



The Early Childhood System of Chicago



Chicago holds the promise of a city where one day all families can raise their children and be sure that they are **happy, healthy, educated** and **thriving**. Experts know that the key to realizing this vision is to give families a strong start when their children are young. The opportunity gap begins before a child is born and extends through the first five years of life, when a child's brain develops faster than at any other time. This period is critical for addressing inequities and ensuring healthy development.

Chicago has a strong history of investing in early care and education opportunities that begin at birth and are delivered in both school and community-based settings. This system of supports and the families it serves are recovering from the pandemic and need additional support and investment now more than ever. The next mayoral administration and City Council will need to build on this foundation and work collaboratively with community partners to establish and pursue a **prenatal-to-five system that provides equitable access to supports and services** that ensure the best outcomes for our city's youngest children and their families.

Research shows that access to high quality early childhood services is worth the investment.

The fiscal benefit of early childhood is rooted in the various protective factors early childhood services provide for children and families. These services provide the skills and resources needed to build healthy parent-child relationships that stimulate physical, social, emotional, and intellectual growth, resulting in a high return on investment and savings in education, welfare, and crime costs.¹ Chicago-based research has shown that preschool students who participate in high-quality early education programs are more prepared to enter kindergarten.² These benefits of early childhood education continue over a child's lifetime with research showing that early childhood services can reduce the likelihood of involvement in the child welfare and criminal legal system.³

Children who participated in quality early care & education programs are:

25% More likely to graduate from high school

4x More likely to have completed a bachelor's degree³ & earn higher wages as adults¹

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many of the existing challenges that families with young children face in Chicago.

Despite Chicago's strong history of investing in a mixed delivery system of early childhood services, families continue to face significant challenges to accessing supports that ensure the health, safety, well-being and education of their young children. Kindergarten assessment data for Chicago Public Schools shows that in 2022, **only 26% of entering kindergarteners were developmentally prepared** in math, language and literacy, and social emotional learning, with **disparities** in the rate of **readiness among children of color, including Asian American and Pacific Islander, Black, Latinx and Indigenous children**.⁵ These disparities are even more acute for children who are **low-income, English Learners and children with disabilities**.

We know that these disparities begin before birth and widen as children grow older and continue to face inequities within the economic, health, education and social systems. To truly address these disparities, Chicago's early care and education system needs real investment. Because of the lack of adequate investment, funding in the early childhood system is stitched together to provide quality care that meets the needs of families. As a result, the process of finding and providing services has become overly complicated. Families struggle to understand and easily access confusing program options and eligibility criteria and providers struggle to piece together the crucial services needed by the families they serve.

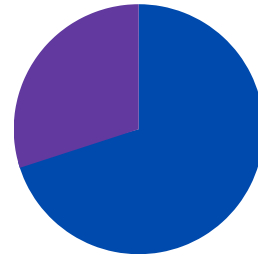
The City of Chicago is experiencing an early childhood workforce crisis that predates – but was also greatly exacerbated by—the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, the Early Childhood Workforce Partnership, a group of 19 early childhood employers in the City of Chicago who are seeking better degree pathways for early childhood educators, estimated that **by 2024** their organizations – which employ educators serving young children in community-based, school-based, home visiting and family child care across Chicago – would need **3,000 new educators and additional credentials for 1,000 existing educators** whose current roles now have higher degree requirements. The acceleration of staff turnover during the pandemic has undoubtedly led to an increase in this need. Teachers, home visitors, doulas, and Early Intervention therapists left the field for less risky and better-paying jobs, leading to a drop in reliable, predictable services for families with children. **Without stability in the early care and education system, the productivity of the workforce in every business field is undermined** as parents cannot find care for their children while they work.

City governments across the country are recognizing their role in strengthening supports for families with young children.

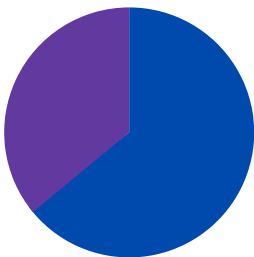
These innovative investments can take many forms, but local governments have realized that dedicated funding streams and direct supports are sustainable ways to support early childhood care and education. In Philadelphia and Denver, excise taxes levied by the city government fund expansion and improvements to school-based pre-k.⁶ The Washington, DC City Council recently passed an ordinance to send one-time payments between \$10,000 and \$14,000 to thousands of early educators in an effort to raise wages. The District of Columbia has also introduced a program, to begin next year, that allows early educators and eligible employees of licensed care facilities to access free, quality, publicly financed health coverage.⁷ Boston's city council uses its innovative Payment in Lieu of Tax program, which collects voluntary payments from large tax exempt entities, to support children's services.⁸ **In Chicago, these financial supports should be directed to address the unprecedented staff shortage faced by the early childhood system, which limits providers' ability to serve families and support working parents.**

Chicago needs leadership that will commit to investing in and working to improve the city's early care and education system.

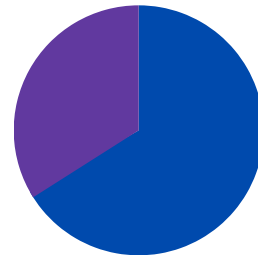
70% of Chicago voters would view a candidate more favorably or much more favorably if they prioritized increasing funding for early childhood services



64% of Chicago voters say that elected officials are not focused enough on early childhood services



66% of Chicago voters say they would be willing to pay a little more in taxes if it meant better services for families with young children



Global Strategy Group conducted a survey of 609 registered voters in Illinois between September 8th and September 12th, 2022. The margin of error at the 95% confidence level is +/-4.0% for this survey. Interviews were conducted over the phone and T2W. Care has been taken to ensure the geographic and demographic divisions of the populations of likely voters are properly represented.



1 Invest in more capacity to lead the planning and administration of Chicago's system of early childhood services and supports

This includes:

- Assuming a leadership role in convening community partners to develop a unified vision for supporting families with young children and improving early childhood services and supports in Chicago.
- Committing local funds to support the goal of working alongside community-based early childhood providers and engaging families with young children in efforts to understand and address early childhood issues.
- Establishing structures for regular engagement between the City's early childhood leadership and community stakeholders to provide transparent, timely information about Chicago's early childhood system, including data on funding and slot allocation and information collected through needs assessments.

2 Address gaps in access to high quality early care and education for all of Chicago's children

This includes:

- Continuing the expansion and support for Family Connects Chicago to ensure that families are connected to early childhood resources at or before birth.
- Supporting & investing in community-based providers as critical resources for families
- Addressing gaps in access to high quality early care and education services for English learners and their families.
- Supporting community-based capacity building to identify and serve 3- & 4-year-old English Language Learners
- Holding Chicago Public Schools accountable for their responsibility to identify and provide free appropriate education in the least restrictive environment for all children with disabilities ages 3-5 in Chicago.
- Working in partnership with the state to address the shortage of Early Intervention specialists and promote access to and enrollment in this important service for children with disabilities ages 0-3.
- Targeting resources to Family, Friend and Neighbor care providers in Chicago so they can provide high quality care and meet the needs of children and families.

3 Acknowledge the critical work of early childhood professionals by increasing support and compensation for the workforce

This includes:

- Developing a clearly articulated strategic plan for growing and retaining the early childhood workforce through further investment in more inclusive and alternative degree pathways and increased compensation.
- Addressing the unprecedented staff shortage in early care and education programs, with a particular focus on bilingual and special education professionals, which impacts their ability to serve families and limits the availability of care for parents who need to go to work.
- Addressing the gap in pay parity between educators in school-based early childhood settings and community-based settings.
- Establishing better communication pathways between the City and the early childhood workforce.



Chicago's Early Childhood System: **Four Major Programs**

1 Chicago Early Learning

A comprehensive and coordinated early learning system that aims to provide easy and equitable access to families with children birth through five years old. Administered by the Mayor's Office, the Department of Family and Support Services and Chicago Public Schools, Chicago Early Learning includes a parent hotline and community collaboration and outreach efforts that offer on the ground supports for families to connect with the full landscape of early learning programs in Chicago.

2 Early Head Start and Head Start Programs

Funded locally by direct federal funds, promotes school readiness of infants, toddlers and preschool-aged children from low-income families. Services are provided in a variety of settings including centers, family child care and a child's own home. Early/Head Start programs also engage parents and/or other key family members in positive relationships, with a focus on family well-being. Chicago is home to six Early/Head Start funding recipients, including the City's Department of Family and Support Services, and three additional Early Head Start- only funding recipients. These organizations serve thousands of children and families in programs across Chicago.

3 Preschool For All

High-quality preschool education for 3 and 4 year-olds in both school- and community-based settings, with a focus on children who live in underserved communities and often have the most to gain from access to early care and education programming.

4 Prevention Initiative

Child development services for expecting parents, infants, and toddlers, through parent coaching in home and child care settings.

Preschool For All and Prevention Initiative are administered by the Illinois State Board of Education and funded through the state's Early Childhood Block Grant, of which Chicago Public Schools receives 37% by statute to operate school-based preschool education for 3 and 4 year-olds. CPS subgrants 40% of the amount they receive to the Chicago Department of Family and Support Services, which funds community-based early childhood programs for expecting parents and children ages birth to five.

Other Critical Programs & Supports:

★ Child Care Assistance Program

Provides financial assistance to eligible, low-income families to offset the cost of child-care and promote school success for children age 6 weeks to 13 years. 40% of parents benefitting from CCAP work on weekends, after school, nights, or otherwise non-traditional hours, and thus rely on child care that can accommodate their fluctuating work schedule. Funded by the state general funds, TANF, and federal Child Care Development Fund and administered by the Department of Human Services.

★ Early Childhood Special Education

Special Education Services for all children ages 3-5 with disabilities in the City of Chicago who are eligible to receive services. As the Local Education Agency, Chicago Public Schools is responsible for identifying and serving all eligible children with disabilities.

★ Early Intervention

Services for children age birth-3 who have or are at risk for developmental disabilities or delays. Administered at the state level by the Department of Human Services and at the regional level by Child and Family Connections offices.

★ Home Visiting

Provides parent capacity building services to expectant and new parents to support strong parent-child relationships that support a child's healthy growth and minimize the risk of abuse and neglect. Families also are connected to additional resources in their community such as health care, counseling, education and job training. Administered by the Department of Human Services and Illinois State Board of Education.

★ Family Connects

In-home nurse visits within the first three weeks of life for families with newborns to provide a wide range of support for the health of the infant, mother, and their support network, and to connect families to additional programs and services they may need. Administered by the Chicago Department of Public Health.

This brief was brought to you by:

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Roundtable:

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- Metropolitan Family Services
- Onward Neighborhood House

Easterseals serving Chicago & Greater Rockford
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Endnotes & References

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