

# EVERY CHILD READY CHICAGO

## Initial Landscape Summary & Strategy Map

APRIL 2021





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This report was prepared by School Readiness Consulting. As a consulting firm focused exclusively on early childhood, SRC partners with cities, districts, states, foundations, and nonprofits to develop and implement systemwide strategies that improve outcomes for children in school and life. SRC believes that improving early childhood and affirming the right for all children to thrive represents the greatest opportunity to create a just society.

## THE OPPORTUNITY

**Children are born with great potential for development and learning.** The first five years are a time of rapid brain development, and this development is guided by each young child’s environment and experiences. The experiences that children have during the first five years have a profound impact on the architecture of the brain, which forms the foundation of all future development and learning.<sup>1</sup>

**Early childhood programs and services make a difference.**

Among other experiences, high-quality early childhood programs and services make a difference for young children. Children who participate are often more prepared to succeed in school, lead healthier lives, and contribute to creating stronger communities.<sup>2</sup> Research conducted by Nobel Laureate James Heckman demonstrated that high-quality birth-through-five programs for children experiencing poverty and related social factors can provide a return of \$6.30 in benefits on each \$1 invested, delivering a 13% per year return on investment over time.<sup>3</sup> Yet across our country, society and the systems that support it have often been shaped in ways that undermine access to positive and productive early childhood experiences, particularly for children of color. Racial segregation across communities—perpetuated by discriminatory and exclusionary policies around housing, education, and employment—and chronic underfunding of the early childhood system have systematically prevented children and families of color from reaching their full potential for learning, prosperity, and self-actualization and have kept high-quality early childhood experiences out of reach for many children.



## CHICAGO’S COMMITMENT TO YOUNG CHILDREN

Recognizing the importance and value of supporting young children and their families in the earliest years, Chicago has long been a national leader in providing and prioritizing high-quality early childhood learning experiences for young children and their families. The city’s long-standing focus on quality, commitment to a robust mixed-delivery system that serves children ages 0–5, and strong nonprofit and philanthropic partners set Chicago apart from many other cities. More recently, city leaders and other stakeholders have been working to strengthen the governance system to increase coordination, support quality improvement, and reduce barriers for families. This provides a unique and powerful platform from which to launch Every Child Ready Chicago.

### EVERY CHILD READY CHICAGO

Chicago’s early childhood system is at a critical moment. Over the last few years, there have been leadership and funding changes along with significant new initiatives. Meanwhile, the field continues to grapple with long-standing issues around access, program quality, workforce compensation, and equity. In recent months, the COVID-19 pandemic and our country’s reckoning with racial injustice have brought a new urgency to addressing these challenges. Recognizing the significance of this moment and the opportunity it presents to overcome the systemic barriers that have prevented Chicago’s young children and families from fully benefiting from early learning experiences, Mayor Lightfoot has advanced a new initiative that seeks to transform the city’s early childhood system: Every Child Ready Chicago.

Building on Chicago’s commitment to providing high-quality early learning experiences to young children and their families, Every Child Ready Chicago (ECRC) is a collective effort to align the city’s prenatal-to-five system under a unified vision and build the infrastructure needed so that all of Chicago’s young children enter kindergarten ready to learn. Led by the Mayor’s Office in partnership with Start Early, ECRC has brought together a large and diverse group of early childhood stakeholders (“Working Group”)—including program leaders, researchers, advocates, parents and families of young children, and city agencies—to articulate a shared vision for Chicago and develop a strategic plan aimed at creating a strong and equitable prenatal-to-five system that nurtures the success of all young children and their families. The Working Group was launched in the fall of 2020, and its nearly 50 members have met over the last six months to craft a vision, develop guiding values, and identify initial strategic areas to be addressed by a formalized advisory body (“Advisory Council”) that will launch in the summer of 2021.

## PURPOSE

Build a coherent prenatal-to-five system that provides equitable access to the supports and services families need

## PROCESS

Convene a working group in a series of meetings representing a broad base of stakeholders to (1) identify and build on existing efforts underway and (2) collectively identify strategic priorities

## GOAL

Co-design a strategic plan for implementation of a strong system that ensures equitable access to quality services and positive outcomes for all children

## VISION

Every child in Chicago can thrive within well-supported families, effective programs, and well-resourced communities so they grow strong, live joyful lives, and realize their greatest potential.

## VALUES

### EQUITY

Prioritizing resources for families who have been most impacted by systemic inequities to create the conditions in which child outcomes are no longer predicted by race, zip code, or other social factors

### DIVERSITY & INCLUSIVENESS

Ensuring that stakeholders across all roles, identities, and interests have a voice in decision-making

### TRANSFORMATION

Partnering with families and communities to reimagine a stronger, more equitable early childhood system that brings lasting change

### TRANSPARENCY

Building trust through communication and a clear decision-making process that prioritizes children and families

### ACCOUNTABILITY

Establishing clear roles, time-bound actions, and measurable benchmarks as evidence of progress to be shared with the community

# INITIAL LANDSCAPE AND STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

This initial landscape summary and strategy map is a summary of findings to share a high-level overview of the current early childhood landscape in the City of Chicago, including recent city developments and relevant state-level context, as well as lift up initial strategic priorities identified by the landscaping process. It is intended to provide a snapshot of some of the key elements of the early childhood system and initial strategic priorities to serve as a foundation from which to begin the strategic planning process. While this document does not capture every success and opportunity, or the full extent of the efforts that have been underway in the city, it is meant to serve as a starting place to build a collective understanding of the current conditions and to identify potential strategic opportunities to drive significant change for young children and families in the city.

This initial landscape analysis and strategy map is intended to summarize some of the key early childhood system elements and efforts in Chicago and the state as a starting place to inform strategic planning for ECRC. This analysis is based on the following:

- Documents and resources identified by the Mayor’s Office and Start Early
- Publicly available reports and data sources
- Feedback from Working Group members
- Stakeholder interviews

*Please also refer to the ECRC Strategy Map that is included in Appendix A for a visual overview of the potential strategic priorities for ECRC.*



# WHAT IS EARLY CHILDHOOD LIKE IN THE CITY?

To better understand what it takes to support families in raising healthy, thriving children in Chicago, it is important to have a clear picture of who they are and what community factors are at play. This requires a hard look not only at the strengths and assets of families and communities, but also at the significant barriers that fragmented and inequitable systems present.

THERE ARE

**193,068**

CHILDREN AGES 0-5 IN THE CITY OF CHICAGO<sup>4</sup>

↳ About **25%** of all children ages 0-5 that live in Illinois live in Chicago<sup>5</sup>



Data show the city is home to a rich diversity of young children and families across **race and ethnicity**...

Percent of Children 0-5 in Chicago by Race/Ethnicity<sup>7</sup>

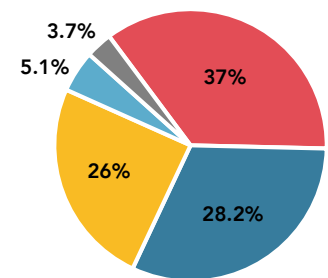
**37.0%** Latinx

**28.2%** Black

**26.0%** White

**5.1%** Asian

**3.7%** Other Race/Ethnicity



CHICAGO IS HOME TO...

**More than 1/3 of the Latinx children** ages 0-5 that live in the state

**Nearly 1/2 of the Black children** ages 0-5 that live in the state<sup>6</sup>



About **one-third** of Chicago residents speak a language other than English at home

**Spanish as the primary language spoken**

Additional languages spoken include Russian/Polish/Slavic languages, other Indo-European languages, and Chinese (including Mandarin and Cantonese).<sup>8</sup>

Parents and providers characterized their communities as **close-knit and family-oriented**.<sup>9</sup>

THEY ALSO IDENTIFIED SEVERAL KEY ASSETS IN THE CITY:



## TRANSPORTATION

Transportation systems were consistently identified as a strength, and most parents that responded to the parent survey indicated that they did not face any transportation barriers.



## PARKS

Parks were considered one of the more important features of a healthy community, and their role in providing a place for young children to freely explore was highly valued by child care providers.



## LIBRARIES

Providers noted that they had strong relationships with libraries: librarians visit providers to read, and providers encourage families to utilize the resources found at the library, such as laptops and assistance with job applications.

While assets exist and progress is being made to provide support, young children and families continue to face **significant barriers to health and well-being as a result of inequities embedded within the economic, health, education, and social systems.** This can result in persistent poverty, unstable housing, underemployment or unemployment, and lack of access to health care.

**25.5%** OF CHILDREN AGES 0-5 IN CHICAGO LIVE IN POVERTY

Young Black and Latinx children in Chicago are more likely to live in poverty than their White and Asian counterparts:

- ➔ **42.7%** of Black children ages 0-5 live in poverty
- ➔ **28.5%** of Latinx children ages 0-5 live in poverty<sup>10</sup>

THE MEDIAN INCOME IN CHICAGO IN 2019 WAS **\$58,247**

... which is less than the overall median income in IL of **\$69,212**<sup>11</sup>

**36 PERCENT** OF CHILDREN LIVE IN HOUSEHOLDS WITH A HIGH HOUSING COST BURDEN

It means **almost 1/3 of income is spent on rent, mortgage, or other related expenses**, which also means less to spend on other basic and child care needs.<sup>12</sup>

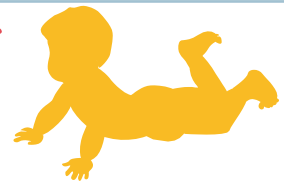
APPROXIMATELY **6,000** CHILDREN UNDER AGE 5 ARE WITHOUT HEALTH INSURANCE<sup>13</sup>



**ALMOST 40% OF WOMEN DO NOT RECEIVE ADEQUATE PRENATAL CARE**

- ➔ The rate of pregnancy-associated deaths is nearly six times higher for Black women in Chicago than their White counterparts, despite similar birth rates.<sup>14</sup>

**13 PERCENT** OF BABIES ARE BORN TOO EARLY<sup>15</sup>



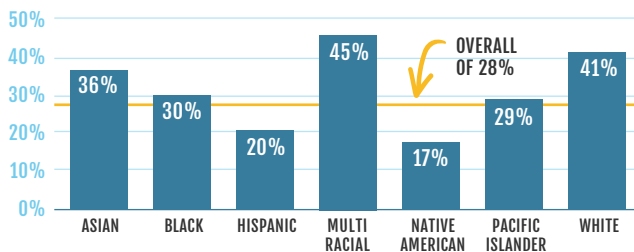
**9.5%** OF BABIES ARE BORN WITH LOW BIRTH WEIGHT<sup>16</sup>  
Both can potentially impact children's healthy growth and development.

THE INFANT MORTALITY RATE IN CHICAGO IS **7 per 1,000 births**<sup>17</sup>

The mortality rate for babies born to Black women is approximately three times as high as those born to White women.

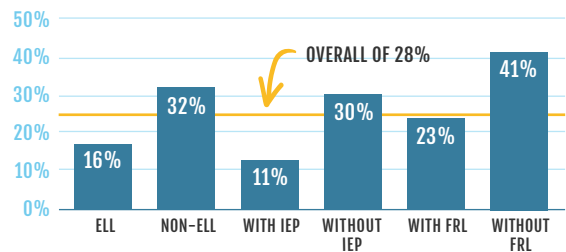
While gains are being made, **only 28% of children that entered kindergarten in 2019 were "ready for school."** Data show racial disparities exist for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous children, as well as gaps in outcomes for children who are dual language learners, children living in households with low income, and children who have individualized education programs (IEPs).

KINDERGARTEN READINESS BY RACE (CPS KIDS 2019-2020)



% of Children of Each Race Who Demonstrate Readiness in All 3 Areas

KINDERGARTEN READINESS BY ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER, IEP, & FREE & REDUCED LUNCH STATUS (CPS KIDS 2019-2020)



% of Children of Each Race Who Demonstrate Readiness in All 3 Areas

## WHAT CAN EVERY CHILD READY CHICAGO BUILD ON?

While Chicago's young children and families are facing ongoing barriers that impede their ability to thrive, there is much to build on within the city that could create change and lead to lasting positive outcomes. Chicago's early childhood system aims to provide comprehensive early learning and development opportunities to support young children and their families, beginning with the prenatal period and continuing through age five and kindergarten entry. This robust and diverse mixed-delivery early learning system is made up of a variety of programs and services that are administered at the state and local levels, including:

**Home visiting**

**Early Intervention  
(Part C)**



**Early Childhood Special  
Education (Part B)**

**Center-based  
child care**

**Family child  
care homes**

**Head Start**

**Early Head Start**

**Preschool for All**

**Prevention Initiative  
programs**



**School-based  
preschool**

**Health care and  
other supports**

*Please see the Chicago Early Childhood Systems Map developed by Start Early that is included in Appendix B for a detailed look at the early childhood system in Chicago.*



# CHICAGO INITIATIVES

Developing a comprehensive and coherent early childhood system that supports young children and their families has long been a focus in Chicago, and in recent years there have been significant efforts and developments aimed at strengthening this system from which ECRC can build. A snapshot of these developments is highlighted below.



## Efforts to Strengthen Governance and Changes to Funding Mechanisms

A shared governance structure between the Mayor’s Office, Chicago Public Schools (CPS), and the Chicago Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS) has been developed to support Chicago Early Learning—the umbrella for all early childhood programs offered by the city. There have been significant changes to how funding is allocated to Chicago Early Learning programs and agencies as well. In 2017 funding for school-based early childhood programs was consolidated within CPS, and funding for community-based early childhood programs was consolidated within DFSS. In 2019 DFSS issued an RFP that sought to strategically allocate state and federal dollars to support an expansion of community-based programs and improve quality. The Head Start re-competition may also significantly impact early childhood funding in the city.



## Preschool Expansion Efforts/UPK

An initiative by the city to expand preschool programs began in 2015. This initiative—known as universal pre-K or UPK—seeks to provide universal access to preschool for all 4-year-olds living in Chicago.



## Mayor’s Office Early Childhood Priorities

Mayor Lori Lightfoot was elected on April 2, 2019, and took office on May 20, 2019. Mayor Lightfoot’s Transition Committee released its [report](#) on May 17, 2019. The committee included a set of recommendations for the city’s early childhood system that included prior work that should continue or expand as well as short- and long-term priorities for the administration. These recommendations include efforts focused on expanding access to early childhood programs across the city’s mixed-delivery system, improving quality, strengthening the city’s early childhood workforce, expanding supports for families, and addressing disparities across the system. See Appendix C for the alignment of Mayor Lightfoot’s Transition Committee Report to other city and state strategic plans and agendas.



## CPS Five-Year Vision (2019-2024)

In 2019 CPS released its [Five-Year Vision](#), in which it identified three goals for early childhood: (1) Increase the number of kindergartners meeting benchmarks across all developmental domains by 50%; (2) 65% of second-grade students will be at or above national attainment for reading; and (3) 65% of second-grade students will be at or above national attainment for math. See Appendix C for the alignment of the CPS Five-Year Vision to other city and state strategic plans and agendas.



### Family Connects Chicago

The Family Connects Chicago program was launched in November 2019. This pilot program offers nurse home visits to all families in the weeks following the birth of a baby and, based on the family's needs, connects them to community resources. The Chicago Department of Public Health is piloting the program at four birth hospitals that serve families predominately from the West Side and South Side of the city. Family Connects is also an explicit strategy included in the [Healthy Chicago 2025 plan](#).



### Other Community-Based Initiatives

ECRC Working Group members have highlighted numerous community-based initiatives that are underway that strengthen the city's early childhood system. Some of these include the Early Childhood Workforce Partnership, the Early Childhood Data Launch Committee, and the Chicago Benchmarking Collaborative. There are undoubtedly others that will be surfaced through future landscaping efforts.

## STATE PROGRESS

There are changes and efforts underway at the state level that also have the potential to impact the city early learning landscape. Some of these efforts and developments include:



### Illinois Early Childhood Funding Commission

In December 2019 Governor Pritzker created the Illinois Early Childhood Funding Commission, which is charged with rethinking early childhood funding and governance to create a system that will create equitable access to high-quality programs and services for all young children in Illinois. The commission is tasked with making recommendations on funding goals, funding mechanisms, management, and oversight to create an equitable early childhood system in the state. The commission's recommendations were submitted to the governor in March 2021.



### PDG B-5 Grant and Illinois Statewide Strategic Plan

Illinois was awarded a one-year federal Preschool Development Birth through Five (PDG B-5) grant in January 2019. PDG B-5 funds were used to develop a statewide needs assessment and strategic plan. The [Illinois Statewide Strategic Plan](#) has 23 goals that are organized into four focus areas: (1) Access; (2) Coordination; (3) Quality; and (4) Workforce. The plan was finalized in February 2020. Illinois was awarded a three-year renewal grant in December 2019. See Appendix C for the alignment of the Statewide Strategic Plan to other city and state strategic plans and agendas.



### Illinois Prenatal to Three Policy Agenda

Start Early and the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development facilitated the launch of the Prenatal to Three (PN3) Initiative in the fall of 2019. The goal of PN3 is to improve access to high-quality services for Illinois infants and toddlers and their families. The [Illinois Prenatal to Three Policy Agenda](#) was published in February 2020 and has four focus areas: (1) Healthy Parents and Babies; (2) High-Quality Early Learning; (3) Economically Secure Families; and (4) Strong Infrastructure. See Appendix C for the alignment of the Illinois Prenatal-Three Policy Agenda to other city and state strategic plans and agendas.



## STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

An analysis of the initiatives and efforts noted above, combined with feedback gathered from Working Group members and stakeholder interviews, point to six initial strategic priority areas in which there are existing strengths and opportunities that can be leveraged, as well as gaps that should be addressed as ECRC seeks to achieve its vision that:

**Every child in Chicago can thrive within well-supported families, effective programs, and well-resourced communities so they grow strong, live joyful lives, and realize their greatest potential.**

These insights can serve as an initial foundation to be explored and refined through additional information and feedback and can inform the strategic planning process going forward.

The six priority areas span multiple levels of the early childhood system to strengthen both programmatic aspects and the infrastructure that supports these programs so that every young child and their family benefits from high-quality early learning and development programs that center their unique needs, values, and preferences.



# ACCESS

*Refers to whether early childhood programs and services are accessible, available at a reasonable cost, and using reasonable effort*

## WHY IT MATTERS

When children have healthy, safe, and positive experiences during their early years, they have some of the most important building blocks for long-term well-being and success. In order to create these conditions, families need and deserve access to a range of early childhood services during the prenatal-to-five years that are culturally relevant, meet their needs and preferences, and are equitably allocated and available.

## EFFORTS TO BUILD ON

In recent years Chicago has worked to develop new approaches to outreach, recruitment, enrollment, and attendance as a key strategy to increasing access to early childhood programs in the city. One example of this is the [Chicago Early Learning Portal and Preschool Application](#), an online resource through which families can explore and enroll in Chicago Early Learning programs. Continuing to invest in recruitment, enrollment, and attendance efforts and developing new models to serve priority populations is also identified as a priority in [Mayor Lightfoot's Transition Report \(2019\)](#).

Another major focus of the city has been expanding access to achieve universal preschool for children ages three to five, a collaborative effort that was launched several years ago and is continuing to be rolled out in phases across the city. Key resources focused on this effort include [Mayor Lightfoot's Transition Committee Report \(2019\)](#), the [CPS Five-Year Vision \(2019–2024\)](#), [Chicago's Roadmap for Implementing Universal Pre-K \(2019\)](#), and [Closer to Home: More Equitable Pre-K Access and Enrollment in Chicago \(2020\)](#). Ensuring equitable access to preschool programs is also identified as a priority in the [Illinois Statewide Strategic Plan \(2020\)](#).

At the same time, the city has taken steps to expand access to prenatal-to-three supports to address the significant gaps that exist in families' access to these services. These steps include launching the [Family Connects Chicago](#) pilot for Chicago families with newborns at several Chicago hospitals and funding an additional 200 Early Head Start slots in the city. Further, increasing access to perinatal supports, home visiting, early intervention, and infant and toddler care is identified in the [Illinois Statewide Strategic Plan \(2020\)](#) and in the [Illinois Prenatal to Three Policy Agenda](#).

**54.9% of children ages 3-5 years & 10.5% of children ages 0-2 years**

**... living in families at or below 200% FPL are enrolled in a Chicago Early Learning program**

*Source: 2019 data from the [DFSS/Chapin Hall Early Care and Education Programs: Supply and Demand website](#)*





## LEARN MORE TOGETHER

In April 2021, ECRC Working Group members had the opportunity to participate in a Shared Learning Journey regarding the **Illinois Prenatal to Three Initiative** to help ensure Working Group members have a shared knowledge and understanding of PN3 and begin to explore how PN3 can inform the ECRC visioning process and strategic plan. Materials and notes from the PN3 Shared Learning Journey will be available on the Every Child Ready Chicago website.

## GAPS TO ADDRESS

As Chicago works to expand equitable access to the early childhood system, stakeholders have identified specific gaps that impact families' abilities to access programs and supports throughout the prenatal-to-five years. Inconsistent messaging and fatigue are real challenges that must be addressed. Continuing to improve communication and explore new and different engagement approaches to connect with families and communities is vital as the city continues to grapple with the impacts of COVID-19 on children, families, and providers and their capacity to seek information or engage. Communication platforms that have been used during COVID-19 (e.g., Zoom, Facebook) may present an opportunity to foster more dialogue; however, with the use of virtual approaches, the digital divide and how that impacts access to information must also be considered.

“How are we going to change our approach and actually build a system where the expectation is that every kid in our city goes to a high-quality early childhood program, every parent knows that that’s their right, that that’s an opportunity they have, and they know how to get into them and that it’s an easy process to get into them?”

– Working Group Member

In addition, city and state stakeholders continue to call for equitable access to prenatal-to-five programs and supports and for targeting expansion efforts to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) families and communities that have long faced systemic barriers to accessing these services. [Chicago’s Roadmap for Implementing Universal Pre-K \(2019\)](#) calls for a phased-in implementation of universal preschool that prioritizes expanding access in areas with more children and families living in poverty, which also have facility capacity to expand, while the [Illinois Statewide Strategic Plan \(2020\)](#) includes eliminating racial and ethnic disparities in early childhood services, and the [CPS Five-Year Vision \(2019–2024\)](#) includes strengthening every school’s system for providing educational equity.

“There was some really good work done to reallocate full day pre-k classrooms to high priority [areas], that we can see from the research. It’s not clear that the needs of the Latinx community have been as well addressed. It really seems like that community is being left behind, and that’s a really big concern. I think we also know that we are not doing everything we can to reach the most vulnerable, what we would describe as the priority populations, children experiencing homelessness, children who are involved in the child welfare system.”

– Working Group Member

## POTENTIAL STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

As Chicago works to ensure that all young children and their families have equitable access to the early childhood system, potential strategic directions to consider include:

### Connecting with families ...

- Expand culturally and linguistically responsive outreach to families to further support BIPOC communities in accessing early childhood supports
- Improve and broaden citywide communication about early childhood programs and initiatives (e.g., public awareness campaigns)
- Increase resources to trusted local organizations within communities to support families as they navigate the early childhood system
- Explore new and different approaches to connect with families and communities—including expanding the use of virtual platforms as leveraged during the COVID-19 pandemic

### Expanding programs to meet families' needs ...

- Increase understanding of the supply of early childhood programs (e.g., where they are located, who is providing services, and which families are participating) as the city experiences shifts due to the COVID-19 pandemic, faces changes in the allocation of major funding mechanisms, and seeks to provide services in communities that have been historically underserved
- Increase availability of affordable preschool programming that meets families' diverse needs and builds on universal pre-K (UPK) efforts
- Expand prenatal-to-three supports—including perinatal supports, home visiting, early intervention, and infant and toddler child care

### Addressing barriers families face when seeking early childhood programs ...

- Increase guidance and support for using existing online and in-person resources to enroll in early childhood programming
- Improve alignment of eligibility requirements and coordination of enrollment and referral processes across the full early childhood system
- Ensure equitable access by addressing disparities in enrollment and participation across race, language, and ability
- Address structural barriers families face to participation in early childhood programming (e.g., transportation, hours of operation, etc.)





## QUALITY

*Refers to the extent to which an early learning environment promotes the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development of young children while responding to the needs of families*

### WHY IT MATTERS

Across the programs and services that make up the early childhood system, quality standards are defined in a variety of ways. While definitions of quality may vary, its importance does not as the quality of early childhood programs, services, and supports determines the degree to which young children and their families benefit. Further, conceptions of quality, as well as accountability for high-quality service delivery, must fully recognize of the impacts of programming on children and families across racial, linguistic, and cultural groups. Early childhood services cannot be considered “high-quality” without a clear emphasis on providing an experience that is free of bias and attuned to the nuances of race, language, and culture as these factors create the context for all of children’s development and learning.

### EFFORTS TO BUILD ON

In Chicago and in the state, quality improvement efforts are focused on refining existing standards and enhancing supports for a range of early childhood providers. For example, in 2019 DFSS released an RFP that aimed to improve quality standards for programs in the city. In addition, [Mayor Lightfoot’s Transition Report \(2019\)](#) includes developing consensus on high-quality standards for all birth-to-age-five providers and expanding supports to meet them as a priority, while the [Chicago Early Learning Standards \(CELS 2.0\)](#), developed in 2020, provides guidance on program expectations for all Chicago Early Learning programs funded by the City

“Definitely making certain that it’s important that you fully understand the Illinois Learning Guidelines and Standards [and use of previous CPS Kindergarten Readiness Tool] because when you understand what those standards look like, in terms of preparing your environment to make certain that your early learning setting is a strong pipeline to the Kindergarten classroom.”

– Early Childhood Provider

of Chicago, regardless of funding stream. At the state level, the [Illinois Statewide Strategic Plan](#) includes “Modify QRIS Standards and Strengthen Support Systems” and “Improve the Quality of Home-Based Child Care Settings” as goals, and the Early Learning Council includes a Quality Committee (which itself has an ExceleRate Subcommittee). Finally, IFF’s [Access and Quality for Illinois Children: Illinois Early Childhood Education Needs Assessment \(2019\)](#) examines access to quality early childhood education across the state, including in Chicago, and Working Group members have indicated that the city is working with IFF on developing quality facilities.

## GAPS TO ADDRESS

As Chicago focuses on improving quality, there are several gaps identified by stakeholders that should be considered. There is a continued need to increase opportunities for culturally and linguistically responsive programming that reflects the strength and diversity of the city’s youngest learners and their families. [Mayor Lightfoot’s Transition Report \(2019\)](#) recommends adding “dual-language programs and educators with early childhood expertise,” while [CPS’s Five-Year Vision \(2019–2024\)](#) includes strengthening supports for English learners.<sup>18</sup> Working Group members have also suggested developing a racial and social justice framework to guide these efforts.

Working Group members have also pointed to gaps regarding the provision of early childhood special education and early intervention services in the city. State-level plans also include this as a focus. For example, the [Illinois Statewide Strategic Plan](#) includes providing timely early intervention and early childhood special education services, and the [Illinois Prenatal to Three Policy Agenda](#) calls for “optimized Early Intervention.”

“Importance of cultural and linguistic responsiveness across programs and initiatives. A vision that does not only hinge on promoting children’s readiness, but places programs and schools that are ready to support ALL children’s development and learning at the center.”

– Working Group Member

“I would love to have more support ... and I know other schools would as well ... from a mental health consultant and more family support specialists. Because if we do not tackle and address or nurture the families that are experiencing the frequent crisis, sometimes it’s just a revolving door. But when they’re paired with that support system ... that’s what moves our academic needle. Because once I’ve helped my parents achieve short term goals ... the sky’s the limit.”

– Early Childhood Provider



**LEARN MORE TOGETHER**

Working Group members will have the opportunity as part of the ECRC strategic planning process to participate in a Shared Learning Journey on **Special Education and Early Intervention**.



In addition, stakeholders are calling for an expansion of mental health supports and other comprehensive services. Both city and state stakeholders had identified expanding mental health and social supports as a priority prior to March 2020. For example, [Mayor Lightfoot’s Transition Report \(2019\)](#) includes expanding mental health consultation, trauma training, and social support for families as a priority, while the [Illinois Statewide Strategic Plan](#) includes expanding early childhood mental health efforts. These needs have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and Working Group members have noted the urgent need to expand mental health and social-emotional supports to mitigate the significant mental health and social-emotional impacts children, families, communities, and providers have experienced as a result of the pandemic.

## POTENTIAL STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

As Chicago continues its long-standing focus on providing high-quality early childhood programs and services throughout the prenatal-to-five continuum, potential strategic directions to consider include:

### Defining and supporting quality ...

- Develop consensus on how “quality” is defined, with families being central to co-creating this collaborative definition
- Increase alignment of high-quality program standards and requirements for all prenatal-to-five providers
- Expand existing quality improvement efforts—including leveraging the statewide quality recognition and improvement system (ExceleRate), increasing support for facilities, etc.
- Improve quality supports directed toward home-based child care and family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) settings

### Ensuring children receive equitable opportunities to grow and learn ...

- Strengthen authentic engagement of families in programming, advocacy, and leadership to fully support their children’s health, well-being, and learning
- Increase opportunities for culturally and linguistically responsive programming to best support dual language learners (DLLs) and children with diverse cultural experiences and strengths
- Increase support for children with special needs—from improving providers’ capacity to support children in an inclusive environment to strengthening the provision of early intervention and early childhood special education services
- Increase capacity and availability of social-emotional supports and mental health services, including expanding infant and early childhood mental health consultation
- Expand use of trauma-informed care and anti-bias practices—particularly as children of color in the city face the ongoing impacts of systemic racism and as families experience the more recent impact of the COVID-19 pandemic



# WORKFORCE

*Refers to the broad range of individuals engaged in the care and education of young children—and the supports that ensure these individuals’ preparation, training, compensation, and well-being*

## WHY IT MATTERS

Among the most powerful predictors of early childhood outcomes are the characteristics and professional preparation of the adults who interact with young children and families across the system. For the workforce to be effective in driving high-quality service provision and strong child outcomes, it must be diverse, fully prepared, and adequately and equitably compensated.

## EFFORTS TO BUILD ON

Chicago has recognized the need to support the early childhood workforce as part of a strong and equitable early childhood system, and there are efforts underway by city stakeholders to expand and strengthen the workforce. For example, the city has worked to increase financial supports to assist the current and future early childhood workforce in obtaining advanced credentials by creating [Chicago Early Learning Workforce Scholarships](#). These scholarships, which are available at several local higher education institutions, aim to support the current and future Chicago Early Learning workforce as they pursue coursework to earn a credential, degree, endorsement, or licensure to work with young children and families. Such efforts continue to be called for by the city and the state: [Mayor Lightfoot’s Transition Report \(2019\)](#) includes the recommendation to maintain and expand City College and university scholarships for early childhood educators, and the [Illinois Statewide Strategic Plan](#) includes the provision of higher education supports.

The city has also begun to address significant shortages in the early childhood workforce by creating the [Early Childhood Workforce Partnership](#). This effort, launched in 2020, includes more than 20 early childhood employers that have agreed

“We’ve had all these various workforce efforts statewide to think about how do we get people into the workforce, but people are leaving ... and they’re being dissuaded from entering the early childhood workforce. So at some point we really just sit down and talk to teachers and find out, ‘What is your real experience? What could we do to make your life easier? What could we do to actually make this job doable, and appealing, and attractive, and something you want to do as a career?’ Because I think we’re coming up on the very real situation that a lot of our current early childhood workforce, the ones who did make it a career are getting close to wanting to retire. And, frankly COVID may push them. So, we don’t have a backlog. We don’t have a group B in the wings. We’re going to look at ourselves sitting around with a whole bunch of classrooms with nobody at the head.”

– Working Group Member



to partner to elevate the early childhood profession; attract and retain more educators; implement systemic strategies that enhance job quality, educator development, and fair compensation; and increase the impact and sustainability of organizations across the sector.

There are also efforts underway at the state level to strengthen systems of support and coordination between higher education and the early childhood system. The Illinois Board of Higher Education is currently working through a strategic planning process that includes early childhood as a focus area. Further, Senate Bill 1832 is currently being considered by the Illinois state legislature; this bill would enable community colleges to grant bachelor's degrees in early childhood education.



**LEARN MORE  
TOGETHER**

Working Group members will have the opportunity as part of the ECRC strategic planning process to participate in a Shared Learning Journey on the **Early Childhood Workforce Partnership**.

## GAPS TO ADDRESS

While Chicago is taking important steps to expand and strengthen its early childhood workforce, stakeholders also point to additional gaps that should be addressed. First, ensuring that early childhood educators and providers receive equitable compensation that properly values their work and helps create and sustain the early childhood workforce pipeline is critical. While the city has begun efforts to increase teacher compensation—for example, through the DFSS RFP released in 2019 and the DFSS learning agenda as referenced in the DFSS 2019–2020 Self-Assessment Report and Action Plan—the fact remains that “most early childhood educators are women of color, and too often their work has been undervalued and underpaid.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, city and state stakeholders continue to call for efforts to ensure the early childhood workforce is equitably compensated: [Mayor Lightfoot’s Transition Report \(2019\)](#) includes the recommendation to “eliminate discrepancies in benefits and salary for early childhood educators,” and increasing compensation for the early childhood workforce is included in the [Illinois Statewide Strategic Plan](#).



Second, efforts to address racial, ethnic, and linguistic disparities within the early childhood workforce and increasing the diversity of the workforce overall must be prioritized. This is vital to ensuring that the early childhood workforce is part of an equitable professional system that reflects the diversity of the young children and families being served. For example, [Bellwether Education Partners' Early Childhood Education Workforce Partnership report \(2019\)](#) notes that Latinx and bilingual educators are underrepresented in senior roles in Chicago. Addressing these disparities is also a priority at the state level: the [Illinois Statewide Strategic Plan](#) includes eliminating workforce racial and ethnic disparities. With respect to increasing the diversity of the workforce, [Mayor Lightfoot's Transition Report \(2019\)](#) recommends prioritizing the cultivation of bilingual and bicultural community members into the early childhood workforce, while the [Illinois Statewide Strategic Plan](#) includes strengthening the workforce to better support the development of children who are culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse. Working Group members have also noted the need to create alternative pathways for credentials to ensure that educators of color and educators who have been in the field for many years are not pushed out. The launch of [Teach Chicago Tomorrow](#), a recent initiative of the Mayor's Office and Chicago Public Schools to build a new pipeline of talented, diverse teachers by creating a structured pathway with intensive supports for CPS graduates who want to be educators, presents an opportunity to increase the diversity of the early childhood workforce.

“Definitely making certain that the pay ... in terms of pay parity is equitable. We know early learning facilities versus Chicago Public Schools, that looks very, very different ... They're the very same classrooms, same criteria, but the pay parities looks very, very different. The teachers in early learning community-based schools need to have it too. I think it's a birthright that they should have health benefits afforded to them in early learning facilities. But lots of times they're not if your school doesn't have blended funding. Making certain that the blended funding is in place so that the school can offer the teacher vacation time. Just the same opportunities that's afforded in our Chicago Public Schools ... those same rights should be afforded to the community partner space. So it can prevent the teachers from going into a burnout state or having to compromise, 'I can't take time off from work, because if I do, I can't pay my rent.' So, that's why [blended funding streams] are so important. That's definitely a big support.”

– Early Childhood Provider

Third, both city and state stakeholders have called for a more robust system of training and professional development that can increase the capacity of the workforce to meet the racial, cultural, linguistic, and developmental needs of children and families. In the city, Working Group members and other stakeholders have cited a lack of infrastructure for high-quality professional development and noted a specific need for educators to have training or supports for behavioral health and trauma. At the state level, the [Illinois Statewide Strategic Plan](#) includes expanding professional development as a goal. Chicago stakeholders have also identified specific gaps in educator credentials and training programs that should be addressed, such as educators who hold special education or dual language credentials. Further, the [Bellwether Education Partners report \(2019\)](#) notes there is a shortage of alternative early childhood and early childhood special education programs and a shortage of infant, toddler, and family support and early childhood director credential-granting programs.

“We have a particular need for educators who have dual language credentials, special education credentials, who are trained and have the supports for behavioral health and trauma.”

– Working Group Member

## POTENTIAL STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

As Chicago works to ensure the city has a dynamic and diverse workforce that is well prepared and equitably compensated, potential strategic directions to consider include:

### Ensuring a diverse and well-prepared workforce ...

- Improve recruitment, participation, and support for navigating higher education systems (e.g., articulation between two-year and four-year college)
- Increase the diversity of the early childhood workforce—including prioritizing BIPOC professionals in leadership positions and cultivation of bilingual community members into the workforce
- Advance alternative pathways to support professionals who have historically been denied access through traditional degree paths (e.g., expanding programs embedded in or linked to high school programs, “grow your own” initiatives, etc.)
- Expand financial assistance and scholarships to earn a credential, degree, endorsement, or licensure to work with young children and families

### Supporting and retaining early childhood professionals ...

- Increase access to professional development opportunities—including addressing barriers to participation (e.g., cost, location, etc.)
- Strengthen the capacity of the workforce across all early childhood settings to support racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse children and families
- Expand training for providers to enhance their knowledge and competencies in high-need topic areas, such as infant and toddler care, special education, trauma-informed practice, mental health consultation, and social supports for families
- Increase compensation to ensure adequate and equitable salary and benefits for early childhood professionals

# LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING

*Refers to the organizational structure and the coordination of authority and accountability for making program, policy, financing, and implementation decisions*

## WHY IT MATTERS

The city's ability to provide collaborative leadership and make timely and conscientious decisions about its early childhood system is critical to the success of young children, their families, and providers. This necessitates leadership and decision-making processes that benefit from diverse perspectives and create strong linkages among decision-makers across the city as well as between the city and state.

## EFFORTS TO BUILD ON

Chicago has worked in recent years to foster increased leadership capacity and improve coordination in the city, most notably by developing a shared governance structure between the Mayor's Office, CPS, and DFSS. Stakeholders have noted the importance of a shared philosophy of partnership among key stakeholders in the city, especially given the city's role as a funder. At the program level, strengthening program governance systems is identified as a goal in the DFSS 2019–2020 Self-Assessment Report and Action Plan.

Stakeholders have also noted the importance of partnering with families, providers, and community members in decision-making and improvement efforts throughout the early childhood system. Working Group members have pointed to specific examples within the early childhood system that can serve as models for engaging families in decision-making, such as Head Start Citywide Parent Policy Council, Health Services Advisory Committee, and Family Connects Advisory Council.



“Foster democratic participation and equity through community-driven decision-making. Bridge the divide between community and governance.”

– Working Group Member

“If I was writing the plan for the Chicago early childhood system, what would be the most important? My most important thing would be to make certain that families are at the table ... a variety of families ... families from a variety of communities ... and to make certain that systems are in place that have an up close, personal effect on them.”

– Early Childhood Provider

“We need to regularly test and check our assumptions, beliefs and ideas with stakeholders who will be most affected if our recommendations were implemented. Our values are being upheld if those stakeholders report that our recommendations would improve the part of the system that touches them directly.”

- Working Group Member



“It’s like we bring them [families and providers] to the table as representation and more to educate them so to speak, or to share ideas with them. And then we ask what they think and when they tell us what they think – it isn’t always received in a way that is being used. So how do you get the end user to the table ... and let them lead the discussion?”

- Early Childhood Provider

## GAPS TO ADDRESS

While important efforts have been made to advance a more coordinated approach to leadership and engage families in decision-making in the city, stakeholders have noted that there are additional opportunities that should be considered. Working Group members have emphasized the need to improve coordination and alignment between the city and the state to ensure that various initiatives and efforts underway in the city are being intentionally considered and coordinated with efforts underway at the state level. For example, there are numerous plans, agendas,



and initiatives underway in the state that should be considered in connection with ECRC—in addition to aligning various efforts being undertaken within the city. An initial snapshot of key state- and city-level strategic plans identified by Working Group members have been included in Appendix C. Other initiatives that have been named include:

- [Chicago Board of Education Early Childhood Committee](#)
- [Governor’s Early Childhood Funding Commission](#)
- [Preschool Development Grant](#)
- [MIECHV Expansion](#)
- [Illinois Bilingual Advisory Committee](#)
- [INCCRRA Professional Development Advisory Committee](#)
- New state-level Family Advisory Committee

Improving coordination has been identified as a priority at the state level as well: the [Illinois Statewide Strategic Plan](#) includes defining an infrastructure for comprehensive systems-building efforts and strengthening program coordination as a priority area.

Working Group members have also pointed to the following as gaps to address or opportunities to explore: the importance of addressing and centering racial equity in leadership of the early childhood system; the need to consider how continuity in city leadership influences (or can hinder) progress over time; and the need to engage the city council (and other citywide leaders) in supporting the city’s prenatal-to-five system.

## POTENTIAL STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

As Chicago works to advance a more coordinated approach to leadership and decision-making, potential strategic directions to consider include:

### **Improve leadership across the full prenatal-to-five system ...**

- Strengthen cross-system coordination between city-level agencies to meet strategic priorities for advancing the early childhood system
- Increase connections and alignment between state- and city-level early childhood efforts
- Examine the role of city leadership in ensuring diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) across the early childhood system (e.g., dedicated staff focused on DEI as an umbrella to early childhood work in the city)

### **Meaningfully engage key stakeholders in decision-making ...**

- Establish an ongoing advisory body to ensure a broad range of stakeholders are engaged in implementation, decision-making, and accountability of the early childhood system
- Ensure representation and meaningful participation of families as central to informing future directions for the early childhood system
- Determine and clearly communicate plans for accountability with system implementation and for child and family outcomes





## FUNDING

*Refers to funding mechanisms and approaches that support early childhood services*

### WHY IT MATTERS

Channeling adequate and equitable funding into the early childhood system is vital to achieving positive and sustainable outcomes for young children and their families, as well as for the educators and providers supporting them across the prenatal-to-five continuum. Identifying, securing, and maintaining funding is needed to address strategic priorities such as access, quality, and workforce, as well as to create the infrastructure needed to pursue these priorities.

### EFFORTS TO BUILD ON

In Chicago various and complex funding streams support the prenatal-to-five early childhood system, as demonstrated by the Chicago Early Childhood Systems Map included as Appendix B. In recent years, efforts have been made to restructure and reallocate early childhood funding in the city—for example, in 2017 the city consolidated funding for school-based programs within CPS and consolidated funding for community-based programs within DFSS. Further, [Mayor Lightfoot’s Transition Report \(2019\)](#) included restructuring and simplifying community-based organizations’ funding streams as a short-term priority, and in 2019 DFSS released an RFP that restructured and overall increased the funding allocated to community-based organizations.

Efforts have also been made to expand the use of blending federal and state dollars to improve program quality. For example, the 2019 DFSS RFP prioritized blending of federal and state dollars to fund early learning at the level necessary to deliver quality.

## GAPS TO ADDRESS

Developing a strong early childhood system that provides equitable access to the supports and services families need requires resources. While efforts to streamline and fully leverage available funds are underway, stakeholders have identified several additional challenges and opportunities to consider regarding funding. Stakeholders have noted that equitably allocating funds and resources is paramount. Ensuring equitable funding and developing equitable funding mechanisms have been identified in existing strategic plans, agendas, and efforts, including [Mayor Lightfoot’s Transition Report \(2019\)](#), the [Governor’s Early Childhood Funding Commission](#), and the [Illinois Statewide Strategic Plan](#).

“The sad reality is that we are living in communities where segregation has played a huge and a compounding factor on resources – tangible or intangible – available in at-risk underserved, and divested communities. And to that end, it plays a role in terms of many providers being able to provide the quality of care that they can provide. They are faced with a lot of high turnover, hiring teachers at a much cheaper rate, living in communities where they’re fraught with high violence and the lack of resources that may exist in other well-funded communities.”

– Early Childhood Provider

Working Group members have also noted the importance of linking systems change to sustainable funding and the need to prepare for potential significant changes in state and federal funding in the next few years. The Head Start re-competition as well as the federal American Rescue Plan funds could impact funding in the city and change the early childhood landscape overall. Working Group members have also noted that federal investments are becoming increasingly important and that there is a need to take a comprehensive approach to allocating new federal dollars across the prenatal-to-five system—including developing infrastructure and investing in programs beyond child care, such as IDEA and home visiting.

At the state level, the [Governor’s Early Childhood Funding Commission](#) has finalized its recommendations, which include centralizing the early childhood funding system and distributing funding in new ways to ensure equitable access to high-quality early childhood education and care services for all children prenatal to age five in the state.

Finally, there may be a need to identify additional state funding to support the cost of quality and facilities development as efforts are made to expand access and improve quality. According to [IFF’s Access and Quality for Illinois Children: Illinois Early Childhood Education Needs Assessment \(2019\)](#), Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) reimbursements do not meet the actual cost of care, and providers need access to additional funding to allow for facilities development and expansion.

“But I think the most important thing is we are actually able to articulate how the funding is being used and where it’s going, and to what communities? Because we know that there is still real disparity between communities. We also know there’s real disparity between age groups.”

– Working Group Member



## POTENTIAL STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

As the city seeks to provide the resources necessary to build a coherent and equitable prenatal-to-five system, potential strategic directions to consider include:

### **Fully resource the early childhood system ...**

- Leverage use of COVID-19 relief funds to address more immediate needs—including support for child care and other essential child and family services
- Maximize existing dollars by creating efficiencies where possible (e.g., restructuring and simplifying funding streams, supporting braiding and blending of funds)
- Engage philanthropy and business leaders to increase investments to strengthen and spur innovation in early childhood programming
- Expand funding with new dollars to support system priorities that will increase access, improve quality, advance equity, and ensure sustainability
- Determine the true cost of funding a high-quality early childhood system that will achieve the vision of ECRC

# DATA AND RESEARCH

*Refers to the collection, use, and sharing of information (data) among key stakeholders in the system and/or the in-depth analysis of an issue, event, entity or process related to the early childhood system*

## WHY IT MATTERS

The availability and quality of data—and its effective use—are essential to determining whether Chicago is fulfilling its commitment to creating an equitable early childhood system that ensures that every child in the city can meet their full potential. Alongside data, continuing and expanding inclusive research efforts is an important element in advancing a more equitable early childhood system infused with best practices that are culturally relevant to its beneficiaries.

## EFFORTS TO BUILD ON

Chicago benefits from a variety of early childhood data sources. Examples of online data sources include:

- [DFSS/Chapin Hall Young Children in Chicago](#): Online data resource maintained by DFSS and the University of Chicago that has specific demographic data for young children.
- [DFSS/Chapin Hall Early Care and Education Programs Supply and Demand](#): Online data resource maintained by DFSS and the University of Chicago that has specific Chicago Early Learning data.
- [Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map \(IECAM\)](#): Online data system maintained by the University of Illinois that provides data on demographics, access, and quality for the early childhood system.
- [Cook County Child Care Data, Cook County Census Data, and Chicago Community Area Profiles](#): These are regular data reports available on the Illinois Action for Children website.
- The [Chicago Community Data Portal](#) includes neighborhood-level data on education, health, and economic security.

There are existing structures and efforts underway in the city that are focused on improving the use of data, including the Chicago Benchmarking Collaborative (CBC), a collaboration of education and human services agencies that make data-informed program improvements and improve outcomes for the individuals and families they serve. Working Group members have also highlighted the Chicago Early Childhood Data Infrastructure Launch Committee and the new cloud-based early childhood data warehouse as an important recent effort and opportunity—so long as there are guardrails to prevent misuse and ensure accountability.



The recently enacted Education and Workforce Equity Act (HB 2170), signed by Governor Pritzker in March 2021, is also an important advancement in data systems as it establishes Illinois’s annual kindergarten readiness assessment (known as KIDS) in state law and provides requirements that state education and human services agencies must follow regarding data governance and organization to support equity and racial justice.



## LEARN MORE TOGETHER

Working Group members will have the opportunity as part of the ECRC strategic planning process to participate in a Shared Learning Journey on the **Data Repository and Research Consortium**.

### GAPS TO ADDRESS

While there are important data and research efforts underway, stakeholders point to several gaps in these efforts that should be addressed. There is a need to collect and use data more transparently and effectively, particularly in identifying and addressing existing inequities. Specifically, Working Group members have identified a need for more disaggregated data, more community-level data, more up-to-date data, and more transparency about what happens after data is collected. Other city and state stakeholders have made similar calls: [Mayor Lightfoot's Transition Report \(2019\)](#) includes the recommendation to continue/expand “using high-quality assessments and data with a focus on addressing disparities”; the [Illinois Statewide Strategic Plan](#) includes improving data usage; and the [CPS Five-Year Vision \(2019–2024\)](#) includes creating student assessment systems to guide teaching. Working Group members have also highlighted the need to consider the impact that COVID has had on the quality of data and current understanding of the early childhood system.

The use of kindergarten readiness data is a potential area to explore as well, as there are different benchmarks and measures used to understand and assess kindergarten readiness in the city. DFSS uses the Teaching Strategies Gold (TSG) Online Assessment System to track children's development in six categories prior to kindergarten entry. CPS uses the state's [Kindergarten Individual Development Survey \(KIDS\)](#) to assess the developmental readiness of children entering kindergarten.

With respect to research, stakeholders have noted a need to advance ongoing early childhood research in ways that are more inclusive and equitable. Working Group members have discussed the opportunities that exist to expand upon current research and include people, communities, and practices that have been excluded in formalized research structures. They have also noted the importance of distinguishing the purpose and goals of research and evaluation and how these efforts can be used in ways that help identify needs and focus on improvement.

“We don't have data. And there's not transparency about data. Enrollment data, we don't have it. We don't have anything disaggregated by race, language, etc.”

– Working Group Member



“Evaluation is a critical element for early childhood programs. The historical gains of early childhood programs have come from high quality, comprehensive programming with access to other forms of support for families experiencing adversity. There is ample evidence to serve as a model.”

– Working Group Member

“It may be important to ratify that the actions and strategies attached to the values are informed by current knowledge about children’s development and parenting. However, it is important that this knowledge should intentionally incorporate the research of a variety of voices, particularly academic voices that problematize dominant discourses, and address unbalanced power dynamics in how new knowledge is built and shared.”

– Working Group Member

## POTENTIAL STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

As the city works to continue to advance early childhood data and research efforts, potential strategic directions to consider include:

### Support data-driven decision-making ...

- Increase the availability of higher-quality and more coordinated early childhood data—including conducting a crosswalk to inventory existing data and define new data that may be needed to advance the early childhood system
- Strengthen the use of community-level and disaggregated data to address disparities and advance equity
- Advance the use of culturally and linguistically appropriate child and program assessments to improve instruction and service delivery and to address disparities, leading to more equitable outcomes
- Increase training, technical assistance, and other supports around data literacy to build capacity of stakeholders to use data to drive continuous improvement and decision-making
- Improve the transparency of data and make it more accessible to stakeholders to monitor progress of the early childhood system and outcomes of children and families

### Advance the use of research and evaluation ...

- Develop a collaborative research agenda that builds on foundational early childhood research and seeks to answer the city’s most pressing questions
- Secure funding to implement the research agenda and broadly communicate findings with families, early childhood stakeholders, and communities

# MOVING FORWARD

The findings presented in this landscape analysis and strategy map point to strategic directions that the ECRC Working Group and forthcoming Advisory Council can consider as they develop and implement a strategic plan. It can also serve as a starting point for the subcommittees established by the Advisory Council as they work to develop a comprehensive landscaping of strategic priority areas.

## POTENTIAL STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

Looking ahead, the Working Group will have the opportunity to participate in three Shared Learning Journeys over the next several months.

- **Wednesday, May 12** – Early Childhood Workforce Partnership Shared Learning Journey
- **Week of May 24** – Special Education and Early Intervention Shared Learning Journey
- **Week of June 7** – Data Repository and Research Consortium Shared Learning Journey

## CONTINUE BUILDING ON THE LANDSCAPE

Efforts to continue developing the landscape can continue as needed. Working Group members throughout the process have highlighted the importance of the following actions to build upon the landscape and inform the strategic planning process:

- **Community Connections:** Engaging a diverse representation of families, providers, and community leaders—beyond Working Group members—to inform the strategic planning process (e.g., interviews, focus groups, community conversations, and town halls)
- **Data Dive:** Diving deeper into data (e.g., access to programs, workforce, funding)
- **Citywide Alignment:** Learning about and establishing connections to other citywide efforts to inform strategic actions for ECRC and guide ongoing implementation (e.g., continuing Shared Learning Journeys)
- **State Impact:** Strengthening their understanding of how current state context impacts citywide efforts and work of ECRC (e.g., the Illinois Statewide Strategic Plan and Governor’s Early Childhood Funding Commission)
- **Learning from Others:** Identifying best practices from other states and jurisdictions (e.g., via reviewing national reports, reading state and local briefs, and inviting speakers to give virtual presentations)

## ESTABLISH ADVISORY COUNCIL

The Advisory Council will be established starting in June. It will be formed based on the initial strategic priorities identified for ECRC and will be tasked both with driving strategic plan development and with implementation of the initiative.

## DEVELOP STRATEGIC PLAN

The Advisory Council will work to refine strategic priorities and ultimately develop a strategic plan that will identify strategies, action steps, measures of success, timelines, and key partners. This plan will guide efforts to develop a strong prenatal-to-five system that ensures equitable access to quality services and positive outcomes for all children.

## KEY ELEMENTS OF THE STRATEGIC PLAN



**VISION:** Guiding image of success as defined by the contribution to those represented or served



**VALUES:** Moral compass that drives efforts and decision-making toward the vision – “what do you stand for”



**PRIORITY AREAS:** Broad statements that describe the intended results or direction for efforts



**STRATEGIES & ACTION STEPS:** Specific activities that must take place to achieve set priorities



**MEASURES OF SUCCESS:** Key indicators that can be used to measure, drive decision-making, and communicate impact



**TIMELINE:** Clear time frames when activities must take place



**KEY PARTNERS:** Stakeholders identified who need to be at the table to bring the vision to life

*Descriptions adapted from [Denver Preschool Program Strategic Plan](#)*

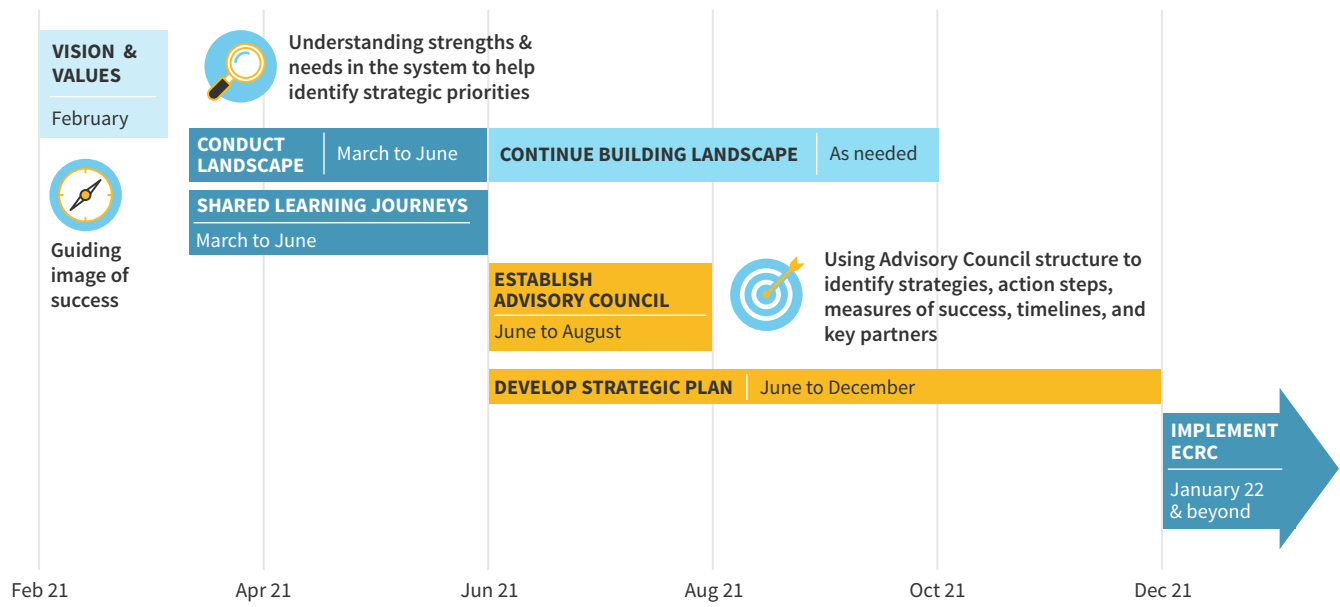
## IMPLEMENT ECRC

Beyond developing a strategic plan, the Advisory Council will also support the implementation, coordination, accountability, and communication for the strategic plan. It will ensure ongoing engagement and collaboration with the city’s diverse early childhood stakeholders and provide a direct line of communication to the Mayor’s Office and city agencies. Further, the Advisory Council will inform and elevate policies and programs aimed at systems improvement and act as a sounding board for new and innovative ideas.





# ECRC Strategic Planning Process



Overall, the strategic plan and the establishment of a citywide Advisory Council represent significant steps forward for ECRC and the city’s prenatal-to-five system. Through this important work, the city will have a plan and structure in place to advance the work of building a strong and coherent childhood system that ensures equitable access to quality services and positive outcomes for all children. And with the ongoing commitment and dedication of the city’s early childhood educators, providers, leaders, and champions, working hand-in-hand with Chicago’s families, ECRC can achieve its vision where *every child in Chicago will grow strong, live joyful lives, and realize their greatest potential.*



# EVERY CHILD READY CHICAGO STRATEGY MAP

April 2021

## VISION

Every child in Chicago can thrive within well-supported families, effective programs, and well-resourced communities so they grow strong, live joyful lives, and realize their greatest potential

## VALUES

### EQUITY

Prioritizing resources for families who have been most impacted by systemic inequities to create the conditions in which child outcomes are no longer predicted by race, zip code, or other social factors

### DIVERSITY & INCLUSIVENESS

Ensuring that stakeholders across all roles, identities, and interests have a voice in decision-making

### TRANSFORMATION

Partnering with families and communities to reimagine a stronger, more equitable early childhood system that brings lasting change

### TRANSPARENCY

Building trust through communication and a clear decision-making process that prioritizes children and families

### ACCOUNTABILITY

Establishing clear roles, time-bound actions, and measurable benchmarks as evidence of progress to be shared with the community

## CONSIDERATIONS

### ACCESS

How to best to connect with families?

- Expand culturally and linguistically responsive outreach to families to further support BIPOC communities in accessing early childhood supports
- Improve and broaden citywide communication about early childhood programs and initiatives (e.g., public awareness campaigns)
- Increase resources to trusted, local organizations within communities to support families as they navigate the early childhood system
- Explore new and different approaches to connect with families and communities—including expanding the use of virtual platforms as leveraged during the COVID-19 pandemic

What must be done to expand programs to meet families' needs?

- Increase understanding of the supply of early childhood programs (e.g., where they are located, who is providing services, and which families are participating) as the city experiences shifts due to the COVID-19 pandemic, faces changes in the allocation of major funding mechanisms, and seeks to provide services in communities that have been historically underserved
- Increase availability of affordable preschool programming that meets families' diverse needs and builds on universal pre-K (UPK) efforts
- Expand prenatal-to-three supports—including perinatal supports, home visiting, early intervention, and infant and toddler child care

What barriers are families facing when seeking early childhood programs?

- Increase guidance and support for using existing online and in-person resources to enroll in early childhood programming
- Improve alignment of eligibility requirements and coordination of enrollment and referral processes across the full early childhood system
- Ensure equitable access by addressing disparities in enrollment and participation across race, language, and ability
- Address structural barriers families face to participation in early childhood programming (e.g., transportation, hours of operation, etc.)

### QUALITY

How can quality be defined and further supported?

- Develop consensus on how “quality” is defined, with families being central to co-creating this collaborative definition
- Increase alignment of high-quality program standards and requirements for all prenatal-to-five providers
- Expand existing quality improvement efforts—including leveraging the statewide quality recognition and improvement system (ExceleRate), increasing support for facilities, etc.
- Improve quality supports directed toward home-based child care and family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) settings

## CONSIDERATIONS

## POTENTIAL STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

### QUALITY CONT.

How to ensure children receive equitable opportunities to grow and learn?

- Strengthen authentic engagement of families in programming, advocacy, and leadership to fully support their children’s health, well-being, and learning
- Increase opportunities for culturally and linguistically responsive programming to best support dual language learners (DLLs) and children with diverse cultural experiences and strengths
- Increase support for children with special needs—from improving providers’ capacity to support children in an inclusive environment to strengthening the provision of early intervention and early childhood special education services
- Increase capacity and availability of social-emotional supports and mental health services, including expanding infant and early childhood mental health consultation
- Expand use of trauma-informed care and anti-bias practices—particularly as children of color in the city face the ongoing impacts of systemic racism and as families experience the more recent impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

### WORKFORCE

What is needed to ensure a diverse and well-prepared workforce?

- Improve recruitment, participation, and support for navigating higher education systems (e.g., matriculation between two-year and four-year college)
- Increase the diversity of the early childhood workforce—including prioritizing BIPOC professionals in leadership positions and cultivation of bilingual community members into the workforce
- Advance alternative pathways to support professionals who have historically been denied access through traditional degree paths (e.g., expanding programs embedded in or linked to high school programs, “grow your own” initiatives, etc.)
- Expand financial assistance and scholarships to earn a credential, degree, endorsement, or licensure to work with young children and families

How are early childhood professionals best supported and retained?

- Increase access to professional development opportunities—including addressing barriers to participation (e.g., cost, location, etc.)
- Strengthen the capacity of the workforce across all early childhood settings to support racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse children and families
- Expand training for providers to enhance their knowledge and competencies in high-need topic areas, such as infant and toddler care, special education, trauma-informed practice, mental health consultation, and social supports for families
- Increase compensation to ensure adequate and equitable salary and benefits for early childhood professionals

### LEADERSHIP & DECISION-MAKING

How to improve leadership across the full prenatal-to-five system?

- Strengthen cross-system coordination between city-level agencies to meet strategic priorities for advancing the early childhood system
- Increase connections and alignment between state- and city-level early childhood efforts
- Examine the role of city leadership in ensuring diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) across the early childhood system (e.g., dedicated staff focused on DEI as an umbrella to early childhood work in the city)

What is needed to meaningfully engage key stakeholders in decision-making?

- Establish an ongoing advisory body to ensure a broad range of stakeholders are engaged in implementation, decision-making, and monitoring progress of the early childhood system
- Ensure representation and meaningful participation of families as central to informing future directions for the early childhood system
- Determine and clearly communicate plans for accountability with system implementation and for child and family outcomes

### FUNDING

What is needed to fully resource the early childhood system?

- Leverage use of COVID-19 relief funds to address more immediate needs—including support for child care and other essential child and family services
- Maximize existing dollars by creating efficiencies where possible (e.g., restructuring and simplifying funding streams, supporting braiding and blending of funds)
- Engage philanthropy and business leaders to increase investments to strengthen and spur innovation in early childhood programming
- Expand funding with new dollars to support system priorities that will increase access, improve quality, advance equity, and ensure sustainability
- Determine the true cost of funding a high-quality early childhood system that will achieve the vision of ECRC

## CONSIDERATIONS

## POTENTIAL STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

### DATA & RESEARCH

What is needed to support data-driven decision-making?

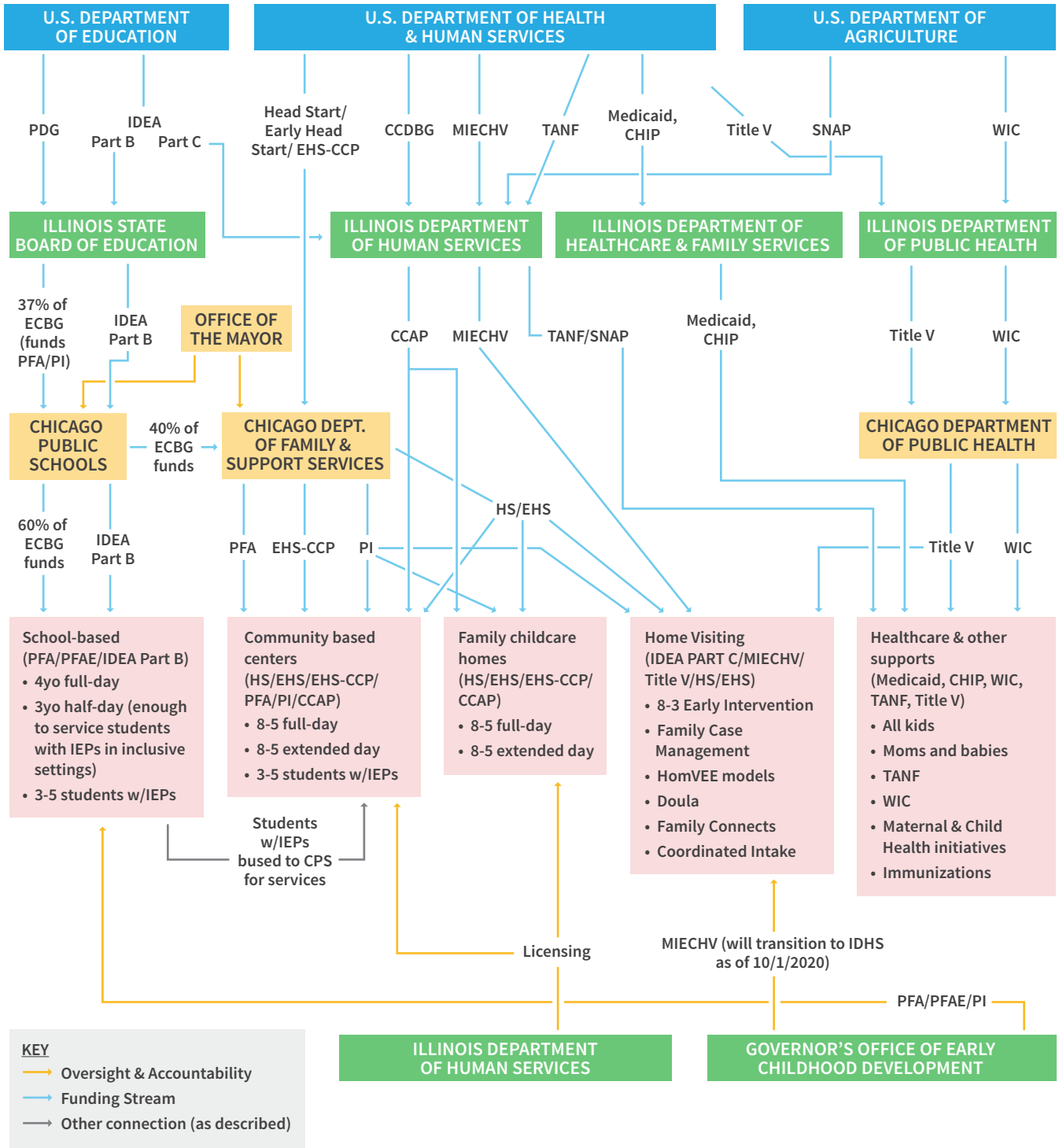
- Increase the availability of higher-quality and more coordinated early childhood data—including conducting a crosswalk to inventory existing data and define new data that may be needed to advance the early childhood system
- Strengthen the use of community-level and disaggregated data to address disparities and advance equity
- Advance the use of culturally and linguistically appropriate child and program assessments to improve instruction and service delivery and to address disparities, leading to more equitable outcomes
- Increase training, technical assistance, and other supports around data literacy to build capacity of stakeholders to use data to drive continuous improvement and decision-making
- Improve the transparency of data and make it more accessible to stakeholders to monitor progress of the early childhood system and outcomes of children and families

How to best advance the use of research and evaluation?

- Develop a collaborative research agenda that builds on foundational early childhood research and seeks to answer the city's most pressing questions
- Secure funding to implement the research agenda and develop communication strategies to effectively share findings with families, early childhood stakeholders, and communities

# Appendix B: Early Childhood Systems Map (Developed by Start Early)

## CHICAGO EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS MAP



## Appendix C: ERC Strategic Plan Snapshot

# Strategic Plan Snapshot

The following charts provide a snapshot of how the proposed priority areas align to existing strategies and efforts

Priority Areas	Focus of Strategies	IL Statewide Strategic Plan	IL PN3 Policy Agenda	CPS 5-Year Vision and Plan	DFSS Self-Assessment Report and Action Plan	Mayor's Transition Committee Recommendations
ACCESS	<b>Expand Supply and Reduce Barriers in Access to....</b> <i>Preventative Health Care</i>	Provide Access to Preventative Health Care (Goal 1 - Expanding Equitable Access to ECE Services)				
	<i>Perinatal Supports</i>	Expand Newborn Supports for All Births (Goal 2 - Expanding Equitable Access to ECE Services)	Comprehensive Perinatal Supports (Goal 1 - Healthy Parents and Babies)			
	<i>Home Visiting</i>	Expand Home Visiting (Goal 3 - Expanding Equitable Access to ECE Services)	Strengthened Home Visiting System (Goal 1 - Healthy Parents and Babies)			
	<i>Infant and Toddler Care</i>	Ensure Affordable Infant and Toddler Care (Goal 4 - Expanding Equitable Access to ECE Services)	Accessible Family & Center-Based Care and Learning (Goal 2 - High Quality Early Learning)			
	<i>Preschool Programs</i>	Ensure Affordable Preschool Early Childhood Programs (Goal 5 - Expanding Equitable Access to ECE Services)		Provide Universal Full-Day Pre-Kindergarten / Open More than 500 New Prekindergarten Classrooms		Operationalize Commitment to Universal Preschool While Maintaining Mixed-Delivery System (Continue or Expand)
	<i>Early Intervention &amp; Early Childhood Special Education</i>	Provide Timely Early Intervention Services (Goal 6 - Expanding Equitable Access to ECE Services)	Optimized Early Intervention (Goal 2 - High Quality Early Learning)			
		Provide Timely Special Education Services (Goal 7 - Expanding Equitable Access to ECE Services)				
	<i>Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health</i>	Expand Early Childhood Mental Health Efforts				Expand Mental Health Consultation, Trauma Training and Social Support for Families (First 100 days)
	<b>Ensure Equity in Access</b>	Eliminate Racial/Ethnic Disparities in ECCE Services (Goal 9 - Expanding Equitable Access to ECE Services)			Strengthen Every School's System for Providing Educational Equity	Consider Models for Serving Priority Populations in the Settings in Which They Enroll (First 100 days)
	<b>Strengthen Coordinated Eligibility &amp; Enrollment</b>					Fund Recruitment, Enrollment, and Attendance Efforts for the 2019-2020 School Year, Removing Barriers in Ways that are Responsive to Families and Communities (First 100 days)
<b>Boost Family Work &amp; Economic Support</b>			Family-Friendly Work Policies (Goal 3 - Economically Secure Families)			
			Income Supports for Families (Goal 3 - Economically Secure Families)			

Priority Areas	Focus of Strategies	IL Statewide Strategic Plan	IL PN3 Policy Agenda	CPS 5-Year Vision and Plan	DFSS Self-Assessment Report and Action Plan	Mayor's Transition Committee Recommendations
QUALITY	Strengthen Early Childhood Program Quality	Modify QRIS Standards and Strengthen Support Systems (Goal 14 - Quality)				Develop Consensus on High-Quality Standards for All Birth-Five Providers; Expand Supports to Meet Them (First 100 days)
		Improve the Quality of Home-Based Child Care Settings (Goal 15 - Quality)				
	Enhance Learning and Development	Expand Use of the Pyramid Model (Goal 17- Quality)		Design a Rigorous Pre-K-12 Curriculum that is Uniquely Chicago's	Implementing Continuity of Relationships Across All CEL Infant/Toddler Programs	
	Improve Early Intervention		Optimized Early Intervention (Goal 2 - High Quality Early Learning)			
	Ensure Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Care			Strengthen Supports for English Learners		Add More Dual-Language Programs and Educators with Early Childhood Expertise (Do over time)
	Increase Family Partnerships	Increase Family Engagement (Goal 8 - Expanding Equitable Access to ECE Services)				

Priority Areas	Focus of Strategies	IL Statewide Strategic Plan	IL PN3 Policy Agenda	CPS 5-Year Vision and Plan	DFSS Self-Assessment Report and Action Plan	Mayor's Transition Committee Recommendations	
WORKFORCE	Increase Compensation	Increase Compensation for ECCE Workforce (Goal 18 - Workforce)			Increasing Teacher Credential Requirements and Compensation	Eliminate Discrepancies in Benefits and Salary for Early Childhood Educators (Do over time)	
	Expand Professional Learning Opportunities	Expand Professional Development (Goal 20 - Workforce)	Cross-System Preparation, Professional Development & Supports (Goal 4 - Strong Infrastructure)				
		Provide Higher Education Supports (Goal 22 - Workforce)				Maintain and Expand City College and University Scholarships for Early Childhood Educators (Continue or expand)	
	Improve Well-being Supports				Reducing Family Service Worker Caseloads and Increasing FSW Credential Requirements		
	Ensure Diversity of Workforce	Strengthen Workforce to Better Support the Development of Children Who Are Culturally, Racially, and Linguistically Diverse (Goal 23 - Workforce)					Prioritize Cultivation of Bilingual and Bicultural Community Members into the Workforce (First 100 days)
		Eliminate Workforce Racial and Ethnic Disparities (Goal 19 - Workforce)					

Priority Areas	Focus of Strategies	IL Statewide Strategic Plan	IL PN3 Policy Agenda	CPS 5-Year Vision and Plan	DFSS Self-Assessment Report and Action Plan	Mayor's Transition Committee Recommendations
LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING	Strengthen Infrastructure	Define an Infrastructure to Implement Comprehensive Systems-Building Efforts (Goal 11 - Coordination)	Strong State and Community Structures (Goal 4 - Strong Infrastructure)			Fully Implement a Birth-to-Age-Five Strategy, Including Driving Investment in Prenatal, Postpartum, Birth-Through-Age-Three, Preschool, and Kindergarten Services (Do over time)
	Improve Coordination	Strengthen Program Coordination (Goal 12 - Coordination)				

Priority Areas	Focus of Strategies	IL Statewide Strategic Plan	IL PN3 Policy Agenda	CPS 5-Year Vision and Plan	DFSS Self-Assessment Report and Action Plan	Mayor's Transition Committee Recommendations
FUNDING	Ensure Efficient Use of Funding	Implement an Improved Funding Mechanism (Goal 13 - Quality)				Restructure and Simplify CBO Funding Streams (First 100 days)

Priority Areas	Focus of Strategies	IL Statewide Strategic Plan	IL PN3 Policy Agenda	CPS 5-Year Vision and Plan	DFSS Self-Assessment Report and Action Plan	Mayor's Transition Committee Recommendations
DATA AND RESEARCH	Improve Data Usage and Decision-making	Improve Data Usage (Goal 10 - Coordination)		Create Student Assessment Systems to Guide Teaching		Continue Using High-Quality Assessments and Data with a Focus on Addressing Disparities (Continue or expand)
		Restructure and Integrate Workforce Data System (Goal 21 - Workforce)				



## Appendix D: Documents Reviewed

Mayor Lightfoot's Transition Committee Report (Mayor's Office)

Chicago's Roadmap for Implementing Universal Pre-K (CPS/DFSS/Chicago Early Learning)

Chicago Community Needs Assessment (DFSS)

CPS Five-Year Vision (2019–2024) (CPS)

Children Services Division 2018–2019 Annual Report (DFSS)

2019–2020 Self-Assessment Report and Action Plan (DFSS)

Chicago Early Learning Standards Manual 2.0 (DFSS)

Children Services Division Information for RFP (DFSS)

Early Learning RFP Process Assessment (DFSS)

Healthy Chicago 2025 (CDPH)

Early Childhood Education Workforce Partnership report (Bellwether Education Partners)

ECRC 2020 Early Childhood Basic Landscape Information (Start Early)

Chicago Early Childhood Systems Map (Start Early)

Illinois Prenatal to Three Policy Agenda (Start Early)

2019–2020 Illinois KIDS Report and Data (ISBE)

Illinois Statewide Strategic Plan (OECD)

Illinois Maternal Morbidity and Mortality Report (IDPH)

Access and Quality for Illinois Children: Illinois Early Childhood Education Needs Assessment (IFF)

Various Chicago Early Learning, CPS, and DFSS websites

Various online data sources (e.g., Chapin Hall, IECAM)

## ENDNOTES

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