Required Actions for Timely Transitions²

Child and Family Connection Office (Representing regions within Chicago)	Indicator 8B % of notifications to families at least 90 days before the toddler's 3rd birthday	Indicator 8C % of completed conferences at least 90 days before the toddler's 3rd birthday
Office #8 (Southwest)	100%	79.5%
Office #9 (Central/West)	100%	46.7%
Office #10 (Southeast)	100%	63.0%
Office #11 (North)	100%	58.8%

Cause

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the number of children receiving services in Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education. Pre-existing challenges in accessing appropriate Early Childhood Special Education services were exacerbated by the pandemic.

These challenges include:

- Delays with referral packets being sent (by CFC) and/or received (by LEA).
- Unsuccessful transition planning conferences.
- Lack of effective procedures between the CFC offices and LEAs.
- Lack of focus on the needs of the child and family in school districts.

Access and identification were further challenged during and post-pandemic by:

- School closures during the pandemic.
- Canceled doctor appointments, hindering the early identification of children who may require specialized services.

² Illinois Department of Human Services. (2023, February 1). *Annual Performance Report - Report period: July 1, 2021 - June 30, 2022*. Retrieved from: <https://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=151976>.

- Inability to conduct effective screening evaluations.
- Lagging communication to families regarding the shift to virtual support.
- Increased parent requests for screening/diagnostic assessments for learning disabilities due to a lack of understanding on the impact of the pandemic on children's development.³

In March of 2023, the United States Department of Education issued two new policy letters. One addressed the requirements and responsibilities of state lead agencies, LEAs, and state educational agencies (SEAs) to ensure a smooth and effective transition for children and families from IDEA Part C Early Intervention to receiving preschool services under IDEA Part B.⁴ This letter reaffirms the goals of Parts B and C and elevates the urgency for action on the state's part to make this happen.

The lack of a clear system for guiding transitions and ensuring transparent data, including a detailed communication plan between systems, creates obstacles for families seeking Early Childhood Special Education services. This process is even more challenging for families with children who speak languages other than English, as they must navigate a complex system primarily designed for English-speaking families.

Solution

The Illinois General Assembly should amend The Early Intervention Systems Act⁵ (EISA) to require quarterly reporting from the Local Interagency

³ Stelitano, L., Ekin, S., Rhim, L. M., Center for Learner Equity, Panel of School Leaders, Tunney, J., Walker, G., Tomorrow's Leadership Collaborative (TLC) Public Charter School, Fenway High School, Barker, E., Hernández-Saca, D., Love, H., Mazzotti, V., Ortiz, A., Wright, K., & Sacramento County Office of Education. (2022). *How has the Pandemic Affected Students With Disabilities? An Update on the Evidence: Fall 2022* [Report]. Retrieved from: https://crpe.org/wp-content/uploads/Special-Education-Impact-Brief_v3.pdf.

⁴ U.S. Department of Education. (2023). *Letter from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs to Jennifer E. Nix regarding Transition Requirements under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. In J. E. Nix, U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs. Retrieved from: <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/OSEP-Response-to-Nix-03-17-2023.pdf>.

⁵ Early Intervention Services System Act, 325 ILCS 20. Section 6. (1999). Retrieved from: <https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/ilcs3.asp?ActID=1463&ChapterID=32>.

Councils to the Illinois Interagency Council on key metrics which would provide enough information to identify the bottleneck in the transition process. Such metrics should include:

- The number of children identified through Child Find.
- The percentage of eligible children with completed transition plans.
- The opt-out rate of eligible children's families in the transition plan process.
- The percentage of children transitioning from Early Intervention who are ineligible for Early Childhood Special Education services.

These data points could provide the necessary information to evaluate transitions' success and identify and address any issues more promptly.

Additionally, the amendment should mandate:

- The development and implementation of a detailed communication plan including who is responsible for data sharing and reporting, along with clear guidance for sharing between the CFC offices, the LEAs, and the Local Interagency Councils.
- Regularly scheduled joint meetings between the CFC offices, LEAs, and the Local Interagency Councils to ensure timely review of the collected data for trends and areas of concern. These meetings will also include reviewing current procedures to effectively identify and address issues.

Illinois already has a structure in place that may create more transparency on the effectiveness of the transition process: the Illinois Interagency Council on Early Intervention, which plays a critical role in advising the Illinois Department of Human Services on Early Intervention programs for infants and toddlers with developmental disabilities and their families. Additionally, the EISA mandates the establishment of Local Interagency Councils, outlining their responsibilities, including reporting to the Illinois Interagency State Council.

The quarterly reporting requires support from the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) and Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to provide updated guidelines and timelines for compliance. The Local Interagency Councils will also require training from IDHS and ISBE on the intended use and effective responses to the reported metrics. The training will address the importance of the collected data and the impact and connection for improving the transition process for children and families.

It is crucial to utilize information obtained from families, the early childhood workforce, and metrics to determine the support needed for families and the workforce. This will help ensure that challenges are accurately identified and represent lived experiences, procedure changes address the gaps, and resources are allocated efficiently. To support these efforts effectively, this must be a continuous process involving the Local Interagency Councils, IDHS, and ISBE.

Revising the data reporting from annually to quarterly allows Illinois to take a huge step forward in creating a more accessible family-friendly system, improving the overall transition process, and early learning educational experience for children. This change will foster transparency, accountability, and better support for families, including culturally inclusive shifts in communication. Additionally, it will help with informed decision-making. These changes, coupled with improved communication strategies, are intended to address the barriers and lead to a smooth and effective transition from Early Intervention to Early Childhood Special Education for children with disabilities and their families.

Outcome

Families with more information and resources are better equipped to actively participate and advocate for their child-in-transition planning meetings. The data collected on the transition of children from Part C to Part B will be utilized by both the CFC offices and LEAs to monitor progress and identify areas for improvement. This data would empower policymakers, CFC offices, and LEAs to identify gaps or challenges in the transition process and make necessary adjustments to improve support for children and families. For instance, policymakers could use this data to determine whether Early Childhood Special Education should move to the new Department of Early Childhood and LEAs. Agencies will have data to help them decide the necessity and effectiveness of establishing local parent transition support groups. A collaborative and supportive transition process ensures the continuation of services for children with disabilities, ages birth to 5, and their families, resulting in a seamless transition from Early Intervention to Early Childhood Special Education experiences.

Workforce Training and Supports

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Social Emotional Learning: Making Equity a Reality

Problem

There is a glaring lack of equitable access to resources and support systems necessary for effective social and emotional learning (SEL) implementation and an equal lack of public access to the data. Social-emotional learning is a critical component of education that equips students with essential life skills. SEL encompasses a range of abilities, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Social and emotional support in schools can help students deepen their connections at school.

The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 and associated disparities among Hispanic, non-Hispanic Black, and non-Hispanic American Indian/Alaska Native children and teenagers has been documented. Reducing these disparities along with overcoming unintended negative consequences of the pandemic, such as the disruption of in-person schooling, calls for broad community-based collaborations and nuanced approaches to social-emotional development and growth.

Evidence for the value of social and emotional learning approaches comes from a recent synthesis of 424 studies involving 575,361 students across 53 countries. It showed that school-based social and emotional learning programs produced significant improvements in students' social skills,

behavior, emotional distress, school climate and safety, peer relationships, school functioning, and academic achievement (Cipriano et al., 2023).

School administrators are responsible for identifying and implementing SEL services and resources within their schools. While Illinois schools have the autonomy to plan and implement SEL, many struggle to incorporate SEL standards into their curricula, let alone measure impact. The Illinois Department of Human Services has developed online databases and resources for SEL; however, there is limited data on their accessibility, effectiveness and usage patterns, creating a barrier to long-term implementation and improvement efforts. Illinois schools lack equitable access to systemic solutions, resources, and professional development opportunities for educators, leading to disparities in access and support across different districts. Disinvested communities, including Black and Brown communities, are disproportionately impacted by these inequities.

Cause

Teachers in Illinois schools often face numerous challenges in providing the undeniable benefits of SEL. Heavy workloads, limited resources, and insufficient training can hinder educators' ability to effectively incorporate SEL into their classrooms, particularly in communities that have historically been neglected or denied resources. This lack of support can lead to burnout and teachers experiencing stress and mental health issues, further compounding the need for SEL support.

Leaving responsibilities for SEL implementation unsupported at the school-level perpetuates existing disparities in educational outcomes between racial groups and parental income.

Solution

To achieve Governor Pritzker's goal of Illinois being the best state to raise a family, children and their communities will need equitable access to culturally responsive social-emotional learning support in Illinois schools.

The Illinois education system can improve the experience of children, families, and teachers by removing barriers to SEL resources, support services, and sustainable implementation. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and school districts should collaborate on a redesign of SEL support that shifts to structural-level support, creating adaptable tools for SEL management at the school level. This project would be funded by

sources like the Regional Office of Education's Social Emotional Learning and ISBE's Community Partnerships Grant, which address post-pandemic gaps in opportunity and unfinished teaching/learning.

ISBE and school districts should form a task force to study and develop a strategy for SEL support that is high quality and can be adapted to include culturally congruent approaches for different school communities. This strategy should:

- Recruit family and school representatives to serve on the task force.
Schools should solicit input from the families they serve and tailor SEL interventions to meet the unique needs of their communities. Parent representatives might also be invited from groups like Raising Illinois and Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI).
- Collect data from existing sources to determine best indicators for a standard of SEL quality.
Schools will engage with students, families, and personnel to assess their needs and resources that will positively impact the school's culture and environment. Evaluation will include data on the accessibility, effectiveness, cultural responsiveness, and impact of SEL resources and initiatives operationalized in Illinois schools.
- Present findings and recommendations for SEL implementation standards.
- Hire and train a team of SEL implementation managers housed in the school districts and allocate SEL resources to schools.
- Ensure all Illinois schools have access to comprehensive, culturally responsive SEL programs and resources, including curricular materials, assessment tools, and professional development programs unique to their academic environment. The input will be used to co-create the SEL plans for their school environment.

This strategy will require schools to report progress and continuous quality improvement updates quarterly. School districts will be required to complete a comprehensive annual report on the fulfillment of each district's SEL implementation plan, making them public within 60 days of the last day of instruction of the school year. This data will help identify best practices, address gaps in support, and allocate resources more effectively. The SEL management and support task force should create a flexible SEL template for schools to develop, implement, and measure the impact of their local SEL models.

Outcome

Equitable access to social-emotional learning support is not just a matter of convenience; it is a matter of educational equity and social justice. By investigating the best path toward prioritizing the needs of teachers, school support staff, students, and families in Illinois schools, we can create more intentional and inclusive school environments. Additionally, we can develop a data management and sharing system for SEL that serves the needs of schools, districts, and the state.

A district-level support resource for SEL, funded by IDHS, will create a map for success for district schools, maintaining enough autonomy to develop culturally congruent SEL programming within a district-supported structure. Removing pressure from teachers and principals to reinvent SEL systems allows them to focus on building an orientation toward cultural congruence. Support that is not location-based or resource-based also increases equitable access to culturally responsive social-emotional learning support, which is essential for the well-being of students in Illinois schools.

By making culturally responsive SEL a priority and involving families in the process, stronger bonds will connect school and home environments. Families and schools collaborating to learn and practice skills will enhance the retention and sustainability of skills acquired by students. We can create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment, ensuring all students thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Eventually, when the system is established, ongoing SEL support will help students demonstrate emotional awareness and use age-appropriate social and emotional skills to self-regulate. This will also result in teachers and caregivers who can guide children toward those benchmarks. Improvement in these areas will reduce student referrals for discipline due to classroom conduct and increased time students spend in class learning.

Investing in structural-level SEL support benefits students and supports the mental health and effectiveness of educators and support staff. By working collaboratively to implement comprehensive, culturally responsive SEL programs and initiatives, we can ensure that every student in Illinois receives the support they need to succeed in school and beyond.

Workforce Training and Supports

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Principals Lead the Way: Prioritizing Early Childhood in Schools

Problem

The first five years of a child's life are crucial to their long-term development. It is critical that schools focus their time and resources on students in this age group to support their long-term learning and well-being. Nearly all three- and four-year-olds who attend Chicago Public Schools (CPS) are in a preschool program that is operated within an elementary school. Now that CPS has completed Universal Preschool expansion, there are over 370 schools with preschool programs, and roughly 18,000 students are enrolled in these programs each year.¹ These schools must balance the needs of their preschool students with the kindergarten through eighth-grade students they also serve.

Many young children enter preschool having been exposed to trauma, which can have long-lasting adverse effects on their development. Young children are not only more likely to have exposure to trauma than older children and adolescents, but they are more vulnerable to the long-term effects of trauma. Children from families with less access to economic resources are also likelier to have experienced trauma.² While these experiences can negatively affect development, research suggests that early childhood education (ECE) can foster resilience in children who have

¹ Chicago Public Schools, (2023). *Demographics. 20th Day Membership Report*.

² Bartlett, J.D. (2021). Trauma-informed practices in early childhood education. *ZERO TO THREE Journal*, 41(3), 24-34.

experienced trauma and improve their socioemotional and academic outcomes.³

Many school leaders value and understand the importance of early childhood; however, they must also address the socioemotional and academic needs of their older students, many of whom are likely experiencing trauma. This often leaves preschool students under prioritized. As a result, schools are not adequately supporting the well-being of children and families in their ECE programs. The district is working more urgently to address socioemotional learning in the aftermath of COVID-19 isolation. Existing structures and systems support this work from kindergarten through 12th grade, but early childhood largely operates outside of these systems. Without prioritizing early childhood, we are missing out on the opportunity to support children when their brain development is at its most critical stage.

Cause

Principals must balance the need for a focus on early childhood with a long list of competing demands for their time and attention. District policies and systems signal to school leaders, directly and indirectly, what should be prioritized. Most school districts do not focus on their youngest learners, and district leaders often do not come from early childhood backgrounds. There are different funding sources and governance structures for early childhood that reinforce the idea that early childhood is separate from elementary school.⁴ As a result of these factors, when schools build their continuous improvement plans or professional learning plans, the staff and teachers in early grades are usually not included or prioritized.

One way that districts signal to schools that early childhood is less important than other grades is through accountability measures. An accountability system demonstrates a district or state's definition of a successful or high-quality school. Historically, district accountability systems have focused on standardized measures of student achievement, which are largely developmentally inappropriate for young children. These

³ Lipscomb, S.T., Hatfield, B., Lewis H., Goka-Dubose, E. & Abshire, C. (2021) Adverse childhood experiences and children's development in early care and education programs. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 72. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.106/j.appdev.2020.101218>.

⁴ Regenstein, Elliott (2019). Why the K-12 world hasn't embraced early learning. *Foresight Law + Policy*.

systems also often penalized schools with large populations of students with exposure to trauma by focusing on test scores rather than on the practices that schools and districts need to implement to support students. CPS' former accountability policy focused almost exclusively on older students, contributing to a culture where early childhood was viewed as separate from all the other grades and not a priority for school leaders to address.

Solution

To encourage schools to prioritize their early childhood programs, CPS needs to update its systems and structures to demonstrate that ECE is a priority. The district is implementing a new accountability policy known as the Continuous Improvement and Data Transparency Policy (CIDT). Unlike the previous policy, which focused almost entirely on grades three through eight, the CIDT will now include preschool through second grade. The policy also now emphasizes the importance of school practices and student outcomes, underlining the district's shared accountability with schools.⁵ It also includes an indicator for whether schools have a healing-centered culture that supports socioemotional health and is responsive to student needs.

The introduction of a new accountability policy represents an opportunity for CPS to demonstrate the importance of early childhood education. As a promising first step, CPS is currently working to build Early Grades Indicators (EGI) to ensure that the individual measures and the implementation of the policy are inclusive, cohesive, and developmentally appropriate for preschool through second grade. As CPS prepares to implement the new policy, early childhood stakeholders and experts will be engaged to evaluate each measure and propose changes. This process will confirm if the indicators of quality are applicable to early childhood classrooms. While parts of the policy are applicable in their current form, others will need to be adapted to be developmentally and programmatically appropriate and to signal to principals the need for grade-level specific work in these areas.

The district could take additional steps to ensure the policy is inclusive. When looking at practice data from schools, early childhood classrooms must be part of the school's comprehensive picture. As the policy is revised

⁵ Chicago Public Schools (2023). *District Policy for Continuous Improvement and Data Transparency*. Board Report: 23-0426-PO4, Section: 302.15, Adopted: April 26, 2023.

over time, early childhood stakeholders should add measures and best practices specific to early childhood. Due to the historic exclusion of ECE from district systems, early childhood needs to be explicitly named to give it the same level of importance as older grades.

While the district works to reshape its accountability systems, it can also begin to change the types of professional learning available to school leaders. Centralized professional learning at CPS is largely divided between preschool and kindergarten through second grade. The district can develop and offer more professional learning focused on the early grades as a grade band, which also addresses some of the practices that will be included in the new policy. Professional learning is essential to ensuring that schools' interventions are developmentally appropriate for their youngest learners. By collaborating with experts to design professional learning, CPS can take advantage of the many resources Chicago has to offer in the field of early childhood. Principals would learn from experts in early childhood development and apply what they learn to their work with their teacher teams. The training would focus on the developmentally appropriate practices that support preschool students' socioemotional development and well-being. This allows schools to work towards achieving a healing-centered culture inclusive of their youngest learners.

Outcome

By explicitly prioritizing early childhood education, CPS will encourage school leaders to focus their attention on preschool. By providing supportive and relevant professional learning, the district will give school leaders the knowledge to effectively lead their teacher teams in the early grades. When these shifts in district and school practices happen, children who come to CPS for preschool will be better supported and have better long-term development, even in the face of trauma. When the district fully recognizes the first five years of a child's life as not only essential for development but part of our shared responsibility, our schools can better serve our youngest learners and set them up for future success.

Workforce Training and Supports

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Equity: Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

Problem

Early childhood classrooms are becoming more racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse, while in Illinois and across the nation, our teaching staff remains 80.6% white women.¹ This has resulted in a cultural mismatch between our educational systems at every level and the students and families they serve. The disparity has led to several unintended outcomes such as: the over identification of early childhood students needing special education services as well as decreased parent engagement.

The data from 2009 to 2023 in Illinois showed a 6.7% increase in Hispanic students; in the same period, we only had a growth of 3.4% Hispanic teachers. This trend continues, with a Black student population of 15%, yet only 7% of teachers are Black.²

Additionally, during the 2021-2022 school year, the largest number of English Language Learners (ELL) with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are in preschool, placing 26% of ELL students under the umbrella of needing

¹ Illinois State Board of Education. (2023, July). *English Learners in Illinois SY2021-22 Statistical Report*. Retrieved from: www.isbe.net.

² See footnote 1.

special education services.³ While at the state level, in 2020, 15% of preschool students in the state of Illinois were identified as needing an IEP. At the preschool level, we have nearly doubled the number of English Language Learners with IEPs compared to other ethnicities.⁴ A lack of culturally congruent instruction leads to the disproportionate pathologizing of Black and Brown children's behavior, evidenced by their disproportionate representation in special education programs. Children are entitled to appropriate assessment and access to IEPs if they need them. However, when educators' biases cause misidentification of those needs, resources are misdirected, and learners miss out on opportunities to develop their language and academic skills according to their actual needs.

Students of ethnic, language and cultural backgrounds that do not align with the teachers instructing them can result in increased suspensions and decreased access to advanced coursework as students move through the PreK-12 educational system.⁵ Studies have found that white teachers will often praise a poorly written essay by a Black or Brown student that would have been marked poorly if a white student submitted the same essay. Educational conversations that occur without being conducted through the lens of language and cultural equity make it nearly impossible to partner with families around behavioral and curriculum expectations; therefore, negatively impacting opportunities for rich family engagement partnerships and opportunities.⁶

Cause

Our educational systems were created centuries ago to mirror the needs and values of a time that no longer reflects the diversity of our student populations, thus affecting the ability of educational systems to equitably serve our communities.⁷ Our systems have long supported white culture, which created barriers to higher education opportunities for people of color for generations. The previous approach in education of not "seeing" culture, race, and ethnicity to promote the concept of a "melting pot" has proven detrimental to students beginning at an early age. Similarly, this approach

³ See footnote 1.

⁴ Illinois State Board of Education. (2020). *Illinois Report Card*. Retrieved from: www.illinoisreportcard.com.

⁵ Will, M., & Najarro, I. (2022, April 18). What is Culturally Responsive Teaching? [Review of What is Culturally Responsive Teaching?]. *Education Week*.

⁶ See footnote 5.

⁷ See footnote 5.

does not align with true equity as it fosters unintentional bias or potential disrespect to students and families who differ from educators in culture, language, lived experiences, and race.⁸

Court rulings such as *Brown v. The Board of Education* and *Pylar v. Doe* have pushed school systems to provide equal opportunities for our diverse students. Sadly, as evidenced in both cases, when there is no embedded accountability around professional development, curriculum selection, and cultural competency training, the outcomes for students do not improve.

Solution

The Illinois State Board of Education should require family advisory councils and home visits for all programs receiving Preschool For All funding. Fostering culturally responsive educational systems begins with focusing on building relationships with our diverse communities and our school systems. This can be implemented with some low-to-no-cost shifts in our practices, including establishing family advisory councils that empower and invite families with various lived experiences to participate, and adding home visiting to the compliance checklist that is required for Preschool For All and Preschool For All Expansion programming.

Parent advisory councils have been a long-standing requirement of Preschool For All programming; however, our recommendation would be for preschool programs, with the leadership of program administrators, to create more inclusive family advisory councils. These councils should not only be held within the neighborhoods and communities they serve but, more importantly, ensure that the needs, wants, and desires of families are represented and heard. Shifting this work to focus on families acknowledges that many of our students are in supportive family environments that do not always reflect a traditional family dynamic of mom and dad as the primary caregivers and educational partners. It is a step to further acknowledge the diversity of the students and families being served in our classrooms. This solution necessitates our educational systems to be present where families live, cultivating a safe space where relationships can begin to flourish. This shift requires and allows for gathering outside of our school conference rooms and gathering at local food banks, libraries, parks, and housing authority offices. Ultimately, the families in our communities should have the opportunity to voice their desires through family and community surveys, family interviews, and

⁸ See footnote 5.

storytelling. It is then the responsibility of our educational systems to value family voice by honoring their desired outcomes at every opportunity possible. Family advisory councils are a powerful tool in providing families with agency and voice in what they value, ideas for family engagement, and a better understanding of educational systems and partnerships.

Administrators foster equity by demonstrating a strong commitment to equitable outcomes for all children and aligning budgetary needs to support that work.⁹ Family advisory councils can further support these efforts in the following ways:

- Provide time and space that is safe for leaders, staff, and families to discuss issues around equity.
- Create meaningful community partnerships that give voice to diverse perspectives and services.
- Establish clear protocols for dealing with challenging behaviors and provide teaching staff with consultation and support to address those behaviors effectively and equitably.

Our educational workforce is integral to the solution, building upon their willingness to adopt culturally responsive approaches rooted in deep relationships. Educators need meaningful opportunities to create these spaces for connection, and one way to begin those relationships is to add home visits to the compliance checklist for Preschool For All programs within the state. Home visits are a powerful tool and a springboard to relationship-building. The visits offer an opportunity to learn more about a family, their culture, their beliefs on education, and their hopes and expectations for their child. As educators work to value parent voice, we must recognize and accept that being in some family homes can be intimidating and not conducive to the desired outcome. In those instances, the coming together of the family and the educational team is essential. Home visits can happen anywhere a caregiver is comfortable, such as a community center, library, or even in the classroom. Establishing a partnership from the beginning creates a safe space for families to feel valued and their ideas appreciated.

Historically, home visiting has roots in a paternalistic system that does not always consider how families perceive teacher home visits. District

⁹ The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). (2019, April). *NAEYC Position Statement: Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education*.

administrators must provide teachers with multicultural resources and materials that reflect the diverse backgrounds and experiences of their students. Administrators and teachers must involve families in the decision-making processes related to home visits. The goal is to weave this cultural information into teaching and learning practices. Teachers should be required to reflect on their biases and assumptions after each home visit. This will require administrators and teachers to regularly assess and adapt practices to better meet the needs of diverse families. Home visiting also provides an opportunity for culturally responsive skill-building, employing students' customs, cultural traits, lived experiences, and perspectives as tools for better classroom instruction. The term was coined by researcher Geneva Gay wrote that "when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference for students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly (2000, p. 2)." This approach to teaching helps students of color see themselves and their communities as belonging, leading to more engagement, and academic success.

The addition of home visits at the start of the school year can be funded through the current grant with minimal cost to school districts. This can be achieved by delaying the start of school for preschool students by five days compared to their kindergarten through 12th-grade peers. The success of this model is evidenced through the current practices of school districts such as Elgin's School District U-46, which requires home visits (meeting with families prior to the start of school) for all enrolled preschool students. As we expand this work more universally across the state, administrators will need to work closely with families and educators to develop questions that advance knowledge around race, culture, and linguistics. It is important that these questions are not perceived as judgmental, as that could further alienate educators from the families they serve.

Our funders, our district administrators and our educational workforce have the social responsibility to embed culturally responsive practices around "customs, characteristics, experience, and perspectives as tools for better classroom instruction."¹⁰ We must shift our belief structure around cultural differences from being a barrier to learning to embracing cultural differences as assets to increase positive outcomes for our students.

¹⁰ See footnote 5.

Outcome

The work of Geneva Gay supports the powerful shifts that occur when students have the opportunity to be taught by someone who is culturally responsive, aware of their own implicit bias, reflects on their practice, and connects in meaningful ways to students and families. Gloria Ladson Billings further supported this research, arguing that teachers who had been identified as “excellent” by both Black and Brown families and administrators were educators who held high expectations for all students, fostered academic success, and valued and integrated themselves into the communities in which they were teaching (1990, p.3). Policymakers and school administrators who make educational decisions have a responsibility to continue making system changes that support positive learning outcomes for each student served. As we focus on building cultural responsiveness, the shift to family advisory councils and the addition of home visiting to the Preschool For All compliance checklist brings our educators and the families we serve closer to embracing and understanding our shared values around racial, cultural and linguistic diversity. This shift will increase positive outcomes for our students and create a more responsive workforce. Culturally responsive teaching is not an “add-on” to classroom curriculum and instruction; instead, it is a fundamental shift in pedagogy.

Workforce Training and Supports

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An Integrated Mental Health Model for Savings and Success

Problem

In 2024, kids are stressed! As early as the womb and young infancy, children are emotionally dysregulated and continuously impacted by trauma. On top of that, professionals meant to support them and their caregivers are fleeing the early childhood field. The early care and education (ECE) workforce is experiencing second-hand trauma, and they do not have all the skills/knowledge/tools to adequately address the social-emotional needs of children despite their best efforts and intentions. For most educators, the choice between self-preservation and humanity causes cognitive dissonance, leading them to question: “Should I stay, or should I go?”

The ECE workforce does not have the integrated and long-term interventions it needs to adequately address social-emotional well-being in a sustainable way. One-time workshops, bi-annual mental health consultations, or surface-level courses are ineffective in changing teacher ability, knowledge, practices, and social-emotional child outcomes. Because mental health practices, support, and resources are not embedded in the early childhood ecosystem, the problem has evolved into a systemic issue that can only be resolved by structural change.

Cause

Since 2020, the COVID-19 crisis illuminated mental health as its own universal crisis affecting adults and children, with a significant impact on

child development. In addition to being ill-equipped, evidence suggests that early childhood educators experience higher levels of stress due to emotionally and financially challenging environments, limited resources, and having a job that is not highly regarded by society. Burnout becomes more than a notion and is exacerbated by low pay and an increased workload with no additional “manpower.”

Mental health services are provided as an intervention and not as a standard of high-quality programming in Illinois. Beyond that, the system currently operates on an “as-needed” basis and is incremental at best. “Without early diagnosis and treatment, children with mental [health] disorders can have problems at home, in school, and in forming friendships. Mental [health] disorders can also interfere with a child’s healthy development, causing problems that can continue into adulthood.”¹

Illinois’ current passive approach treats the symptom and not the problem. As a result, early childhood educators do not have the capacity to implement systematic interventions for children that address their social-emotional and mental health needs. Due to the lack of training and experience, many educators do not feel confident in providing support to youth who have a history of trauma.²

The system is reactive and triggered by crises, escalations in a child’s behavior, or a staff incident caused by burnout. This leads to further child endangerment and physical and emotional harm beyond repair. Educators implementing interventions with limited knowledge often incur secondary traumatic stress (STS), which can unintentionally exacerbate symptoms related to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This suggests that teachers are unable to properly support students in a way that does not inflict further trauma on themselves or impact their care over time.

Current research combats this service delivery model by articulating that methodical and constant intervention is more valuable. Interventions implemented once a week by an early intervention professional in a clinical setting are less likely to be as effective as the practice of regularly engaging children in routines and activities, either within the family unit or at the early

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023, July 26). *What is Children’s Mental Health?* Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/basics.html#:~:text=Without%20early%20diagnosis%20and%20treatment,that%20can%20continue%20into%20adulthood.>

² Alisic, E., Bus, M. Dulack, W., Pennings, L., & Splinter, J. (2012). Teachers’ experiences supporting children after traumatic exposure. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 25, 98-101. doi: 10.1002/jts.20709.

childhood center.³ Further research suggests that a teacher's lack of understanding of children's social-emotional behaviors negatively impacts teacher-child relationships and affects how they support the child. It also suggests that teachers with a solid understanding can positively impact classroom support and teacher-child relationships through key social-emotional interventions.

Currently, in Illinois, several formally regulated ECE programs exist for home-based, center-based, and school-based child care. Funds for these programs come from the Child Care Assistance Program, Early Childhood Block Grant and Head Start/Early Head Start. The highest and most trauma-affected groups are communities of color who have historically had less access to resources. Illinois serves over 89,000 children 0–5 years of age, including 75,000 in the Preschool for All program and 13,700 infants and toddlers in the Prevention Initiative program (Fiscal Year 2018). Standards set by federal and state-funded programs aim to serve these populations, but these standards often propagate trauma, homelessness, poverty, domestic violence, and more.

Solution

As Illinois launches the new Department of Early Childhood, it should blend and braid the appropriate funds so that each child care site receiving state funds is required to provide formal, adequate, and well-regulated mental health supports. The new agency will outline a framework that defines standards for in-house, trauma-informed training and the frequency of implementation, as well as in-house, credentialed coaching provided by school-based mental health clinicians. It should also define qualifications and equitable compensation for the mental health clinicians, requiring them to be certified through local and state entities (such as Gateways). This framework should be validated through continuing education units and supported by local Childcare Resource and Referral agencies. Any additional layer of coaches (early childhood educators trained in trauma-informed care and implementation support) should also be added. Legislation should mandate required medical benefits, allowing early childhood professionals to receive discounted rates for clinical service during their employment in early childhood settings.

³ Brunzell, T., & Stokes, H. (2019). *Shifting Teacher Practice in Trauma Affected Classrooms: Practice Pedagogy Strategies Within a Trauma Informed Positive Education Model*. School Mental Health, 1-15. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-018-09308-8>.

Systematic mental health intervention in the early years is more cost-effective than treating mental disorders later in life.⁴ The current system does not allow for intentional and individualized practice coaching or changing of staff. Additionally, because implementation is infrequent and not regulated formally, there is no concrete way to measure impact. By creating a statewide program, there would be a way to collect data and see how mental health support affects teachers, children, and families.

In 2021, the Chicago-based nonprofit Gads Hill Center, funded by the Illinois State Board of Education and Head Start, proactively acknowledged and addressed the early childhood mental health crisis, making organizational changes themselves. Gads Hill uses federal and state dollars to implement a framework that provides active and consistent support to all 11 ECE programs. It offers in-house mental health clinicians who aim to support staff, classrooms, and children and their caregivers. By doing this, Gads Hill has seen increased social-emotional outcomes for its students, fostered positive teacher-student outcomes, and better equipped its classrooms. Staff can provide trauma-informed solutions with confidence and consistency. The model shows that the state can blend and braid funds to provide our workforce with mental health support.

Outcome

By creating a required integrated framework where mental health supports and clinicians are embedded into the early childhood ecosystem, students, teachers, educational staff, and families can receive appropriate and consistent support for young children experiencing mental health and behavioral challenges. When these challenges are actively addressed in the most critical stage of life, we can ensure that children and their families are equipped to deal with the inevitable challenges they face in concert with the retention and job satisfaction of the workforce. Early childhood educators in Illinois will become more confident, helping to stabilize the declining workforce and preparing the state for a bright future. Addressing critical and emerging mental health concerns at the earliest stages of life will have a powerful and positive impact on our communities and society as a whole.

⁴ Alderton, A., Villianueva, K., O'Connor, M., Badland, H., & Boulange, C. (2019, April 29). Reducing Inequities in Early Childhood Mental Health: How Might the Neighborhood Built Environment Help Close the Gap? A Systematic Search and Critical Review. *National Library of Medicine*, PMC6540328. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16091516>.

Workforce Training and Supports

Verletta Saxon

Deputy of Research and Child Well-Being
Illinois Department of Children and Family Services

Measuring Child Well-Being Statewide

Problem

Frontline workers, who tirelessly strive to meet the well-being needs of children, families, and communities, find themselves struggling to navigate the convoluted maze of state systems riddled with overlapping policies and practices. As one State of Illinois employee astutely observed, “We run them [children and families] around from service-to-service and agency-to-agency to get their needs met, but do we really know how any of this is impacting their lives as a whole?”

In Illinois, there is a limited understanding of child well-being and its outcomes among state agencies. The State Board of Education (ISBE), Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), Department of Human Services (DHS), and Healthcare and Family Services (HFS) each define and measure the well-being of children, families, and communities differently. This results in a lack of standardized measures for well-being across agencies and inconsistent interpretation of well-being and how it is measured throughout the state. There is no statewide mechanism to ensure a comprehensive understanding of community well-being measures, efforts, or outcomes. This lack of alignment amplifies the complexities faced by frontline staff, leading to redundant practices, systemic barriers, and staff turnover.¹ Without a universal approach to defining and measuring well-being, the State of Illinois is unable to demonstrate how the well-being of

¹ Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. (2023). *Cultivating Well-Being, Well-Becoming, and Resiliency: The Office of Research and Child Well-Being's Equity-Centered Strength-Focused Approach*.

children, families, and communities change over time or evaluate how they are impacted by our programs and interventions.

In 2018, the federal government made a transformative shift toward prevention services when they signed the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) into law. This legislation shifted the culture of the Child Welfare system from child protection to child prevention services. DCFS² also changed their approach accordingly by shifting the focus to prevention services and established a universal definition of well-being:

Well-being refers to overall health, happiness, and prosperity, encompassing various aspects of an individual's life. Moving toward and achieving one's concept of well-being is a lifelong journey, starting at birth and lasting throughout the developmental progression. Well-being encompasses five domains: physical health and safety; education and cognitive health; social, emotional, and mental health; economic security; and racial and ethnic equity... To experience growth and build well-becoming, people need opportunities, resources, support, and relationships which help them meet their basic needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) and build the resiliency necessary to navigate life's adversities.³

This definition does not exclusively apply to families in DCFS care; it applies to all individuals and families across programs and throughout the state. In partnership with individuals with lived experiences, The Office of Research and Child Well-Being (ORCW) at DCFS identified the need for a statewide definition and consistent sets of domains and measures of well-being. If state agencies adopted such a framework, it would benefit all children, youth, families, and communities involved in state-sponsored interventions and services. The sentiments shared by individuals with lived experiences in Illinois aligns with the Family First Prevention Services Act, which encourages states to stand up a “21st century child well-being system” that focuses on engaging children and families as a preventative measure before they enter systems of care.

In 2019, Governor J.B. Pritzker publicized his desire for Illinois to be “the best state in the nation for families raising young children,” which aligns with the aspirations of a 21st century child well-being system.⁴ Since that

² See footnote 1.

³ See footnote 1.

⁴ Office of Governor J.B. Pritzker. (2019, December 16). Gov. Pritzker Calls on Illinois to Become Best State in Nation for Families Raising Young Children. *Illinois.Gov Press Releases*. Retrieved December 9, 2023, from <https://www.illinois.gov/news/press-release.20950.html>.

time, the Governor has signed an executive order to establish a new state agency to oversee the majority of early childhood programs in Illinois.⁵ Adjacent to these efforts, in 2023, the Lieutenant Governor, Julia Stratton, established the Healing-Centered Illinois Task Force pursuant to Senate Bill 646.⁶ The task force centers its focus on state agencies and communities addressing trauma while focusing on individual and family strengths and prosocial behaviors, all of which impact well-being. While these initiatives mark positive steps toward unified programming there is more to consider before the new agency is established and the healing-centered work is implemented statewide. The five domains of well-being are diverse and extend across all systems to ensure they meet the needs of children and families. Measuring well-being creates an informed, responsive, and equitable approach to improving the overall quality of life for individuals and communities.

Cause

Currently, the State of Illinois lacks a collaborative and comprehensive approach to well-being due to a variety of factors, such as the absence of a shared lexicon, assessments, measures, data management system, and outcomes for child, family, and community well-being aimed at resolving common challenges and barriers. In addition, state agencies are required to report federal measures of well-being in different ways to federal governing bodies. This stands in stark contrast to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,⁷ which developed its first federal measure for overall well-being and published it in Healthy People 2030.⁸ The Overall Health and Well-Being Measure is a life satisfaction measure that focused on the well-being of Americans aged 18 years and older from 2021–2022. This measure has a single definition, manner of assessment, and outcomes that set the

⁵ Office of Governor J.B. Pritzker. (2023, October 24). Gov. Pritzker Announces Proposal to Create Unified Early Childhood State Agency. *Illinois Gov Press Releases*. Retrieved December 9, 2023, from <https://www.illinois.gov/news/press-release.27179.html>.

⁶ Healing-Centered Illinois Task Force. (2023). Retrieved March 28, 2024, from: <https://ltgov.illinois.gov/councils/hcitr.html>.

⁷ U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (2023). *What is Lived Experience?* Retrieved December 19, 2023, from: <https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/5840f2f3645ae485c268a2784e1132c5/What-Is-Lived-Experience.pdf>.

⁸ Healthy People 2030 is a document produced by the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion that focuses on ways to improve individual, community, and structural health challenges faced by Americans. Retrieved June 10, 2024, from: <https://health.gov/healthypeople>.

stage for a cohesive and coordinated effort with a holistic approach across states. While the Department of Health and Human Services publicized its first measure of well-being, it exclusively measured the well-being of individuals 18 years and older, not individuals under the age of 18. Due to the life stages, diverse needs, and experiences of those under the age of 18, Illinois should prioritize the assessment, measurement, and development of shared language and well-being outcomes for children under the age of 18, followed by families and communities.

Solution

As a state, Illinois needs to standardize the definition and measures of well-being, which will assist state agencies in developing a path forward in understanding child, family, and community well-being and reduce the stress on the workforce to create environments of collective strength. The state's journey toward defining, measuring, and achieving specific well-being indicators involves embracing diverse perspectives. This includes adopting an equity and inclusion framework that recognizes individuals from diverse backgrounds and agencies across the state to provide a rich tapestry of insights that encourages adaptability and innovation. As the state embraces new well-being definitions and indicators, state agencies and individuals with lived experiences will play a crucial role in defining and creating well-being indicators statewide. This approach enables the state to adopt a dynamic and responsive strategy that enhances collaboration, communication, and the development of statewide standards that promote a collective commitment to well-being with an emphasis on inclusivity and collaboration.

It is imperative for the General Assembly to:

Establish a task force for the State of Illinois dedicated to defining and designing key child, family, and community well-being metrics for every state agency to use. This task force will include individuals from various state agencies and diverse individuals with lived experiences who have participated in government-sponsored services and supports.⁹ As part of

⁹ The OHSP (2023) describes individuals with lived experience (ILEx) as those who are directly impacted by government-sponsored social programs. The insight of ILEx provides valuable

the task force's efforts to develop crucial data points on well-being, the task force will focus on the following key objectives:

- Leverage the state's robust infrastructure for data management and production. The committee will capitalize on the state's existing capacities to develop a publicly available dashboard specifically centered around measures of child well-being, emphasizing the essential steps required to establish and maintain the dashboard.
- To enhance the usage and usability of the dashboard, a dedicated analytic approach will be employed for tasks such as collecting, evaluating, analyzing, translating, and identifying trends in child well-being data. The task force will make recommendations on allocation of resources to diverse communities.
- Allocation of resources is crucial to ensuring programs receive the necessary support, enabling them to function effectively and remain valuable; therefore, data on well-being will be shared with state agencies and policy makers along with benchmarks and goals to influence research and policy initiatives that benefit diverse communities. Then, the relevant government agency will incorporate and implement the recommendations of the task force.

Outcome

Based on the proposed solution, the following outcomes are expected:

- The development of consistent and standardized statewide measures of child well-being that establish a foundation for future workforce development.
- A workforce that prioritizes the well-being of populations with less access to resources, which leads to individuals with better cognitive, emotional, and social skills, thereby contributing to a more skilled and resilient workforce.
- The development of a statewide well-being definition and framework that is consistent and standardized.
- The inclusion of diverse individuals with lived experiences from various backgrounds, races, sexual orientations, genders, etc. in the

information into how policies, practices, and programs impact end user and it is an opportunity to gather feedback that impacts system change. Office of Human Services Policy (OHSP, 2023). *What is Lived Experience?* Washington, DC: US Department of Health & Human Services.

development, planning, implementation, and ongoing efforts to establish a statewide framework and dashboard for well-being.

- The exchange of best practices and successful strategies that improve well-being across state agencies.
- The establishment of a statewide well-being dashboard and benchmarks.
- The ability to measure child, family, and community well-being over time, identify trends, and respond to events that impact well-being (e.g., COVID-19, recessions, etc.).
- The recommendations of policies tailored to meet the specific and diverse well-being needs of children and families.

Workforce Training and Supports

Michelle Wood

Bureau Chief of Quality Initiatives
Illinois Department of Human Services
Division of Early Childhood

Family Child Care: Save the Work That Saves the Workforce

Problem

The number of home-based child care providers in Illinois is on the decline. Child care is widely unavailable to families, both nationally and in Illinois. In Illinois, 58%¹ of the population resides in an area where there are not enough nearby child care providers to care for the local population of children. Meanwhile, family child care providers, who are paid rates equivalent to subminimum wage, are leaving the profession.

From 2012 to 2019 in Illinois, licensed family child care capacity declined 20% and the number of license-exempt family child care homes declined by 65%.² This decline has particularly impacted communities of color, who disproportionately rely on this type of care. Overall, licensed capacity in Illinois decreased in the years before the pandemic, and the capacity of licensed child care centers also reduced.

The child care industry struggled to meet the needs of Illinois' families and was not prepared for the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The system's overall failure results in insufficient child care capacity and an inability to serve all families. It leaves both parents and child care workers economically depleted and in a constant state of anxiety.

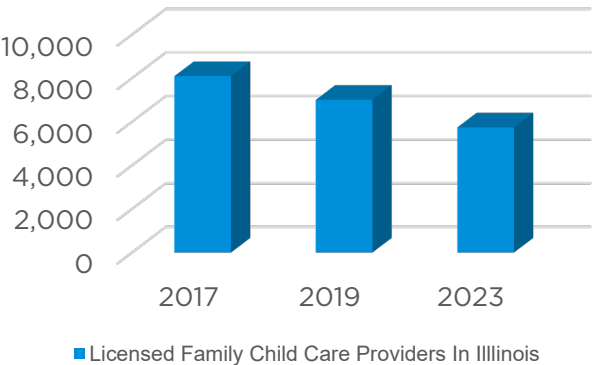
¹ Illinois Child Care for All Coalition. (2022). *Child Care in Illinois: Parents Can't Afford to Pay. Workers Can't Afford to Stay*. Retrieved from: https://ilchildcareforall.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/22.05-Child-Care-White-Paper_v7.1-1.pdf.

² See footnote 1.

The system’s failures are felt by parents and workers of all demographic and economic backgrounds; however, communities of color with less access to financial resources are impacted the hardest. This is particularly evident with child care workers, who are disproportionately women of color. Challenges faced by child care providers and parents have gained increased attention from national media, policymakers, and other stakeholders as the pandemic plunged child care deeper into crisis, which has been further fueled by the undervaluation and underpayment of child care workers. In 2019, licensed family child care providers in Illinois made an average of \$7.04 an hour, while license-exempt family child care providers made even less.³

According to the Illinois Department of Human Services Salary and Staffing Survey, there were 8,092 licensed family child care providers in 2017. Subsequent updates of the same survey showed the number dropped to 7,007 in 2019 and dropped again to 5,741 in 2023 (Whitehead, 2019, 2023). In short, Illinois experienced a 19% decrease in licensed family child care providers from 2019 and a 30% decrease from 2017 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Number of Licensed Family Child Care Providers in Illinois



Nationwide, the number of licensed family child care homes fell by 52% from 2005 to 2017. From 2014 to 2017, the drop was 22%. Family child care educators shared that the job has challenges that include carrying out

³ See footnote 1.

standards without sufficient dollars/resources, a difficult economy, costs, and aging/retirement.⁴

Cause

In February 2022, the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies conducted a survey called the Illinois Child Care COVID Impact Report. The survey targeted family child care homes and child care centers, and a few key takeaways were:

1. 45.3% of family child care homes closed their doors when Illinois' governor mandated a stay-at-home order on March 21, 2020.
2. Most facilities were closed for just over two months. When they reopened on June 1, 2020, they found that enrollment had dropped significantly, approximately in half, for centers and homes between January 2020 and July 2020.
3. As of June 30, 2021, enrollment still had not returned to pre-pandemic levels.⁵

Supporting a family on less than federal poverty level wages is not sustainable to thrive in today's economy. Another reason why so many family child care providers are choosing to leave the field are the high number of hours worked each week. On average, family child care providers were paid to care for children 50.2 hours per week with an average net pay of \$14,868.33 per year.⁶

Solution

Illinois should build home-based child care center networks through the Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) system to increase supply and stability. CCR&R agencies serve all 102 counties in Illinois, breaking them up into 16 Service Delivery Areas. By setting up family child care networks in

⁴ National Association for Family Child Care. (2016). *Family Child Care Research & Data Fact Sheet*. Available at: [Family Child Care Research & Data - National Association for Family Child Care \(nafcc.org\)](https://www.nafcc.org/fact-sheet).

⁵ Salrin, R., Lee, C., Norton, J., & Whitehead, J. (2022). *Illinois Child Care COVID Impact Report*. Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies. Available at: <https://www.inccrra.org/images/datareports/Illinois-Child-Care-COVID-Impact-Report.pdf>

⁶ See footnote 5.

each Service Delivery Area, we could support family child care providers with resources, specialized training, ongoing home visits, peer-to-peer learning opportunities, telephone support, business support, and much more. This work adds to current efforts on family child care networks in the state. We are learning from providers in the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and other well-established networks; creating ad-hoc groups to get provider feedback is critical as we decide how best to use the state's resources.

The Family Child Care Network Impact Study showed that provider affiliation with a staffed network, particularly with a specially trained coordinator and supportive services to providers, is associated with higher-quality care. Lower quality ratings, on average, were found for providers in networks without a specially trained coordinator and supportive services, providers in associations, and unaffiliated providers.⁷ Currently, only 10.4% of home-based providers statewide hold a Gold, Silver, or Bronze ExceleRate Circle of Quality.⁸

The solution is to incorporate family child care networks into the Child Care Resource and Referral Service Delivery Areas. There are three key benchmarks needed to ensure successful implementation. In a 2022 study from Home Grown and Erikson Institute, evidence-based benchmarks for home-based child care networks were grouped into three categories: the who, the why, and the how.

WHO:

A home-based child care network is an interconnected group of providers and families who come together to enhance supports for home-based child care, including quality, access to services, and sustainability through formal or informal mechanisms (e.g., associations, child care resource and referrals, provider-led groups, shared services alliances).⁹

⁷ Bromer, J. (2009). *The Family Child Care Network Impact Study: Promising Strategies for Improving Family Child Care Quality*. Erikson Institute. Available at: https://www.erikson.edu/wp-content/uploads/Bromer_FamilyChildCareBrief_Final_web.pdf.

⁸ Salrin, R., Lee, C., Norton, J., & Whitehead, J. (2024). *Illinois Salary & Staffing Survey of Licensed Child Care Facilities: FY2023*. Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies. Available at: [IDHS: •Illinois Salary & Staffing Survey Of Licensed Child Care Facilities: FY2023 \(state.il.us\)](https://idhs.org/IDHS-Illinois-Salary-Staffing-Survey-Of-Licensed-Child-Care-Facilities-FY2023)

⁹ Erikson Institute and Home Grown. (2022). *Strengthening home-based child care networks: An evidence-based Framework for High Quality*. Available at: <https://homegrownchildcare.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/HomeGrown-Erikson-BENCHMARKS-BRIEF-draft6-1.pdf>.

WHY:

- **Organizational Culture:** The why benchmark focuses on the network's organizational culture, intentionally focused on home-based child care as a distinct, essential, and valued early care and education setting for children and families.
- **Provider Engagement:** The second component of this benchmark is for the network to include providers as equal decision-making partners in network governance, operations, and accountability.
- **Equity and Culturally Grounded Service Delivery:** The last component of the why benchmark is the network's ability to demonstrate an intentional focus on equity and culturally grounded service delivery. The component should ensure the network offers services that promote provider well-being and attachment to home-based child care work. The network should also provide services that promote economic well-being and sustainability. Lastly, the network should offer services that build on and enhance culturally relevant and community-embedded provider practices that contribute to positive child and family outcomes and holistic services for them.

HOW:

The how component should ensure the network uses:

1. Researched evidence to inform how services are implemented, including a focus on relationship-based approaches.
2. An intentional and collaborative approach to data collection and analysis that informs service delivery.
3. Intentional staffing strategies to support providers.
4. Recruitment strategies resulting in ongoing provider participation.¹⁰

To ensure sustainability and growth in the Illinois family child care sector, implementing this administrative change would provide more funding to family child care networks. Currently, two statewide family child networks serve children in the northern part of the state. One is supported by a Child

¹⁰ See footnote 9.

Care Resource and Referral agency, and the other is a community-based organization. This does not allow all family child care providers access to a network to support their work. Using Child Care Development Funds (CCDF) or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families Funds (TANF) — both federal funding sources the state administers— the Department of Human Services could increase funding to support this effort.

Applying the Family Child Care Network Impact Study Framework to develop a strategy and gather input from the field will yield greater success as we implement this change. Alternatively, the Department of Human Services could post a request for proposal/notice of funding opportunity, allowing other organizations to apply to join the family child care networks.

Outcome

When we see a system of family child care networks in place across the state, there will be sustainable improvements to the child care workforce, improved business practices for family child care providers, a culture of collaborative relationships among providers, and a well-established recruitment model in place. This will not only improve the family child care sector but will also improve the quality of the overall child and family experience. The family child care networks will create a safer and healthier home environment that fosters development, learning, and equity among providers. They will promote culturally and linguistically grounded provider-child interactions that nurture children's self-identity and healthy development. Lastly, family child care networks will provide family supports and build provider-family relationships that promote family well-being.

Biographies of Fellows



Julissa Cruz

Senior Director of Community-Based Advocacy
Carole Robertson Center for Learning

Cruz is the senior director of Community-Based Advocacy at the Carole Robertson Center for Learning, an early childhood and youth development organization in Chicago. In her role, she works to lend and uplift the lived experiences of the Center's family,

staff, and community members in conversations around systems-building and transformation.

Prior to joining the Center, she spent over a decade in Chicago Public Schools, working closely with the district's stakeholders on family engagement and governance. Cruz is also a board member of the North River Commission. She is committed to ensuring that every child and family in Chicago has access to the resources, supports, and opportunities that will enable them to thrive. Cruz holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Illinois and a master's degree from Loyola University Chicago.



Cassandra F. Davis

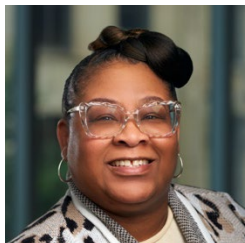
District Manager of Student Assessments
Chicago Public Schools

Davis has more than 20 years as an experienced educator dedicated to serving students and their families, as well as supporting teachers and school leaders in Chicago. Throughout her career, she held various roles, including teacher, coach, school-level

administrator, network-level data strategist, and instructional support leader.

Currently, Davis holds the position of district manager in the Department of Student Assessment & MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Supports) at Chicago Public Schools. In this role, she is responsible for overseeing and managing the student screening/benchmark assessments processes to support

student's academic needs. Her career is driven by her passion for education and commitment to equity and excellence in the educational experience. She works to ensure all students in the City of Chicago have access to the highest quality education possible and a supportive and inclusive learning environment, partnering with teachers and school leaders to improve educational outcomes.



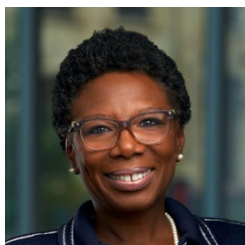
Shannon Ellison

Director of Programs and Contracts
Collaboration for Early Childhood

Ellison joined the Collaboration for Early Childhood in 2014 as the developmental screening coordinator and now serves as the director of programs and contracts. She has over 27 years of experience in various capacities, including roles in child care, Head Start,

Early Head Start, and as a program family service worker, preschool site director, and infant-toddler specialist for children and families experiencing homelessness. She was also a developmental therapist for the early intervention systems in Illinois and Indiana and served as a parent advisor for families with children who were deaf or hard-of-hearing.

Ellison is passionate about serving families, especially those who, historically, have little to no access to resources and connecting them to services to meet their children's needs for holistic development. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree in human development and family studies from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a Master of Education degree in early childhood leadership and advocacy from National-Louis University.



Felicia S. Gray

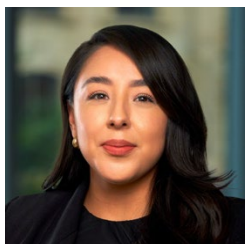
Associate Director of Operations
Illinois Department of Human Services
Division of Early Childhood

Gray is the associate director of operations for the Illinois Department of Human Services' Division of Early Childhood where she works to equip pregnant persons, young children, and families across the state

with the supports they need to achieve their full potential. A native of Chicago's Austin community, her leadership in serving individuals and

families spans more than 29 years— successfully engaging families, leading collaborative teams, programs, and projects with excellence to increase capacity, equitable access, and quality services to support residents.

Gray received her Bachelor of Social Work degree from Grambling State University in Louisiana and her Master of Social Work degree from the Jane Addams College of Social Work at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She is a board member at the Firehouse Community Arts Center in Chicago's Lawndale Community and serves her community and profession through several other organizations.

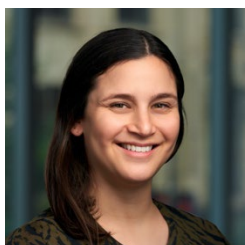


Rosario Hernandez

Senior Education Policy Analyst
Latino Policy Forum

Hernandez is a senior education policy analyst at the Latino Policy Forum (Forum) who advocates for early childhood education (ECE) policy that promotes equitable services for Latino and English Learner families. She works to create a greater understanding of cultural and linguistic strengths and draws upon community assets to improve ECE programs and systems.

Additionally, she works to equip parents and caregivers with tools to support their children's early development and boost their school readiness through various workshops. She also contributes to the coordination and implementation of other education advocacy and policy efforts at the Forum, including the shortage of bilingual and Latino educators. Hernandez received her Master of Social Work degree with a focus on interpersonal practice and mental health from the University of Michigan.



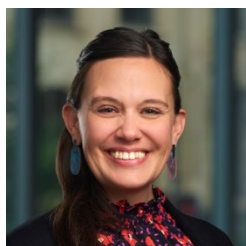
Emily Kelin

Early Childhood Project Manager
Chicago Public Schools
Office of Early Childhood Education

Kelin is the early childhood project manager at Chicago Public Schools (CPS). In this role, she manages the Universal Pre-K (UPK) initiative, working to expand free, full-day preschool access for all four-

year-olds in Chicago. She also leads the district's Pre-K recruitment and enrollment work and partners with CPS, city leadership, other government agencies, community organizations, and vendors to support preschool enrollment at nearly 400 CPS schools and 200 additional community-based sites.

Kelin began her career as a second-grade teacher in CPS and taught first grade for five years in the McKinley Park neighborhood. She is a former Chicago Mayor's Office Fellow. She has a bachelor's degree in Spanish with a minor in public health from Washington University, a master's degree in education from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and a master's degree in public policy from the University of Chicago.



Maggie Koller

Communications Manager
Birth to Five Illinois

Koller is the communications manager for Birth to Five Illinois, the state's equity-driven regional community system designed to amplify family, provider, and community voices in the state policy-making process.

In her role, she is responsible for upholding the organizational values of racial equity, family voice, and collective impact across statewide and region-specific communications strategies.

Prior to this role, Koller served as the director of communication & dissemination for the Illinois Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development, spearheading the Office's communications and public dissemination for the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5). She also managed logistics for three statewide groups: the Illinois Early Learning Council and its Executive Committee, and Early Childhood Inter-Agency Team. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology and theater arts/dance from Beloit College and holds a Master of Science in child development with a specialization in children's law and policy from Erikson Institute.



Rayshonda McElroy

Director of Early Childhood
Gads Hill Center

McElroy is the director of early childhood at Gads Hill Center. She oversees center-based and home-based programs in the Children Services Department. She ensures compliance in programming, quality implementation, and comprehensive services for children and families. She is also laser-focused on professional development for teachers, affirming that reflective learning communities create safe spaces for teachers and increase child outcomes.

A Chicago native, she has more than two decades in early childhood education and strongly believes that all children, regardless of their socioeconomic status, deserve a quality education. Focused on systems and innovative change, she aims to close the academic achievement gap in communities that have historically had less access to resources. She also pushes for early childhood education to be recognized as a profession and advocates for higher teacher salaries.

She received a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, with a concentration in special education, and a master's degree in educational administration.



Dara Munson

President & CEO
Family Focus

Munson has built a career focused on the needs of women and children and currently serves Chicagoland as the first African American president and CEO of Family Focus, which delivers early childhood education and development and other support services to 20,000 families and their children. She is the former CEO of Chicago Child Care Society, past president and CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metro Detroit, past chief operating officer of the Girl Scouts of Southeastern Michigan, and past senior director of United Way of Southeastern Michigan.

She recently served as chair of the board of trustees for Eastern Michigan University. She also serves as chair of the Chicago Alliance for Collaborative

Effort, and as a board member of the International Women's Forum-Chicago Chapter and Illinois Partners for Human Services.

She holds a Bachelor of Science degree in criminal justice from Eastern Michigan University, a Master of Science degree in public administration from Central Michigan University and a strategic perspectives in non-profit management certificate from Harvard Business School.



Kisha Petties

TANF Engagement Unit Administrator
Illinois Department of Human Services

Petties currently serves as the TANF engagement unit administrator for the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS). She was previously the bureau chief of collaborations and partnerships for IDHS' Division of Early Childhood. In this role, she developed a vision, mission, and goals as a foundation to establishing a strategic plan.

A Bellwood, Ill. native and first-generation educator, Petties began her journey in early childhood education as an undergraduate student at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Her experience as a young mother inspired her commitment to change the trajectory of children and families locally and across the globe. She gave back to her community through substitute teaching at both her grammar school and high school prior to advancing her studies at National Louis University Chicago, where she went on to gain her master's degree in teaching and an advanced study certificate in curriculum and instruction.



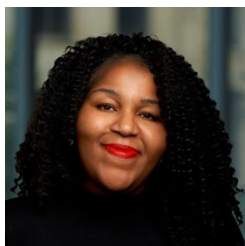
Lynn Reuter

Early Learning Administrator
School District U-46

Reuter is an early learning administrator with School District U-46. Her role is focused on both teaching and administration in early childhood since beginning her career at the district in 1998. In the last nine years, her leadership has been focused on supporting the district's home visiting program, and preschool access for families aging out

of the Early Intervention program and students identified through Child Find as needing enriching early learning experiences.

During her tenure with the school district, she led the Parents as Teachers Home Visiting team and received the prestigious recognition of being a Blue Ribbon Affiliate with Parents as Teachers National. Reuter's passion has been partnering with families furthest from opportunity to assist them in providing enriching, safe, consistent, and engaging opportunities to support their littlest learners while creating authentic, relational experiences around education that are positive.



Krystal A. Ross

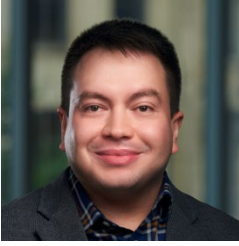
Chief Program Officer
Gads Hill Center

Ross is the chief program officer for Gads Hill Center and manages Head Start, Home Visiting, Preschool for All, Prevention Initiative, and the Partnership Child Care Center, among many other support programs that serve over nine schools and 697 children. She has

21 years of experience in the field of early childhood education and, over her tenure, has served in federally funded programs such as Early Intervention and Head Start programs.

She is passionate about creating a more equitable space for Black and Brown families, especially those in Chicago's south and southwest sides. She has been a featured speaker at several nationally recognized conferences and provides consulting to agencies across the Midwest like LEARN Chicago and the YWCA St. Louis.

Ross holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in early childhood education. She is a member of the Chicago Early Learning Collaborative and Illinois POC Migration Policy Institute Committee, among many other community organizations.



Erick Saldivar

Family Resources Support Services Manager
Illinois Action for Children

Saldivar has worked for Illinois Action for Children for 10 years and currently manages Family Resources Training and Technical Assistance. He previously managed the support services for the state-funded Child Care Assistance Program.

Born and raised in Chicago, his family's immigrant experience, defined by hard work, sacrifice, resilience, and the pursuit of better opportunities for their children, has given Saldivar the aptitude to navigate the complexities of identity and bridge the gap between his parents' rich Mexican heritage and the American dream.

He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in history from Northeastern Illinois University and is a proud alum of Chicago Public Schools.



Verletta A. Saxon

Deputy of Research & Child Well-Being
Illinois Department of Children and Family Services

Dr. Saxon is the deputy of research and child well-being at the Illinois Department of Children and Families and a Licensed Clinical Practicing Counselor who is passionate about well-being, well-becoming, and resilience. She believes that children, youth and adults have the power to transform their lives when they build and develop relationships, have a sense of belonging, and use their strengths to achieve their goals. Her bold mission is to be a well-being ambassador who supports life-long learning and assists others as they gain purpose and power in their individual lives.



Guadalupe Valdivia

Manager of the Chicago Early Learning Workforce Scholarship
City Colleges of Chicago

Valdivia is manager of the Chicago Early Learning Workforce Scholarship at City Colleges of Chicago-Truman College. She and her team build pathways to early childhood careers for Chicagoans currently

taking courses or who are already in the workforce and want to pursue credentials, degree, endorsements, or licensure. She also teaches early childhood courses at the college.

She worked at Metropolitan Family Services in 2008 as a family service worker and quickly moved to the director role, where she was able to secure the National Association for the Education of Young Children accreditation for the center. She later moved to Chicago Public Schools under the Office of Early Childhood in Network 7, engaging principals, teachers, and families in the Pilsen/Little Village neighborhoods with quality tools, training, and best practices for early childhood.

Valdivia has a Bachelor of Science degree in child development and a master's degree in applied and family studies from Northern Illinois University in Dekalb, Ill.



Ricardo Villalobos

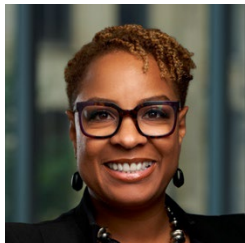
Director of Family and Community Engagement
Christopher House

A seasoned community and family advocate with nearly 20 years of nonprofit experience, Villalobos has a strong foundation in community building, policy and advocacy work, and organizational strategic development. He is a lifelong Chicagoan and has

intimate knowledge of the surrounding community's core needs and the barriers that often challenge community goals. He firmly believes that his lived experience as a second-generation Mexican American is invaluable to his work, guiding his perspective, fueling his passion, and, most importantly, keeping him grounded within the communities he serves.

Before joining Christopher House, Villalobos worked at BUILD Inc. as the director of community engagement and strategic partnerships. He

managed all of BUILD's community and stakeholder partnerships while helping lead the way for restorative, trauma-informed practices in communities experiencing high levels of gun violence. Through the years, he helped develop and provide community support such as high-quality early childhood education resources, financial support services, immigration, and trauma-informed resources to families across Illinois.



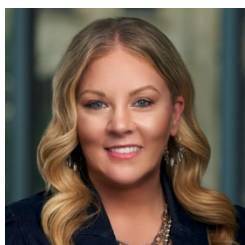
LeTosha White

Vice President
Black Child Development Institute Chicago Metro

White is the vice president of Black Child Development Institute Chicago Metro where she works to support and develop programs designed with the needs of Black children, their parents, and villages in mind.

Equitable policy, practices, and resources for all children is the foundation of her work.

In her career, she was a child care center owner, franchise operator, national trainer/speaker, and coach. Her unique leadership lens, niche skill sets, and contagious enthusiasm for inspiring and facilitating organizational change has become her trademark and is known to unequivocally announce: "If it's not fun and meaningful, I'm not doing it." Her charismatic and skilled approach to collaboration with aligned partners makes getting there both practical and enjoyable. She is a second-generation college graduate and third-generation entrepreneur whose leadership values are centered in honoring her ancestor's journey from sharecroppers in Como, Mississippi to multigenerational business owners.



Michelle Wood

Bureau Chief of Quality Initiatives
Illinois Department of Human Services
Division of Early Childhood

Wood is the bureau chief of quality initiatives in the Division of Early Childhood at the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS). She oversees Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, program improvement and quality, and site-administered child care contracts. Her bureau also houses many of the Smart Start Illinois projects, such as Smart Start Transition

Grants, Smart Start Quality Supports Program, the Apprenticeship Pilot, etc.

Before joining IDHS, Wood was a principal consultant in the early childhood department at the Illinois State Board of Education, focusing on continuous quality improvement and overseeing state-funded Preschool/Prevention Initiative programs and Head Start collaboration. She also has 17 years of experience as an early childhood educator in various programs.

She holds a Bachelor of Science degree in early childhood and elementary education from Greenville University and a Master of Arts degree in education from Ashford University. She is currently working towards her Ph.D. in early childhood leadership and advocacy from Walden University.

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Chief Resilience Officer
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