



Chicago Early Childhood Research Consortium

Exploratory Report

MARCH 2021



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Executive Summary

In support of the Every Child Ready Chicago initiative, Start Early has begun to explore the creation of a Chicago early childhood research consortium that would bring together researchers, policymakers, practitioners, families, and community representatives across sectors in a robust, long-term research-practice partnership focused on helping Chicago achieve its vision for a strong early childhood system.

Critical to the success of early childhood, and any other systems-building initiatives, is access to evidence and data that are relevant, actionable, and timely to guide the decisions of policymakers and program leaders. For an early childhood system as large and ambitious as Chicago, no one research partner or institution alone has everything that is required to achieve these goals. Chicago already benefits from several research consortia, but none focus specifically on supporting the early childhood system in Chicago.

This report presents the findings of the initial phase of exploration regarding the creation of a Chicago early childhood research consortium. Between October 2020 and January 2021, we conducted stakeholder interviews with 26 participants from 16 different organizations. Interviewees included researchers, advocates, practitioners, leaders of community-based organizations, Chicago City officials and staff, and other experts selected based on their current work, relationships, and areas of expertise. Each interview focused on:

- Gaps in the current landscape: Do we need a new consortium?
- What should be the role and functions of a consortium?
- How should a consortium be structured and where should it be housed?
- Anticipated barriers or challenges in creating a consortium?
- Other advice, suggestions, and recommendations?

Recommendations

Based on these exploratory interviews, five clear recommendations emerged regarding the creation, scope, and function of a Chicago early childhood research consortium.

1. **Create a Chicago early childhood research consortium** to serve as a long-term, sustainable research partnership focused exclusively on Chicago's cross-sector, system-wide early childhood priorities.
2. **The research consortium should:**

- Create guidelines and processes based on principles of equitable research and evaluation to **ensure that all projects, activities, and methods are centered in equity**.
- **Ensure that research is accessible, relevant, timely, and useful** in supporting decision-making and improvement of early childhood systems, policies, and programs.
- **Facilitate the logistics** of engaging in early childhood research in Chicago, including data sharing, funding, disseminating findings, etc.
- **Bring transparency and coordination** among the various early childhood research studies, partnerships, and initiatives happening across agencies, stakeholders, and research institutions.
- **Convene diverse partners and stakeholders**, including researchers, City agencies, community leaders, early childhood providers, and parents to guide strategy regarding topics such as research questions, methods, interpretation of findings, and dissemination.
- **Build and maintain connections to related state-wide research efforts** as a pilot model that can be refined and replicated in other Illinois communities.

3. The research consortium should not:

- **Be responsible for collecting or managing administrative or accountability data**, or collecting data on behalf of any monitoring entities.
- **Build or manage “real-time” data dashboards** or descriptive analyses for City agencies or early childhood providers
- **Advocate** for particular policies, programs, or funding

4. The research consortium should function as:

- **A neutral third-party** without allegiance to, or conflicts of interest with, any City agency, office, or department.
- **A trusted thought-partner and capacity support** for City agencies, offices, and departments, as well as community and systems leaders.
- **A “hub” for researchers** across institutions and disciplines.
- **An integrated complement** to existing and emerging infrastructure, systems, consortia, and partnerships; it should not duplicate or replace them.

5. The research consortium should be housed within an existing institution outside of City government that has robust infrastructure and a trusted reputation within the Chicago early childhood field.

Strategic Questions

The exploratory interviews also helped to specify a set of important strategic questions.

1. **What is the specific purpose—including vision, agenda, and “endgame”—of the Chicago early childhood research consortium?**
2. **What specific benefits would the research consortium offer to affiliates, partners, collaborators, and participants?**
3. **How can City agencies, offices, and departments engage with the research consortium most effectively?**
 - What benefits will they gain by engaging with the research consortium?
 - Does the City currently have the capacity to engage as it would hope to?
4. **How should the research consortium leverage, align, or coordinate with ongoing key initiatives in Chicago and statewide in Illinois in ways that can be mutually supportive?**
 - Every Child Ready Chicago (ECRC)
 - Chicago Early Childhood Data Infrastructure Project
 - Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC)
5. **Should the consortium be the holder of a master data sharing agreement with one or more City agencies in order to house and manage these data?**
 - If not, it would instead provide language and templates for partners to put data sharing agreements in place.
6. **Should the research consortium inform the design and data collection processes for “real-time” data dashboards or descriptive analyses for City agencies and/or early childhood providers?**
7. **What types of research findings, and under what guidelines, would the research consortium publish and disseminate?**
8. **How would the research consortium engage with advocates and advocacy organizations?**
9. **Where should the research consortium be housed to ensure success and sustainability (vis a vis funding, political climate, etc.)?**
 - What are the criteria for an institutional home for the research consortium?
10. **How should the research consortium be structured and staffed?**
 - What capacities and expertise must exist within the research consortium staff itself?
 - What capacities and expertise should partners contribute?
 - What capacities and expertise should steering or advisory bodies contribute?

Proposed Next Steps

To continue to move this work forward, we propose the following next steps.

1. **Share this report** with interviewees and more widely throughout Chicago's early childhood community to continue to socialize the idea of the research consortium and catalyze continued conversation.
 - **Connect with ongoing key initiatives** such as Every Child Ready Chicago and the Chicago Early Childhood Data Infrastructure Project in Chicago, and Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC) and the Education Systems Center statewide, to discuss how efforts should be aligned or coordinated.
2. **Explore more formal, inclusive structures** to guide and advance the research consortium.
 - **Hold an exploratory meeting** as a continuation of, and opportunity to build upon, the exploratory interview process described in this report.
 - **Form a steering committee** of approximately eight members, including City agency representatives, research, advocacy groups, and funders to guide the planning stages.
 - **Continue and build upon the 2017 Early Learning Research Symposium** convened by the Mayor's Office to continue to bring together Chicago's early childhood researchers.
3. **Gather additional information** to inform the research consortium.
 - **Conduct a landscaping analysis** to identify every university and research institution currently doing relevant research in Chicago.
 - **Connect with those leading similar consortia** in other places (e.g., [New York City Early Childhood Research Network](#) and [Oregon School Readiness Research Consortium](#)) to learn from and with them about creating an early childhood research consortium in Chicago.
 - **Utilize existing structures to connect with parents and providers** to illuminate both their direct experiences with early childhood systems as well as "hidden" issues within communities that impact families.

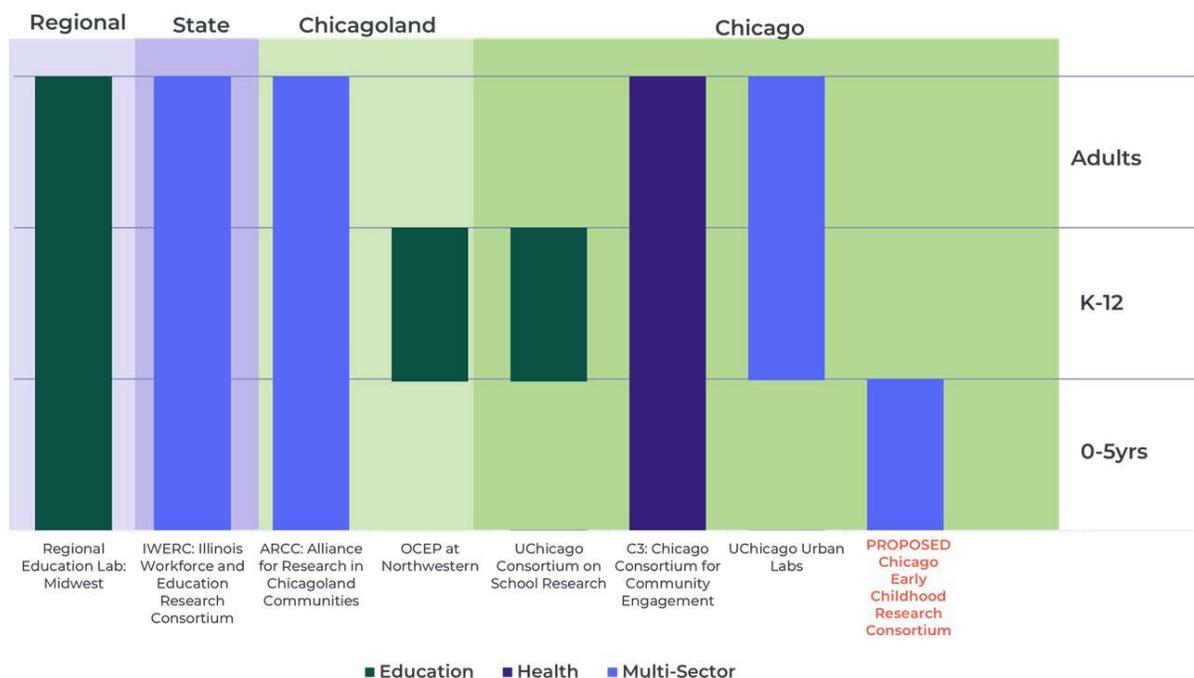
Introduction

Critical to the success of early childhood, and any other, systems-building initiatives is access to evidence and data that are relevant, actionable, and timely to guide the decisions of policymakers and program leaders. Research-practice partnerships (RPPs) have become increasingly common across the country to address this need. RPPs offer a unique solution for cities and states to strengthen and align their internal and external research and evaluation capacity in order to produce the data and evidence they need to implement high-quality, equitable programs and policies.

For an early childhood system as large and ambitious as Chicago, it is unlikely that any one research partner or institution alone has everything that is required to achieve these goals. Thus, to successfully build this capacity for Chicago, it is most likely necessary to create a long-term and collaborative cross-institution *consortium* that uses intentional partnership strategies to build mutually-beneficial, trusting relationships in order to address the City's most pressing practice and policy decisions. Similar cross-institutional early childhood research consortia already exist in [New York City](#) and [Oregon](#).

Chicago already benefits from several research consortia, but none focus specifically on supporting the early childhood system in Chicago (see Figure 1). Within the early childhood space, the City already partners with many of Chicago's leading researchers, but there is not yet a mechanism for coordinating across these efforts. In June 2017, the City of Chicago brought

FIGURE 1. There is no existing research partnership or consortium focused specifically on early childhood (ages 0-5) in Chicago.



together researchers engaged in active research in partnership with the City for an Early Learning Research Symposium. This was an important first step in identifying and convening Chicago's strong community of early learning researchers. But a one-time—or even more regular—conference-style convening is not enough to support the City to achieve its vision for a high-quality, integrated, and equitable early childhood system.

Current Landscape and Opportunity

Now is the time to fill this critical gap. At the state level, Illinois is currently focused on expanding data and research infrastructure and capacity, including launching the new [Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative \(IWERC\)](#). In addition, The City of Chicago is currently engaged in two sweeping initiatives aimed at creating new connections, more cohesion, more equitable opportunities, and higher quality services within the early childhood landscape.

At the heart of this work, **Every Child Ready Chicago (ECRC)** is a public-private partnership led by the City of Chicago in partnership with Start Early (formerly the Ounce of Prevention Fund) working to create a coordinated, cross-sector early childhood system, beginning with prenatal care and extending into preschool to ensure all children in Chicago enter kindergarten ready to succeed. ECRC launched in fall of 2020 by bringing together leaders from early childhood programs and services, the research and advocacy communities, parents and families of young children, and city agencies to create a shared vision of success for the city's system for its young children and their families. This Early Childhood Working Group will guide the City and inform the development and implementation of a multi-year strategic plan to build the systems infrastructure needed to create a high-quality, equitable early childhood system. A key strategy of Every Child Ready Chicago is to anchor programs and policy solutions in research.

Second, the **Chicago Early Childhood Data Infrastructure Project** was launched in 2019 in recognition that as Chicago's early childhood ecosystem grows in reach and complexity, Chicago's existing data system was insufficient to catalyze collective action and make smarter, more equitable policy decisions. The Mayor's Office, in partnership with the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, launched a national RFP process that identified Third Sector Intelligence (3Si) and local partner, Chapin Hall, to make recommendations for improving the city's early childhood data infrastructure. The Chicago Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS), with continued support from the McCormick Foundation and additional support from Crown Family Philanthropies, responded to their recommendations by partnering with an external advisory group ("Launch Committee") to create a comprehensive blueprint for a data warehouse. The first version of the data warehouse was built at DFSS by late fall 2020, using cloud-based technology that allows for expansion and integration in ways that could merge and share data across agencies and organizations once the data governance is in place to support access while protecting confidential information. Chicago Public Schools has also begun to identify ways to make their internal early childhood data systems more efficient and shareable with the data warehouse. Ongoing work includes building this data governance to allow for equitable *use* of the data across early childhood stakeholders in Chicago.

At the same time, several major shifts are underway in the Chicago early childhood landscape. First, a new universal postpartum home visiting program, Family Connects Chicago, was launched recently (in November 2019). Second, Chicago's Head Start super-grant (currently managed by DFSS) was recompeteted by the federal Office of Head Start in late 2020. This recompetition has created a great deal of uncertainty about the future allocation and oversight of Head Start funding across grantees, and raises important questions about the logistics and politics of continuing to aggregate Head Start data citywide. Third, Chicago Public Schools continues to rapidly expand the availability of full-day pre-k for four-year-olds toward universal access. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused substantial declines in early care and education enrollment system-wide, and has limited families' use of healthcare and other services as well. We do not yet know how these shifts may interact with one another to cause "ripple effects" in the early childhood system overall.

This shifting early childhood landscape, together with a renewed focus on enhancing the reach, quality, equity, and integration of the prenatal-to-fives system will undoubtedly raise critically important empirical questions that research has not yet answered. Current efforts to improve data infrastructure at the state and city levels will make it possible for RPPs to answer these questions. Thus the time is ripe to expand research capacity and partnerships focused on early childhood in Chicago.

This Report

Therefore, in support of the Every Child Ready Chicago initiative, Start Early has begun to explore the creation of a Chicago early childhood research consortium. This consortium would bring together cross-disciplinary researchers with policymakers, practitioners, families, and community representatives across sectors (e.g., health, education, home visiting, social services) in a robust, long-term research-practice partnership singularly focused on helping the City achieve its overall vision for a strong early childhood system.

In this report, we present the findings of the initial phase of our exploration. Between October 2020 and January 2021, we conducted stakeholder interviews with 26 participants from 16 different organizations. Interviewees included researchers, advocates, practitioners, leaders of community-based organizations, Chicago City officials and staff, and other experts selected based on their current work, relationships, and areas of expertise (see Appendix for a complete list of interviewees). Each interview included questions focused on:

- Gaps in the current landscape: Do we need a new consortium?
- What should be the role and functions of a consortium?
- How should a consortium be structured and where should it be housed?
- What barriers or challenges to creating a consortium should we anticipate?
- Other advice, suggestions, and recommendations?

In the sections that follow, we summarize the common themes that we heard from these stakeholders on each of these five topics. We then present a set of recommendations and strategic questions that emerged from our analysis of these conversations, and conclude with proposed next steps.

Stakeholder Perspectives

Gaps in the current landscape: Do we need a new consortium?

Every interviewee agreed that there is a need to create an early childhood research consortium in the city of Chicago.

Interviewees identified three main gaps in the current Chicago landscape that could be addressed by a new early childhood research consortium:

1. An early childhood-specific research partnership.

Interviewees expressed their desire for a dedicated early childhood research partnership that is long term, can act as a hub to create and build relationships across the early childhood field, and can help to inform a cohesive plan to strengthen Chicago's early childhood system.

"I think this is a really good thing. For children to do well in school, we need strong early childhood education, and the [UChicago] Consortium on School Research can't do everything."

2. Coordination of early childhood data systems. A diverse range of interviewees expressed their need for cohesive and easily accessible data at the program, organization, and City levels to support decision making, analysis, and research.

3. Increased transparency. Many interviewees pointed to a lack of visibility with the City on current initiatives, research projects, proposals and RFP opportunities, and dissemination of research findings.

What should be the role and functions of the consortium?

Virtually every interviewee mentioned that an early childhood research consortium should "bring together" different groups and areas of work. Specifically, they emphasized:

1. Bringing together a broad range of projects—including longstanding and new research studies across disciplines and sectors—under one research agenda to ensure that findings will fit together and build into a useful body of knowledge that can support current and future

systems leaders and decision-makers. There was broad agreement that the research agenda be co-constructed and include qualitative and quantitative research focused on topics including policy, teaching and learning, early care and education quality, and universal pre-k.

2. Bringing together a broad range of **people**—including policymakers, system and community leaders, practitioners, parents, researchers, and research participants—in order to make the consortium’s research more accurate, relevant, and useful.
3. Bringing together a broad range of **organizations**—including City agencies, community and advocacy groups, research institutions, and funders—so that all have a voice in setting the research agenda and guiding priorities and approach.
4. Bringing together **city and state visions**. Many interviewees mentioned the need for the consortium to somehow be connected to, or inform, state-wide efforts and issues, including rural and suburban areas, rather than focusing solely on Chicago. To some, this was an important issue of equity. One participant cautioned that if an early childhood research consortium is created that focuses just on Chicago, it should be considered and treated as a pilot project that is designed to be replicable across the state.

Every interviewee discussed the role of an early childhood research consortium in relation to the city’s early childhood data, but interviewees held vastly differing opinions about whether it should house and manage those data. Some interviewees, especially researchers, felt that it would be beneficial if a research consortium did house and manage the data. One interviewee felt strongly that it should not. Four interviewees felt that it could, but had some doubts and conditions. One of those interviewees suggested that: *“Conducting research is not the same function as housing and managing data, which is also not the same function as generating more real-time analytics to support programs. But they are related, like siblings. They should collaborate closely, and could even live in the same house.”* ***Regardless, facilitating data sharing agreements was seen by many as a vital aspect of an early childhood research consortium’s role.*** Some suggested that the consortium should hold master data sharing agreements with City agencies, and several interviewees mentioned the difficult legal work involved in executing data sharing agreements and the challenges of getting multiple agencies or partners into one agreement. Overall, as interviewees considered the question of whether an early childhood research consortium should house or manage data, they collectively weighed whether and how the research consortium should address several important issues:

1. **Data accessibility:** democratizing access to data (and research) so that everyone can use it.
2. **Data infrastructure:** making sure that the right data are getting into the right systems or warehouse. Specific concerns were raised around data security, data collection processes, and the potential for added data entry burden for programs.
3. **Data coordination:** facilitating reporting standards and linking data across City agencies and programs.

4. **Data support to programs:** supporting programs' ability to collect data consistently and providing descriptive analyses of those data (e.g., dashboards) back to the programs and organizations who are responsible for inputting it. Interviewees disagreed about whether this should be a role for an early childhood research consortium.

Anchoring the research consortium in principles of equity was specifically mentioned by several interviewees. Interviewees suggested that an early childhood research consortium should challenge prevailing perceptions of who is deemed "an expert." For example, one interviewee

"Really think about rooting the mission and vision in equity ... that means that you need parents, community members, and ECE teachers as stakeholders at the table."

suggested that an early childhood research consortium should endeavor to understand the lived experience of research participants—through, for example, one-on-one conversations with parents, providers, and community representatives—and ground research and data in those experiences. Others suggested that a consortium should attend to who is being served and who is not being served by the early childhood systems. As one interviewee put it, "*What do we know about the state's children for whom we have no data?*"

Interviewees also brainstormed several other recommendations for the functions of an early childhood research consortium, including:

- **Provide project management** to research projects, including communication with funders, keeping timelines tight and moving, and managing community engagement processes.
- **Find efficiencies across projects,** such as by coordinating shared surveys or focus groups that meet the needs of multiple studies, to reduce participant burden and project costs.
- **Conduct very large studies,** such as randomized controlled trials or longitudinal studies, that are too large for any one organization to do alone.
- **Support dissemination of research findings** by helping researchers write for non-researcher audiences to make their work more accessible and usable. Importantly, one interviewee (a researcher) noted the need for clear guidelines, decision rules, and expectations for dissemination, as tensions can arise between researchers and the agencies or programs they are studying about what results can and should be published about its programs. Another warned about the need to be careful not to present findings from consortium studies in ways that could be construed as advocacy.
- **Serve as a community of practice,** including as a place for researchers to present research ideas for feedback, serve as thought partners to City agencies, and facilitating continuous

"It is helpful to have an entity to make sure that the evidence builds knowledge over time ... to make sure that the findings fit together [across multiple studies] to tell a useful story."

quality improvement routines among researchers and the users of their research. One interviewee suggested a consortium might also facilitate collaboration and peer learning with other cities on topics such as universal pre-k.

- **Serve as an innovation lab** by providing the infrastructure needed to develop, study, and pitch new ideas to the City.

What barriers or challenges to creating a consortium should we anticipate?

The scope and size of an early childhood research consortium was noted as a primary challenge. Several interviewees observed that it would be a huge undertaking to coordinate this work across all partners and competing institutions in the City, and potentially across the state. One interviewee noted that it will be important to manage expectations around what an early childhood research consortium can (and cannot) do. Similarly, we heard that the research consortium should be careful not to define its scope too broadly, and instead identify specific action items (not just good ideas).

To help manage this challenge, *several interviewees cautioned not to duplicate efforts with other current work or prior initiatives*, and to ensure that we consider past successes and failures. At the same time, *interviewees were clear that it would not be wise to build something totally new, but rather connect an early childhood research consortium to existing infrastructure.* One noted that a consortium should not take resources away from the already under-funded early childhood system.

Many interviewees discussed challenges they have encountered in working with the City of Chicago, and expressed concern about its current capacity to support an early childhood research consortium. Specifically, concerns included the City's political sway over other partners, combined with perceived misalignment between the City's priorities and that of other organizations or groups. One interviewee also noted a lack of transparency related to past and current research projects. Capacity was a major theme of this discussion, including concerns about insufficient capacity within City agencies to manage all of their many partners; insufficient data infrastructure and lack of trust needed to support citywide data sharing; and high rates of staff turnover within City agencies and offices.

How should a consortium be structured and where should it be housed?

Interviewees suggested several different approaches to staffing, funding, managing, and sustaining a research consortium over time.

Funding was mentioned as a critical challenge by virtually everyone we spoke to; they identified fundraising as a function key to the success of an early childhood research consortium. Several interviewees noted the importance of fundraising to support consortium

staff, not just for research projects. One interviewee suggested that in order for a consortium to be viable, it would be necessary to secure at least three years' worth of stable funding prior to launching. Indeed, one interviewee explained that lack of funding was the reason that a past effort to create and sustain a similar type of consortium had been unsuccessful. Interviewees brainstormed the following possible funding scenarios:

- **Federal grants** could provide seed funding.
- **Creation of a funder council** to allow many funders to contribute small amounts to support costs and activities that project-specific funding would not be able to cover.
- Facilitate consortium members to come together as a research-practice-partnership (RPP) to apply for **project-specific funding** together.
- Respond to **City Request for Proposals (RFPs)** to support specific projects.
- Secure funding from philanthropic partners to **support start-up grants** for new projects to gather pilot data and write a larger grant proposal.

Several interviewees emphasized the importance of strong leadership, management, and staffing structures for an early childhood research consortium to be successful.

Recommendations included creating a small steering committee that includes funders; ensuring focused, strategic, and consistent consortium leadership; and creating a consortium “backbone” staff that maintains the infrastructure over time rather than shifting and rebuilding for each individual project. One interviewee suggested that a consortium be modeled on a contract-based center (similar to the [Education Systems Center](#) at Northern Illinois University) that secures a contract for each project, and noted that it should operate as a “council.”

Interviewees' opinions differed on the right approach to staffing an early childhood research consortium, but many agreed that a strong leader is important. One participant highlighted the importance of having consortium staff engaged in each affiliated research project to ensure that the consortium has a voice in project decisions and to help ensure alignment to the consortium's agenda and processes. But some participants recommended maintaining a slim team of staff members with expertise largely focused on project management, contracts and grants management, and fundraising. Others suggested that consortium staff would also need to have expertise in data analysis and management, dissemination and marketing, continuous quality improvement, equity, and partnership-building. Several emphasized the importance of keeping staffing lean and focused on supporting other organizations in their use of evidence and data for continuous quality improvement within their programs.

“[A home institution] has to have a critical mass of leadership that understands and has experience working in a participatory way that disrupts traditional roles of holders of knowledge and expertise.”

Interviewees generally agreed that an early childhood research consortium should be housed within a larger, established and trusted institution, but suggested several different types of institutional homes.

1. Most interviewees suggested that a consortium be housed within a **university**, noting benefits including universities' status and prestige; robust infrastructure (e.g., IRB; IT and legal infrastructure to support data systems, capacity, storage, and sharing) and resources (e.g., library); opportunities for collaboration with other researchers and faculty; and strong existing partnerships. Two interviewees noted that public universities and community colleges could provide easier access to certain funding streams and leverage internal data sharing agreements with other state or city government entities. However, interviewees also discussed several drawbacks to housing a consortium in a university, including that the university's mission as a research institution, as well as its academic requirements, could become barriers to fulfilling a consortium's goals. A few interviewees also expressed concern that universities have the potential to exert undue influence over what research is being proposed, which partners are involved, and how work is disseminated. One interviewee also cautioned that depending on how it is positioned within a university, some of the institutional resources made available to academic departments may not be available to a consortium.
2. Several interviewees suggested that a consortium could be housed in a **foundation**, noting the benefits of this scenario for ensuring stable funding and continued support. One interview participant disagreed, however, suggesting that foundations and philanthropy should be "silent partners" instead of leading the work so that they do not exercise too much influence over the direction of the research.
3. Several interview participants suggested that a consortium could be housed in a **nonprofit organization** that is already doing early childhood work in Chicago, has a focus on equity, and is already trusted by early childhood programs, communities, and families.
4. A few participants suggested that a consortium might be housed within a **City agency or office**. The benefits they cited included broad access and insight into ongoing initiatives and projects; an advantage in advocating for resources; the ability to help coordinate across City sectors by offering "peer-level accountability"; and the opportunity to function as a constant during turnover of administrations. *However, many interviewees disagreed, suggesting that a research consortium should not live in City government.* Several cited the City's influence, politics, and focus on research and outcomes that would prioritize benefits to the City over benefits for all children and families. Some interviewees also mentioned that trust needs to be rebuilt in the City's relationships with researchers, institutions, organizations, and communities.
5. Only a few suggested that a consortium could be successful as its own **independent entity**, potentially incubated inside a larger organization. Those in favor suggested that this would allow a consortium to be an independent, neutral third party in relation to the City and early childhood field. But other argued that the burden of building the necessary infrastructure from scratch would be too great.

Other advice, suggestions, and recommendations?

Interviewees offered the following advice regarding how to approach the next phase of planning for an early childhood research consortium.

- 1. Clarify a consortium's purpose.** Two interview participants suggested that gaining clarity on an early childhood research consortium's purpose—including vision, the agenda, and even the “endgame”—is a critical next step. For example, is the primary purpose to inform government to make decisions based on research, to give researchers peer support and collaboration, or for communities to access data and information for proposals?
- 2. Be intentional about language.** Two interview participants urged that those planning and creating an early childhood research consortium must be intentional about language in order to garner trust and accurately convey the consortium's scope from the start. For example,
 - a.** One interviewee suggested using phrasing such as “ensuring wellbeing of young children,” while avoiding “data-driven decision making” and “accountability” that sound punitive or threatening to some.
 - b.** Another interviewee suggested including phrasing such as “maternal-child health” to be inclusive of the whole family and community, while avoiding “early childhood,” which points more narrowly to education and excludes the public health sector.

Interviewees also made important recommendations for concrete next steps for the early work of building an early childhood research consortium.

- 1. Hold an exploratory meeting** as a continuation of, and opportunity to build upon, the exploratory interview process described in this report. Several interviewees recommended this as a next step that could illuminate questions and concerns from the state's early childhood community.
- 2. Involve parents and providers early in planning** for a consortium and setting a research agenda. One interviewee suggested that holding an exploratory meeting or individual conversations with parents could illuminate both their direct experiences with early childhood systems as well as “hidden” issues within communities that impact families. Another suggested that a survey of providers and programs could yield important information by reaching a larger group than is possible via meetings or focus groups.
- 3. Conduct a landscaping analysis** to identify every university and research institution currently doing relevant research in Chicago. Similarly, one interviewee suggested continuing and

“Listen to parents; find those hidden issues. Your research then leads to the solutions. We can identify the problem, but don't always know how to fix it.”

building upon the 2017 Early Learning Research Symposium convened by the Mayor’s Office to bring together all of these researchers as a way to maintain these connections going forward.

4. **Form a steering committee.** One interviewee recommended a steering committee of approximately eight members, including City agency representatives, research, advocacy groups, and funders to guide the planning stages as well as ongoing activities of a consortium once it is up and running.
5. **Conduct a pilot project** as one first step to opening a consortium. One interviewee suggested that a pilot project is a good way to learn which partners are interested and ready to be involved, would help to establish and test processes and infrastructure, and could lead to larger partnerships and projects.

Finally, interviewees discussed key ongoing initiatives and potential partners that should be included as exploration of an early childhood research consortium progresses (see Figure 2). Several interviewees also expressed personal or organizational interest in being a partner or collaborator in the launch or ongoing activities of a Chicago early childhood research consortium.

FIGURE 2. Partnerships suggested by interviewees.

Key initiatives to leverage and align with:	
Every Child Ready Chicago	Chicago Early Childhood Data Infrastructure Project
Additional partners suggested by interviewees:	
Alliance for Research in Chicago and Communities (ARCC) at Northwestern University	Northwestern Office of Community Education Partnerships
Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago	Public Health Institute of Metropolitan Chicago
Chicago Consortium for Community Engagement (C3)	University of Chicago Urban Labs
Head Start grantees in Chicago	
Interviewees from the following organizations expressed personal or organizational interest in partnering with an early childhood research consortium:	
Chicago Department of Family Support Services (DFSS)	Illinois Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development
Chicago Department of Public Health	Latino Policy Forum
Chicago Public Schools	McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National Louis University
Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI)	NORC at the University of Chicago
Erikson Institute	Northwestern University
Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC)	University of Chicago Consortium on School Research

Recommendations

Based on careful analysis of the exploratory interview findings presented above, we make five recommendations regarding the creation, scope, and function of a Chicago early childhood research consortium. These recommendations reflect clear perspectives that we heard more than once, and about which there was general agreement among interviewees.

1. **Create a Chicago early childhood research consortium** to serve as a long-term, sustainable research partnership focused exclusively on Chicago's cross-sector, system-wide early childhood priorities.
2. **The research consortium should:**
 - Create guidelines and processes based on principles of equitable research and evaluation to **ensure that all projects, activities, and methods are centered in equity.**
 - **Ensure that research is accessible, relevant, timely, and useful** in supporting decision-making and improvement of early childhood systems, policies, and programs.
 - **Facilitate the logistics** of engaging in early childhood research in Chicago, including data sharing, funding, disseminating findings, etc.
 - **Bring transparency and coordination** among the various early childhood research studies, partnerships, and initiatives happening across agencies, stakeholders, and research institutions.
 - **Convene diverse partners and stakeholders**, including researchers, City agencies, community leaders, early childhood providers, and parents to guide strategy regarding topics such as research questions, methods, interpretation of findings, and dissemination.
 - **Build and maintain connections to related state-wide research efforts** as a pilot model that can be refined and replicated in other Illinois communities.
3. **The research consortium should not:**
 - **Be responsible for collecting or managing administrative or accountability data**, or collecting data on behalf of any monitoring entities.
 - **Build or manage “real-time” data dashboards** or descriptive analyses for City agencies or early childhood providers
 - **Advocate** for particular policies, programs, or funding
4. **The research consortium should function as:**
 - **A neutral third-party** without allegiance to, or conflicts of interest with, any City agency, office, or department.

- **A trusted thought-partner and capacity support** for City agencies, offices, and departments, as well as community and systems leaders.
 - **A “hub” for researchers** across institutions and disciplines.
 - **An integrated complement** to existing and emerging infrastructure, systems, consortia, and partnerships; it should not duplicate or replace them.
5. **The research consortium should be housed within an existing institution outside of City government** that has robust infrastructure and a trusted reputation within the Chicago early childhood field.

Strategic Questions

Some of what we heard reflected stark disagreement among interviewees or revealed suggestions that were odds with one another. As such, *the exploratory interviews also helped to specify a set of important strategic questions*. The questions listed below were either raised (but not answered) by the interviewees themselves, are issues about which interviewees held vastly differing opinions, or reflect gaps that became apparent during our analysis of the interview findings.

1. **What is the specific purpose—including vision, agenda, and “endgame”—of the Chicago early childhood research consortium?**
2. **What specific benefits would the research consortium offer to affiliates, partners, collaborators, and participants?**
3. **How can City agencies, offices, and departments engage with the research consortium most effectively?**
 - What benefits will they gain by engaging with the research consortium?
 - Does the City currently have the capacity to engage as it would hope to?
4. **How should the research consortium leverage, align, or coordinate with ongoing key initiatives in Chicago and statewide in Illinois in ways that can be mutually supportive?**
 - Every Child Ready Chicago (ECRC)
 - Chicago Early Childhood Data Infrastructure Project
 - Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC)
5. **Should the consortium be the holder of a master data sharing agreement with one or more City agencies in order to house and manage these data?**
 - If not, it would instead provide language and templates for partners to put data sharing agreements in place.

6. Should the research consortium inform the design and data collection processes for “real-time” data dashboards or descriptive analyses for City agencies and/or early childhood providers?
7. What types of research findings, and under what guidelines, would the research consortium publish and disseminate?
8. How would the research consortium engage with advocates and advocacy organizations?
9. Where should the research consortium be housed to ensure success and sustainability (vis a vis funding, political climate, etc.)?
 - What are the criteria for an institutional home for the research consortium?
10. How should the research consortium be structured and staffed?
 - What capacities and expertise must exist within the research consortium staff itself?
 - What capacities and expertise should partners contribute?
 - What capacities and expertise should steering or advisory bodies contribute?

Proposed Next Steps

Given this important set of open questions, it will be important to bring together potential partners for nuanced discussions throughout planning and launch phases regarding these recommendations, strategic questions, and additional topics that emerge as this work progresses. *We propose the following next steps to catalyze these conversations and build upon our initial exploration:*

1. **Share this report** with interviewees and more widely throughout Chicago’s early childhood community to continue to socialize the idea of the research consortium and catalyze continued conversation.
 - **Connect with ongoing key initiatives** such as Every Child Ready Chicago and the Chicago Early Childhood Data Infrastructure Project in Chicago, and Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC) and the Education Systems Center statewide, to discuss how efforts should be aligned or coordinated.
2. **Explore more formal, inclusive structures** to guide and advance the research consortium.
 - **Hold an exploratory meeting** as a continuation of, and opportunity to build upon, the exploratory interview process described in this report.
 - **Form a steering committee** of approximately eight members, including City agency representatives, research, advocacy groups, and funders to guide the planning stages.

- **Continue and build upon the 2017 Early Learning Research Symposium** convened by the Mayor's Office to continue to bring together Chicago's early childhood researchers.

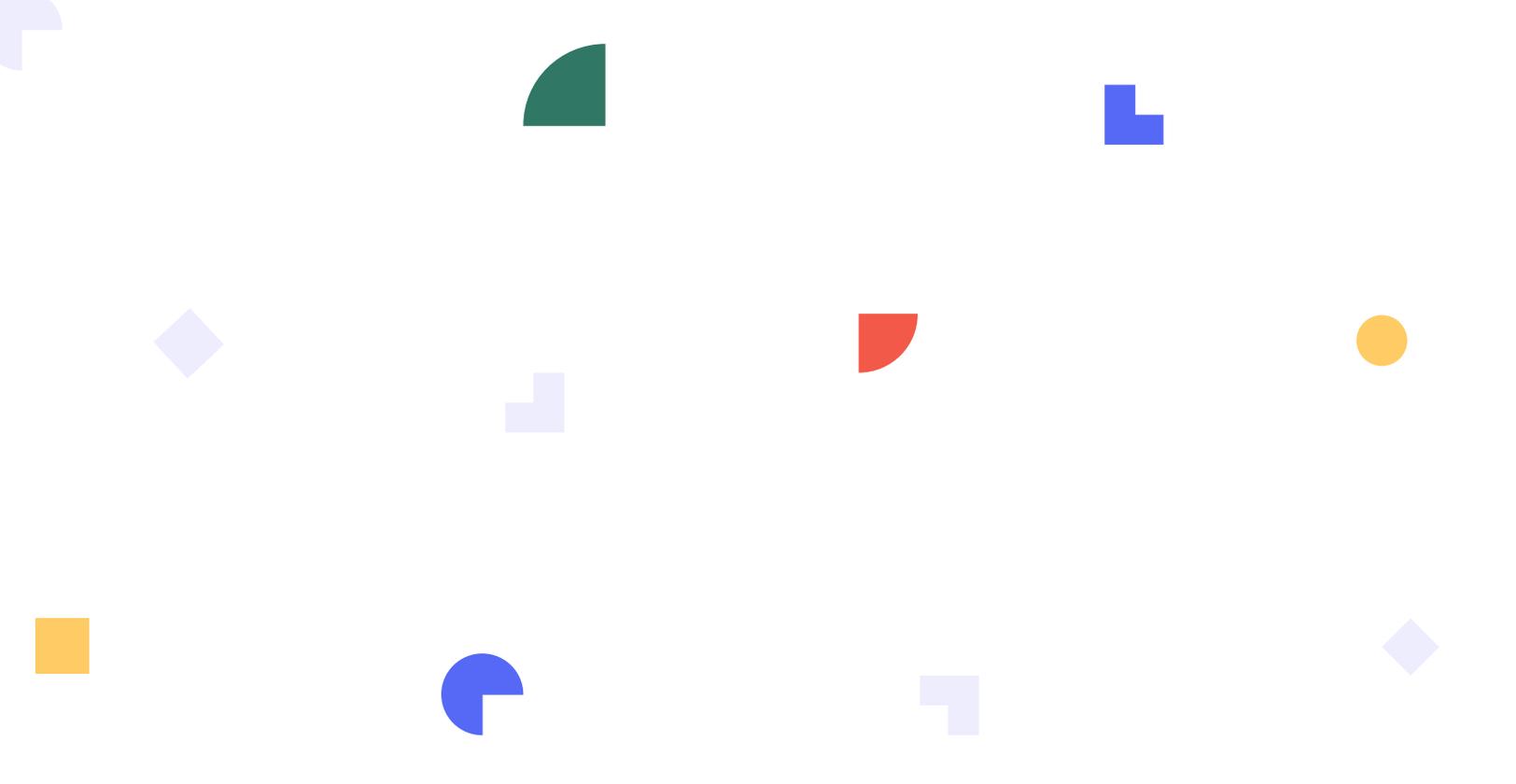
3. Gather additional information to inform the research consortium.

- **Conduct a landscaping analysis** to identify every university and research institution currently doing relevant research in Chicago.
- **Connect with those leading similar consortia** in other places (e.g., [New York City Early Childhood Research Network](#) and [Oregon School Readiness Research Consortium](#)) to learn from and with them about creating an early childhood research consortium in Chicago.
- **Utilize existing structures to connect with parents and providers** to illuminate both their direct experiences with early childhood systems as well as "hidden" issues within communities that impact families.

Appendix

Interviewees

- Elaine Allensworth, Director, University of Chicago Consortium on School Research
- Meg Bates, Director, Illinois Education and Workforce Research Collaborative (IWERC)
- Ben Boer, Data Coordinator for Education and Workforce Data, Illinois Governor's Office & Senior Fellow, Education Systems Center, Northern Illinois University
- Cerathel Burgess-Burnett, Deputy Commissioner, Chicago Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS)
- Madeline Cancel-Hanieh, Director of Children Services, Chicago DFSS
- Melissa Casteel, Director of Assessment, McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National Louis University
- Anna Colaner, Data Manager, Office of Early Childhood Education, Chicago Public Schools
- Sarah Dickson, Director of External Research, Department of School Quality Measurement and Research, Chicago Public Schools
- Stacy Ehrlich, Senior Research Scientist, NORC at the University of Chicago
- Theresa Hawley, First Assistant Deputy Governor, Education, Illinois Governor's Office
- Tiffany Junkins, Manager of Family Support Programs, Chicago DFSS
- Christina Krasov, Consultant, Chicago Early Childhood Data Infrastructure Project & President, CK Impact Strategies
- Gudelia Lopez, Consultant, Latino Policy Forum & Principal, Lopez Strategic Solutions
- José Marco-Paredes, Director of Civic Engagement, Latino Policy Forum
- Lisa Masinter, Director of Research, AllianceChicago
- Diana McClarien, Vice President, Early Head Start and Head Start Network, Start Early
- Ashley Nazarak, Associate Vice President, Program Scaling and Dissemination, Carole Robertson Center for Learning (formerly Vice President, Learning and Evaluation, YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago)
- Cristina Pacione-Zayas, Senior Policy Advisor, Erikson Institute & Illinois State Senator
- Jesse Rojo, Organizer, Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI)
- Terri Sabol, Assistant Professor of Human Development and Social Policy, Northwestern University
- Penny Bender Sebring, Co-Founder, University of Chicago Consortium on School Research
- Bryan Stokes II, Chief of Early Childhood Education, Chicago Public Schools
- Beth Stover, former Assistant Director, Children Services Division, Chicago DFSS
- Teri Talan, Michael W. Louis Chair of the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National Louis University
- Jennifer Vidis, Deputy Commissioner, Chicago Department of Public Health
- Rebecca Vonderlack-Navarro, Director of Education Policy & Research, Latino Policy Forum



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