

**SUMMARY BRIEF**



# Illinois Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five Needs Assessment

## KEY FINDINGS IN BRIEF

### Overview

As a result of a commitment to improve the early childhood care and education (ECCE) mixed-delivery system, Illinois received a federal Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five award from the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education. The overall purpose of the grant is to help Illinois improve the effectiveness of Illinois’s ECCE mixed-delivery system by executing several activities (see sidebar), including a statewide needs assessment on the availability and quality of existing ECCE programs in Illinois. Illinois contracted with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to lead the statewide needs assessment, as well as Northern Illinois University and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for topic areas. This brief will provide an overview of the needs assessment methods and findings.

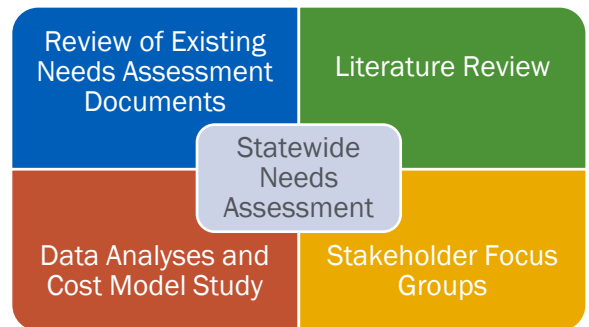
### Needs Assessment Methods

The Illinois needs assessment addresses questions about the availability and quality of existing ECCE programs in the state, aligned with PDG B-5 Needs Assessment Guidance provided by HHS-OCC. The AIR team used three key methods: (1) a review of Illinois’s existing ECCE needs assessments, (2) a literature review on targeted needs assessment domains, and (3) stakeholder focus group interviews to address HHS-OCC questions. In addition to these methods led by AIR, the state contracted with Northern Illinois University and the Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to conduct additional analyses and a cost model study to address additional questions.

### Preschool Development Grant (PDG B-5)

The Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five (PDG B-5) initiative, a federal grant program offered in 2018 by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child Care (HHS-OCC), supported 46 states and territories in the following activities:

- (1) conducting a statewide needs assessment, (2) developing a statewide strategic plan, (3) increasing opportunities for parent choice and knowledge about high-quality ECCE, (4) sharing best practices among early childhood service providers, and (5) improving the overall quality of ECCE services. For more information on the federal Preschool Development Grant initiative, visit <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ/resource/pdg-b-5-initiative>.



## PDG B-5 Federal Needs Assessment Guidance Focal Domains

1. Definitions of Key Terms
2. Focal Populations for This Grant
3. Number of Children Being Served and Awaiting Service
4. Quality and Availability
5. Gaps in Data or Research to Support Collaboration Between Programs/Services and Maximizing Parental Choice
6. Quality and Availability of Programs and Supports
7. Measurable Indicators of Progress
8. Facilities
9. Barriers to Funding and Provision of High-Quality Early Childhood Care and Education
10. Transition Supports
11. System Integration and Interagency Collaboration

## Findings

Following is a summary of key findings on the availability and quality of existing ECCE programs in Illinois, organized by the 11 focal domains outlined in the PDG B-5 Needs Assessment Guidance.

### *Definitions of Key Terms*

**FINDING:** There is little consistency in terminology usage across the existing ECCE system. A review of existing needs assessments and relevant resources revealed inconsistent use of definitions for key terms, making it difficult to interpret and compare findings across resources. The definitions of terms such as “low-income” families, “quality” ECCE, and “access to” or “availability of” ECCE varied across reports. Although these reports provided critical information about strengths and gaps of services provided to families and young children, the inconsistency in definitions limited the utility of these resources for identifying the needs of the state.

### *Focal Populations for This Grant*

**FINDING:** Additional analysis of existing data is needed to determine the characteristics of children who are vulnerable or underserved and the characteristics of children living in rural areas. Data are available on

characteristics of children such as race/ethnicity, home language, income status, and geographic concentration of children ages 5 and under in Illinois. However, we cannot determine how these available data overlap with the population that we define as vulnerable or underserved without further analyses. Similarly, we also cannot determine how the available data on their race/ethnicity, home language, and income status, and on the geographic concentration overlap with the population that we define as living in rural areas without additional data and further analyses.

### *Number of Children Being Served and Awaiting Service<sup>1</sup>*

**FINDING:** Establishing an unduplicated count of the number of children being served and awaiting services may not be possible with the existing available data sources. The analysis completed by Northern Illinois University addressed the number of children being served but not the number of children awaiting services across programs. Obtaining the number of children awaiting services across programs relies on administrative data from the Illinois Department of Human Services and the Illinois State Board of Education that describe program-specific services received by children. Establishing an unduplicated count in this area may not be possible with the use of existing administrative data only.

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<sup>1</sup> Illinois contracted with Northern Illinois University to address this topic.

### *Quality and Availability*

**FINDING:** Availability of ECCE has increased in recent years, but access to high-quality ECCE services is not uniform across Illinois because of challenges such as workforce issues and funding limitations. Focus group participants highlighted a need to provide more extensive training and preparation to teachers and staff who serve the children we have defined as vulnerable or underserved in order to expand access to quality ECCE services. Providers also expressed frustration with the system’s inability to attract and retain highly qualified staff because of lack of funding for teacher salaries. In addition, for children in rural areas, lack of transportation was identified as a major barrier to accessing high-quality ECCE services.

### *Gaps in Data or Research to Support Collaboration Between Programs/Services and Maximizing Parental Choice*

**FINDING:** Data or research on the outcomes and impact of programs and supports for families and children is needed. A review of existing needs assessments and related resources as well as focus group conversations with researchers, advocates, and policymakers support the hypothesis that there is a need for data on the outcomes and impact of programs and supports for families and children, particularly when it comes to specialized care such as health services, early intervention/special education services, or services for children who are English learners. In addition, details on specific programs and supports for families and children were limited in the existing needs assessments and related resources, with more emphasis placed on the prevalence of services as opposed to the quality of or demand for these services.

### *Quality and Availability of Programs and Supports*

**FINDING:** Details on the quality and availability of specific programs and supports were limited. Children who are vulnerable or underserved and children in rural areas were identified as groups with particularly limited access to resources. Focus group participants mentioned that children who are vulnerable or underserved and/or living in rural areas have limited access to specialized services such as special education services, trauma-informed services, and services for English learners. In addition, focus group participants identified workforce issues, language barriers, funding limitations, and lack of transportation as major challenges for children who need specialized care.

### *Measurable Indicators of Progress<sup>2</sup>*

**FINDING:** Challenges with the available data sources currently make the development and use of indicators of progress difficult. IECAM described three overall challenges that inhibited further development of the Illinois Early Childhood Dashboard. These challenges—funding and prioritization, data availability, and operational definitions of the metrics—are overlapping, resulting in an overall lack of clarity regarding measurable indicators of progress.

### *Facilities*

**FINDING:** The increased funding opportunities for ECCE facilities in 2019 demonstrate Illinois’s recognition that improved and expanded preschool facilities should be a priority for the state. Illinois received \$40.2 million in federal grants from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services targeted at early childhood infrastructure, specifically for building and expanding preschools in certain neighborhoods. This finding suggests that

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<sup>2</sup> Illinois contracted with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to address this topic.

future researchers explore the current state of Illinois’s ECCE facilities and gather data that will allow us to begin answering the questions dictated by the federal guidance.

#### *Barriers to Funding and Provision of High-Quality Early Childhood Care and Education*

**FINDING: Personnel is the major driving cost in ECCE.** Northern Illinois University conducted a cost model study to estimate how much it costs to fully fund a high-quality, comprehensive ECCE system. In their model, which uses parity in compensation across ECCE delivery models along with recommended group sizes, the per child cost is estimated between \$15,000–\$33,000.

#### *Transition Supports*

**FINDING: The transition from preschool to kindergarten was identified as being more straightforward than the transition into preschool from other settings. Continuity of care was identified as a need for this domain.** Transitions were found to be especially difficult for children moving from home visiting or home-based care into center- or school-based preschool. For children who are vulnerable or underserved, trauma-informed support that follows children as they transition between types of care (e.g., home- to center-based child care or preschool to kindergarten) was identified as a need. In addition, providers mentioned language barriers and work schedules as limitations for many families seeking transition support, particularly for those children who could be defined as vulnerable or underserved. For children in rural areas, the inconsistency of offerings was emphasized, and transportation was also identified as a barrier to effective transition.

#### *System Integration and Interagency Collaboration*

**FINDING: Several policies, practices, and structures remain that continue to hinder interagency collaboration. The greatest among these include ongoing data challenges.** Several practices are in place that reflect effective and supportive interagency collaboration supporting young children and families (e.g., the Illinois Early Learning Council, the Illinois Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development, ExceleRate Illinois, the interagency team, and the Illinois Longitudinal Data System). For these practices to spread to other areas, agencies, or sectors, the ongoing data challenges among and between agencies must be addressed.

## Next Steps

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*Illinois’s mission is to provide access to a continuous, equitable, and high-quality early childhood system enables children, with the support of their families and communities, to grow up safe, healthy, happy, and ready to succeed.*

”

–Illinois PDG B-5 Strategic Plan, 2020

Illinois has made strides in recent years to expand programs and services for young children and their families through its mixed-delivery system. The challenge—and opportunity—for the state moving forward is to identify and implement the action steps for ensuring equitable access to ECCE services within the context of Illinois’s complex mixed-delivery system.

This needs assessment aims to inform Illinois’s PDG B-5 strategic plan, which is intended to make actionable recommendations for advancing progress toward the state’s long-term goal: providing access to a continuous, equitable, and high-quality early childhood system that enables children, with the support of their families and communities, to grow up safe, healthy, happy, and ready to succeed.

## Acknowledgement

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