

EC-REACH

Early Childhood Research Alliance

★ OF CHICAGO ★

Early Childhood Research Alliance of Chicago (EC-REACH) unites diverse partners to co-construct and conduct action-oriented research that promotes equitable solutions for early childhood policy and practice in Chicago.

EC-REACH WILL:

1.

CONVENE diverse partners and collaborators to unite Chicago’s research and evaluation initiatives across sectors, agencies, and institutions and facilitate alignment with city- and state-wide efforts.

2.

CATALYZE and support robust research-practice partnerships that produce research and evaluation that is relevant, timely, and useful for enhancing early childhood systems, policies, and programs.

3.

COMMUNICATE holistic research and evaluation findings with Chicago policymakers, program leaders, families, and community members in an accessible and transparent manner.

WHY EC-REACH?

First, community members closest to early childhood program and practice are often excluded from problem-solving efforts. The **disconnect between community voice and the research landscape** means present research and evaluation efforts may not accurately reflect the needs of the Chicago early childhood community. Second, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners **work in silos**, missing out on opportunities to holistically impact the city’s vast early childhood landscape. Finally, **the availability and quality of data—and its effective use**—are essential to understanding how Chicago is advancing a more equitable early childhood system. Sustaining and expanding **inclusive research efforts that leverage newly-available integrated Chicago data** is critical. But there is currently no existing research alliance or consortium focused specifically on early childhood (ages 0-5) in Chicago. **EC-REACH will be the only hyperlocal research alliance focused on improving early childhood in Chicago by empowering stakeholders with equity-focused, accessible research findings.**

WHY NOW?

As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, Chicago is faced with the enormous task of supporting true recovery for children, families, and providers. In recent years, both **our city and state have risen to the challenge** by strengthening collaboration across agencies and organizations, and by building data infrastructure to bring together a wealth of information about Chicago’s youngest children and their

families. In Chicago, these initiatives include the rapid scaling of universal pre-k and Family Connects Chicago, Every Child Ready Chicago, collaborative efforts across the newly diversified Head Start landscape, and this year’s launch of the Chicago Early Childhood Integrated Data System. Statewide, recent initiatives include Raising IL, Birth to Five IL, the Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC), and the Illinois Longitudinal Data System 2.0.

Investing in EC-REACH is the next step in realizing the full potential of these efforts. Although it is invaluable and foundational, data alone cannot answer many of the questions that matter most to policymakers and practitioners. **Research expertise—and thoughtfully-designed, community-engaged research studies—are essential to learning all that we can from the available data.** EC-REACH will complement and build upon existing efforts by creating the infrastructure needed to collaboratively engage Chicago’s early childhood researchers in this important work. By supporting robust research partnerships focused on a co-constructed research agenda, EC-REACH will ensure that newly-available integrated data are used to their greatest extent to benefit the children and families of Chicago.

OUR APPROACH

The following **core values** will guide every aspect of the work of EC-REACH.

RIGOROUS

Research will meet high standards in qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methodologies and will be committed to an open science practice.

RESPONSIVE

Research will be solutions oriented and provide timely insights that are responsive to the pressing issues facing early childhood policy and practice.

EQUITABLE

Research will prioritize an equitable and asset-based approach that addresses the bias of power and privilege and engages community perspectives (especially those from historically disadvantaged and underrepresented groups) to shape the entire research process.

COLLABORATIVE

Research will be conceptualized, designed, and implemented through balanced and pre-determined collaboration among research partners, policy partners, practitioners, community leaders, and families.

INCLUSIVE

Research will engage researchers, policymakers, and practitioners who approach their work from a variety of perspectives; EC-REACH will be especially intentional about including researchers from historically disadvantaged and underrepresented groups as so to develop a more inclusive pipeline for the systemic work.

CONTEXTUALIZED

Research will be grounded in Chicago’s social, economic, and political context.

ACCESSIBLE

EC-REACH will communicate findings to diverse audiences (locally, state-wide, and nationally), using a variety of formats, to encourage the use of research to inform meaningful change in policy and practice.

EC-REACH will **leverage and expand Chicago’s data infrastructure** by advancing:

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| DATA SOURCES | Supporting research studies that use administrative data, and studies that include primary data collection including both quantitative and qualitative data. |
| DATA ACCESS | Facilitating access to existing early childhood data, including administrative and accountability data that may include providing language and templates for partners to put data use agreements in place and/or establishing master data sharing agreements with one or more agencies/organizations. Subject to authorization by data owners. |
| DATA SHARING | Facilitating the sharing of data, documentation, and prepared administrative data for analysis among current and past EC-REACH partners to support wide access to a growing body of new early childhood data. |
| DATA LINKING | Facilitating the ability to link early childhood data from various sources, including via streamlined or expedited access to the CECIDS dataset. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• CECIDS will provide integrated data, data modeling, and a secure research environment for EC-REACH.• EC-REACH projects will identify the need for improved and additional data to incorporate into CECIDS. |
| REVIEW & APPROVALS | Adhering to home institution institutional review board (IRB) approval process and support partner IRB approval processes, including supporting approvals by data owners. |

EC-REACH will be hosted by the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University, where it will benefit from the university’s infrastructure and resources, while maintaining its autonomy as an independent entity that is primarily accountable to Chicago’s broader early childhood community. Once launched, EC-REACH will regularly engage **three diverse and representative advisory bodies** to help guide its strategy, direction, focus, and approach:

- 1. STEERING COMMITTEE:** A small body that will provide ongoing strategic guidance, advising, and support to the EC-REACH Director.
- 2. ALLIANCE PARTNERS:** Managed by the Director, practitioner, policymaker, and researcher representatives of partner organizations will collaborate to inform the work of EC-REACH, pool resources to support these efforts, and drive forward the shared agenda.
- 3. RESEARCH ADVISORY COUNCIL:** A broader group of diverse external stakeholders—including community organizations, practitioners, and families—who are engaged to inform: the research agenda; outreach strategies; and the interpretation, sharing, and application of research findings.

HOW WE GOT HERE & WHERE WE ARE GOING

Start Early began to explore the nascent concept of a Chicago early childhood research consortium or alliance in fall 2020 in support of the Every Child Ready Chicago initiative, and published their findings in an [Exploratory Report](#) released in March 2021.

In spring and summer 2022, EC-REACH engaged in a planning phase led by a citywide planning committee comprised of 14 committed, Chicago-based members with diverse research, policy, and practice expertise. Convened and staffed by Start Early, and facilitated CoSpero Consulting, with advising from five additional subject-matter experts, the planning committee provided exceptional leadership and set a strong foundation for EC-REACH by:

- Determining the mission, vision, structure, governance, and sustainability model;
- Guiding the engagement of a broader group stakeholders and advisors; and
- Identifying a home institution and initial funding to support the launch of EC-REACH.

EC-REACH is committed to bringing transparency to each aspect of its work. As part of this commitment, the work of the planning committee—including meeting minutes, key materials, and other relevant planning committee updates—can be found on the [EC-REACH website](#).

The planning committee unanimously selected Northwestern University to host EC-REACH via a rigorous application process. Northwestern stood out among an exceptionally strong pool of four applicants because it could provide the strongest institutional commitment to financially and logistically supporting EC-REACH to fulfill its mission; maintaining EC-REACH as an independent body within the university; and expertise in data and resource sharing as well as community engagement.

Now, in fall 2022, EC-REACH is moving into the launch phase, with the goal of fully funding and establishing EC-REACH at its new home by June 2023. The Planning Committee will sunset in October 2022. A Launch Committee is being formed to provide strategic advising to the home institution and launch support staff at Start Early during this critical transition. The work of the launch phase is twofold:

1. Secure \$4 million it needs to ramp up and sustain operations for the first three years.
 - As of September, 2022, we have \$1.1 million committed thanks to the generous support of an anonymous donor and the funders of Every Child Ready Chicago.
2. Execute an MOU with Northwestern as the home institution for EC-REACH and transfer all administrative and governance functions to Northwestern, including:
 - Hiring an EC-REACH director;
 - Establishing and convening the three new EC-REACH advisory bodies (steering committee, alliance partners, and research advisory council); and
 - Creating a permanent EC-REACH website (currently hosted on an interim basis by Start Early).

In its first year, EC-REACH will build upon the foundation laid by the planning and launch committees to realize the vision of this valuable new research hub for Chicago’s early childhood community. Specifically, EC-REACH’s first year will focus on establishing diverse and representative ongoing advisory bodies; co-constructing an action-oriented research agenda; hosting Chicago’s first early childhood research conference in more than five years; developing partnership and engagement protocols, tools, and ways of working; producing 2-3 high-priority review publications; and launching 1-2 initial research studies.

We are excited to see EC-REACH take root in Chicago. We would not have gotten this far without the enthusiasm, hard work, and partnership of so many of Chicago’s early childhood researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. And we cannot fully realize their vision without dedicated funding to support the start up of EC-REACH and sustain its operations through the critical first three years.

Interested in learning more? Please contact Maia Connors at mconnors@startearly.org.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to planning committee members:

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