

Listening Sessions to Inform Illinois' New Department of Early Childhood



Key feedback from the early childhood community on priorities for the state's new unified agency.

As Illinois transitions to the new Department of Early Childhood (IDEC) to streamline the coordination and delivery of early childhood education and care services, groups across the state held listening sessions in the summer and fall of 2024 to gather feedback about how to best improve the state's early childhood systems.

Illinois Action for Children (IAFC) engaged families and providers as a part of this effort. Their feedback was shared directly with the state transition team.

GROUP FEEDBACK

The We, the Village Coalition hosted three listening sessions in July, August, and September 2024 with coalition members.

This included a broad representation of child care providers, parents, early childhood advocates and activists in McHenry, Kane, Cook, Stephenson, Jo Daviess, Winnebago, McLean, Adams, and Jefferson counties.

Participants provided feedback on Illinois' early childhood system and communicated the following priorities for IDEC:

Participant Group: We, the Village Coalition

The We, the Village Coalition (WTV) is comprised of advocates, nonprofit organizations, child care providers, school districts, parents, and other supporters united for supportive policies that advance the well-being of Illinois' youngest children.

WTV seeks adequate, equitable, sustainable, reliable funding for children's services from birth through age five and works to ensure all children and their families can access quality early childhood education and care they deserve.

1. Expand Communication and Engagement

- Effective communication will be vital for the new agency, and Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agencies can play a central role. These agencies should serve as trusted points of contact for providers, easing their anxieties through consistent, transparent guidance.
- Participants suggest expanding communication channels, incorporating regular Zoom meetings, and town halls to allow a wide range of voices to be heard. Focused discussions through regular town halls would also allow providers to address specific issues, such as funding, staffing, and regulatory updates.

1. Expand Communication and Engagement (Continued)

- Increasing media presence and leveraging social media could further engage younger parents and caregivers, ensuring broader reach and timely information sharing. Public awareness campaigns on the importance of early childhood, amplified through social media and influencer partnerships, would help raise the profile of early childhood programs and foster community-wide support.

2. Ensure Community Representation and Inclusion

- A commitment to diverse representation in decision-making is essential for the new agency. Establishing family and policy councils, creating subcommittees, rotating membership, and inviting participation from various roles will ensure that a range of perspectives are included to shape policy.
- Public school-based early childhood staff, particularly those involved in ISBE-funded PFA programs, currently feel excluded from decision-making, and increasing their engagement will help ensure their voices are considered.
- Providing stipends for family child care providers and other community partners would encourage participation and make input more accessible.

3. Leverage Data and Resources

- Advocates call for the agency to use available data and resources effectively to inform policy decisions and strengthen partnerships.
- Data from programs like Birth to Five Illinois and local collaborations can help target resources where they are needed most. Disaggregated data would further support equity-focused decisions by highlighting racial, geographic, and special needs disparities across Illinois.
- Transparency in data reporting, especially on program access, funding distribution, and demographic reach, will build community trust and enable stakeholders to identify successes and gaps.

4. Develop Coordinated, Family-Centered Approaches and Support Systems

- Participants highlight the importance of family-centered support systems. This includes expanded access to full-day care and transportation, which would promote family stability and child development.

4. Develop Coordinated, Family-Centered Approaches and Support Systems (Continued)

- Community members see the potential of the Integrated Referral Intake System (IRIS) to create a unified referral process, making it easier for providers and families to access support. However, they also express a need for clarity on how existing supports, such as Caregiver Connections and Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) consultations, will be integrated within the new agency's structure.
- Simplifying state systems and reducing administrative barriers for community-based programs would improve accessibility and encourage more families to participate.

5. Provide Stable and Equitable Program Support and Funding

- Participants are concerned that inconsistent funding could destabilize the industry. This would exacerbate staffing shortages and burnout as educators struggle to meet students' behavioral and special needs in classrooms. Immediate, hands-on assistance—not just additional training—is needed to address these issues and prevent teacher burnout.
- There is an urgent need to support existing programs that serve diverse, low-income populations. Some have experienced funding cuts that affect their ability to operate effectively. Programs like the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), Smart Start Workforce Grants (SSWG), and ExceleRate Illinois have been instrumental for maintaining quality and accessibility in early childhood. Participants stress the importance of expanding this support to stabilize the sector.
- Additional financial assistance for families and providers, including scholarships and wage supplements, would further alleviate the financial burden on providers and ensure that early childhood programs remains accessible to families who need it most.
- Participants emphasize high standards for dual language learners, as outlined in Preschool for All/Expansion (PFA/E) regulations. Moreover, these were seen as critical across all early childhood programming.

6. Improve Child Care Licensing Requirements

- Participants express strong support for transferring licensing requirements from the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to the new Department of Early Childhood. They emphasize a need for a cohesive, streamlined licensing process in the new state agency that understands the nuances of early childhood.
- The agency must work closely with centers and home providers to ensure a consistent interpretation of licensing standards and provide hands-on, start-to-finish support throughout the licensing process. This is especially important for home providers, who need a unified licensing approach to navigate a complex regulatory landscape.

7. Address Workforce Challenges and Provide Solutions

- Many providers emphasize the need to raise wages and offer benefits, as turnover remains high due to limited compensation and job demands.
- Participants also call for career pathways that attract bilingual and Spanish-speaking individuals, with a focus on creating opportunities for high school students and stay-at-home parents to enter the early childhood workforce.
- Participants highlight major concerns over the current educator licensing requirements—specifically the need for early childhood educators to hold multiple licenses, unlike elementary educators who require only one. The disparity contributes to significant teacher shortages and places undue pressure on teachers, leading many to leave the field.
- Ongoing turnover and burnout, driven by demanding conditions and limited resources, further jeopardize workforce stability. Moreover, participants question how roles and benefits, such as Teachers' Retirement System (TRS) contributions, will transition between the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and the new agency.

8. Invest in Child Care Infrastructure

- The issue of child care deserts remain especially pronounced in rural areas. Addressing this shortage will require capital grants to expand facilities and increase licensed capacity.
- Facility renovations and upgrades, while costly, are necessary for meeting safety and accessibility standards. Funding for these improvements would enable more families in underserved areas to access high-quality child care.

CONCLUSION

This feedback will help to guide IDEC priorities as it begins to administer early childhood programs and services. As the transition continues, additional feedback will be essential to design processes and programs that meet provider and family needs and address the greatest inequities in the early childhood system.

To learn more about ways to take part in this important work, contact neoma.nagahawatte@actforchildren.org. To learn more about opportunities offered through IDEC, visit <https://idec.illinois.gov/>