



# CHICAGO EARLY/HEAD START RESEARCH AGENDA

**Fiscal Years 2024 - 2026**



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TABLE OF  
CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Background & Methodology	4
Current Work	8
Research Questions	10
Indicators of Success	14
Conclusion	16





# INTRODUCTION

Setting a path for expanding and improving early learning and care programs and services in Chicago through research- and community driven policies



## Agenda Priorities

Start Early’s Research and Evaluation Team is working in collaboration with the Illinois Policy Team and the Early/Head Start Network to co-create a community-engaged **Chicago Early/Head Start Research Agenda** that centers parent<sup>1</sup>, staff and community voice. The Agenda has three major priorities.

We hope that at the end of the process, policy priorities will inform research questions and research will bolster policy and advocacy initiatives.

1

### Elevate Voices

Elevate the voices and priorities of the communities that we serve in order to center equity<sup>2</sup> and put into practice antiracist<sup>3</sup> principles in our work as researchers

2

### Partner for Progress

Further research activities in partnership with Chicago Early/Head Start staff, teachers, parents and community partners—in order to implement a Research Practice Partnership within Start Early’s Early/Head Start Network

3

### Drive Collaboration

Revamp and reinforce the ways that Start Early’s local, state and national efforts align and incorporate lessons learned along the way







## BACKGROUND & METHODOLOGY

Creating a plan in partnership with communities, families, experts and financial supporters

## Partnership Opportunities for Impact

For the first time, Start Early's Head Start grant includes research funding. We plan to use these resources to improve programs and practice in Chicago<sup>4</sup>. We also hope to model for other institutions how to scale what is working at a systems-level to state- and federal-level policy. Additionally, the 2021 reallocation of Chicago's federal Head Start funds created a new landscape of early childhood service delivery throughout the city.

Moving from two grantee recipients to six shifted power dynamics and created new opportunities to address issues experienced within Early/Head Start programs. This is therefore an opportune moment to implement a Research Practice Partnership within the Chicago Early/Head Start Network to:

1. Identify interest in changing or learning more about how a process is working
2. Help identify existing data, or collect new data
3. Analyze data and share findings
4. Create a plan of action
5. Allow time to reflect and revise as ideas are implemented to continue supporting programs

This process is ongoing. Therefore, this Agenda is a living document that we will revise as we continue to engage with families and Early/Head Start staff, and incorporate other separate but aligned Start Early initiatives.

The **Chicago Early/Head Start Research Agenda** puts equity and antiracism at the center of its work by including voices of parents, teachers and staff throughout the entirety of the research and evaluation process.

While programs like Head Start are designed to close opportunity gaps, they will not be successful unless they acknowledge institutional and environmental racism and mitigate its effects in the lives of children, families and staff by providing equitable learning experiences and family and workforce supports. This challenge is particularly acute in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic that disproportionately affected communities of color.



Start Early is committed to using equitable research and evaluation procedures, and we are intentionally co-creating the Agenda with parents and staff. We therefore acknowledge families, staff and practitioners as the primary experts on program and policy and have designed a process to allow their priorities to drive this agenda. We also consulted with secondary experts within Start Early, including the Illinois Policy Team and the Early/Head Start Network.

## Listening Sessions

This work began by conducting several "listening sessions" with our Chicago Early/Head Start grantees—parents, in-classroom staff, and administrators. We designed these questions with feedback from Diana McClarien, Vice President of the Early/Head Start Network at Start Early, and her team. In some of these meetings we engaged parents, staff and community partners in a dialogue about the hopes and dreams they have for the children in their lives, what they most worry about standing in their children's way, how Early/Head Start programs can help to actualize those dreams, and what else Early/Head Start could be doing to provide support.



In order to capture their policy priorities, we asked Chicago Early/Head Start staff if they had five minutes with President Biden, what they would ask him to work on to help children and families achieve their goals. We captured these thoughts through the online tool, Thought Exchange, which records responses anonymously, and allowed for participants to review and rate other responses based on their general agreement to the answer (n = 68). These data and the feedback received during the listening sessions helped inform this Agenda. To capture additional voices, we also encouraged participants to ask families, other staff members and leaders to answer this question via the Thought Exchange.

These are the responses that the Thought Exchange participants rated highest regarding the President Biden question:

**What should President Biden work on to help children and families achieve their goals?**

- + Increase or remove the federal poverty guidelines for families to qualify for Early/Head Start
- + Make early care and education affordable for the working and middle class
- + Increase funding for public schools/public school systems
- + Increase salaries for early childhood education professionals
- + Increase funding for areas experiencing other social and environmental health impacts

We reframed this question for Chicago Early/Head Start Policy Council parents to be more Chicago-focused. When asked if they had five minutes with Illinois Governor Pritzker, what would they ask him to work on to help children and families achieve their goals, the parents of the Policy Council discussed the following topics:

**What should Illinois Governor Pritzker work on to help children and families achieve their goals?**

- + Make early care and education more affordable for families
- + Improve communication between staff and parents, including increased updates on activities and programmatic information/resource sharing
- + Provide additional resources to improve inclusion<sup>5</sup> practices for children with disabilities

We want to acknowledge that all insights and feedback received from staff and parents were not entirely conducive to a Chicago-focused research agenda; thus, as we move forward with this work, we will continue to be in conversation with listening session participants. This will allow us to share back the data we collected and solicit feedback on what we understand to be their core concerns and policy priorities.

**SOURCES**

These principles and strategies were informed by the following sources:

- + Bruno, E.P. & Iruka, I. U. (2022). Reexamining the Carolina Abecedarian Project using an antiracist perspective: Implications for early care and education research. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 58, 165-176.
- + Curenton, Stephanie, Iruka, I.U., et al. (2019) Validity for Assessing Classroom Sociocultural Equity Scale (ACSES) in Early Childhood Classrooms. *Early Education and Development*.
- + Kendi, Ibram X. *How to be an Antiracist*. (Random House, New York) 2019.
- + Van Horne, Y.O., Alcalá, C.S., Peltier, R.E. et al. (2023). An applied environmental justice framework for exposure science. *J Expo Sci Environ Epidemiol*, 33, 1-11.





# CURRENT WORK

Building on more than 40 years of on-the-ground work in Chicago and across Illinois providing direct services and engaging programs, providers and families



## Comprehensive & Diverse Input

The **Chicago Early/Head Start Research Agenda** aims to align related research within the Start Early network. In addition to the listening sessions with parents, staff, leadership, and community partners in Chicago, the Research Team convened a series of internal “information sharing” sessions with teams from across the organization, including: Early/Head Start Network, Educare Chicago, National Center on Parent and Community Engagement, Professional Learning Network and more. The National and Illinois Policy teams were also engaged multiple times throughout this process. The goal of these sessions is to understand the data and research landscape for each group specifically, to:

### Goals for information sessions

- + Learn about data being collected
- + Hear how the data are being used
- + Hear about participation in research projects
- + Consider the topic areas where we can collaborate on research and data projects now and in the future

This process of information sharing is ongoing, and we hope that we can continue to increase communication between aligned research within Start Early. For example, the **Chicago Early/Head Start Research Agenda** is working in tandem with the Head Start Enrollment Improvement Project (funded by the Vivo Foundation), which is working to identify barriers to enrollment in Chicago Early/Head Start programs by engaging directly with families who have, are currently, and have never participated in Head Start/Early Head Start, as well as staff members. The goal of this work is to develop and implement community-informed practices to improve recruitment and retention efforts to increase enrollment.



Additionally, Agenda is supporting the Inclusion Project (funded by the Crown Foundation). This project, in collaboration with the Chicago Public Schools' (CPS) Office of Diverse Learners Supports and Services staff, and the Mayor's Office, aims to develop a plan to implement a community-based service delivery approach to advance accessible and equitable special education services for children dually enrolled in Head Start and CPS throughout Chicago. The goal of this Inclusion Project work is to formally evaluate and document how this process occurred, what was learned along the way, and create recommendations for community partners and educational systems leaders.





# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Seeking to answer research questions in order to drive recruitment and enrollment, support the workforce and ensure inclusion and equity

## What We Seek to Learn

Aligning the feedback we received through engaging with and listening to Early/Head Start parents, staff, leadership, community partners and current Early/Head Start research work, we have discussed, refined and identified a number of research questions that will prove useful to each group and will lay the foundation for the **Chicago Early/Head Start Research Agenda**.

As these questions and related research work progress in Chicago Early/Head Start programs the hope is that, over the next couple of years, these projects and findings can be expanded into other programs and locales to continue building on and improving early childhood care and learning for all families.



## RECRUITMENT & ENROLLMENT

Research Question	Data/Funding Source
<p><b>From the perspective of families and staff, what are the facilitators and barriers that need to be removed regarding enrollment in Chicago Early/Head Start programs?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>+ What innovative strategies and practices are effective in increasing recruitment, enrollment and retention in Chicago Early/Head Start programs?</li><li>+ How can these enrollment improvement strategies be incorporated into policy- and systems-level changes?</li></ul>	<p>Vivo Enrollment Data</p> <p>CECIDS</p>
<p><b>From the perspective of parents, what is their awareness of eligibility criteria for qualifying for Early/Head Start programs?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>+ From the perspective of parents, what is their awareness of eligibility criteria for qualifying for Early/Head Start programs?</li></ul>	<p>Data from EHSN</p> <p>Additional Data Collection</p>

WORKFORCE TOPICS

Research Question	Data/Funding Source
<p>Due to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, some of Start Early’s early childhood education (ECE) employees were provided salary increases. To what extent did these salary increases impact Start Early ECE workforce retention rates?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>+ Are there difference in retention rates based on: Early/Head Start program type, location, staff tenure, educational level, Race/Ethnicity or language spoken?</li><li>+ What mechanisms were used to secure funding for increased salaries?</li><li>+ Based on findings on retention rates, what salary and funding recommendations can be made for other ECE workforce members?</li></ul>	Internal Data Analysis
<p>What are the facilitators and barriers that need to be removed related to credentials, compensation and benefits for the early childhood workforce in the recruitment process?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>+ Are these facilitators and barriers the same or different pre-/post-pandemic?</li><li>+ What are effective strategies to increase staff diversity<sup>6</sup>?</li><li>+ How is diversity reflected in the recruitment strategies of programs and agencies for BIPOC staff?</li></ul>	Additional Data Collection
<p>What are the facilitators and barriers that need to be removed that influence early childhood workforce retention? (e.g., credentials, compensation, benefits, professional development opportunities, career pathways, partnerships with peers, mental/physical health support, and workplace climate, culture and environment).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>+ Are these facilitators and barriers the same or different pre-/post-pandemic?</li><li>+ What encourages or prevents individuals who are eligible for the Chicago Early Education Workforce Scholarships to apply or not apply? Do these Scholarships make an impact on Early/Head Start workforce retention?</li></ul>	Additional Data Collection
<p>To what extent are Chicago Early/Head Start staff accessing EducareShare and/ or OHS ECLKC training resources? Are there measurable performance impacts for those who access these resources?</p>	Additional Data Collection

INCLUSION & EQUITY

Research Question	Data/Funding Source
<p>What are the facilitators and barriers that need to be removed to implement and sustain systems- and program-level changes to ensure all Head Start eligible children with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) in Chicago are served in the least restrictive environment?</p>	Crown Inclusion Project Data
<p>What are the facilitators and barriers that need to be removed that influence priority populations’<sup>7</sup> access to Early/Head Start programs throughout different communities?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>+ How are Early/Head Start programs reaching (and not reaching) the specific needs of different communities?</li><li>+ What are the opportunities for Early/Head Start programs to collaborate with other ECE programs to be responsive to family accessibility needs (i.e., off hours or extended hours of care, and access to referred resources)?</li></ul>	CECIDS Community Assessment Data Vivo Enrollment Data
<p>Are there associations between more equitable sociocultural practices in the classroom and teacher job efficacy, satisfaction, well-being and retention/ turnover?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>+ How can professional learning opportunities best support sociocultural equitable practices in Early/Head Start classrooms?</li></ul>	Additional Data Collection, including ACSES tool (pending partnership with Dr. Stephanie Curenton)
<p>What are the facilitators and barriers to providing home-based Early Intervention services for families in Chicago?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>+ How can pathways be continually built from home visiting and Early Intervention to Early/Head Start programs?</li></ul>	Additional Data Collection + Additional Funding
<p>What is the parent/caregiver experience of their child being screened, identified, and potentially receiving an IEP/IFSP or specialize services in Early/Head Start programs?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>+ What additions or adaptations can be made to these processes based on parent/caregiver feedback and perspective?</li></ul>	Additional Data Collection + Additional Funding
<p>How do equitable sociocultural classroom practices vary across setting, funding type(s), and geography? Are there any models in Chicago Head Start programs?</p> <p><i>Additional sociocultural classroom practices-focused research questions are in development.</i></p>	Additional Data Collection, including ACSES tool (pending partnership with Dr. Stephanie Curenton)



# INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

Setting standards and expectations for sustainable and widespread impact



## Tracking Success

This Agenda will be successful if the following are observed and documented:

- 1 We authentically and continuously engage with Early/Head Start parents, staff and practitioners to help drive research priorities and approaches
- 2 Multiple studies are funded and completed that have widely disseminated findings in various accessible formats for multiple audiences within the early care and education field
- 3 Early/Head Start systems-level policy makers and program-level leaders and staff are interested in and can use the findings and data to guide programming for children and families, professional learning and continuous quality improvement





# CONCLUSION

Building an early childhood system in Chicago that gives all young children a chance to thrive



## Advocating for Change

The **Chicago Early/Head Start Research Agenda** hopes to impact the field by informing parents, practitioners, policymakers, funders, researchers, and advocates about Start Early’s research and evaluation findings that show promise for improving early childhood program quality and the outcomes of children, families, and the professionals who serve them. Early childhood services in Chicago must aim to support every young child in a manner that is equitable and culturally, linguistically, and ability responsive.

It is our hope that this Agenda will have broad reaching implications for and impact on practice, policy, and ultimately children and families of Chicago and beyond. We also hope that the Agenda will expand beyond Head Start in the coming years and into other systems that impact the lives and experiences of families with young children.

## Timeline



### ENDNOTES

- 1 We acknowledge the diversity of family structure and intend for this term to encompass all caregivers supporting the health and development of a child.
- 2 Defined as the effort to provide different levels of support based on an individual’s or group’s needs in order to achieve fairness in outcomes. Working to achieve equity acknowledges unequal starting places and the need to correct the imbalance.
- 3 Defined as the practice of identifying, challenging, and changing the values, structures, and behaviors that perpetuate systemic racism.
- 4 Early/Head Start programs reach beyond Chicago-city limits, and intend for this work to focus in the City of Chicago, as well as the general Chicagoland area.
- 5 Defined as putting diversity into action by creating an environment of involvement, respect, and connection—where the richness of ideas, backgrounds, and perspectives are harnessed to create value. Inclusion also centers a person being able to come as they are and being accepted without the need to assimilate into the dominant group.
- 6 Defined as representation of people from a wide range of different identities (e.g., race, gender, age, ability, socioeconomic status) in a team or organization.
- 7 Defined as groups of children/families officially recognized by the Illinois Early Learning Council that experience significant barriers to early care and learning programs (e.g., children experiencing homelessness, with disabilities, face barriers based on culture and/or language, impacted by parental involvement in the criminal legal systems, etc.)



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