

Office of the Mayor
121 N LaSalle St. Unit 507
Chicago, IL 60602

Chicago City Council
City Hall Council
Chambers 121 N LaSalle
St, 2nd Floor Chicago, IL
60602

Dear Mayor Brandon Johnson and Members of City Council,

We, the undersigned organizations, urge you to direct additional funds in the City budget toward investment in early care and education (ECE) programs, services, and infrastructure that support expectant families and those with young children in Chicago. Investments in ECE are critical to ensuring our city's youngest learners are healthy, developmentally on track, and arrive at kindergarten ready to learn and thrive. The city budget must also prioritize communities, families and children most impacted by historical, structural, and institutional discrimination and disparities by ensuring ECE programs have the resources they need to provide the high-quality, accessible, bilingual, and culturally responsive programming that families need and want. Mayor Johnson and his administration's transition report made clear the commitment to ensuring that in Chicago every student is supported in a fully resourced, safe, and healthy learning environment¹ *and* every person is provided the specific support they need to grow, thrive, and live healthfully throughout their life². Building on Chicago's strong history of investing in ECE opportunities that begin at birth and are delivered in both school and community-based settings is key to achieving these complementary and interdependent visions. Strong, sustainable investment is particularly needed now as the City continues to recover from the pandemic, but faces funding cliffs from expiration of federal relief dollars, while contending with a unique crisis of providing support to thousands of migrant families with young children. We therefore submit for your consideration the following recommendations.

Strengthen the governance and infrastructure of Chicago's mixed-delivery ECE system

- *Expand early childhood leadership and staffing in the city to lead the planning and administration of Chicago's early childhood services and supports.* Meeting the needs of both families and the whole child through a unified prenatal-to-five system requires coordination across multiple city departments, community based

¹ Chicago for the People, "Transition Team Report to Mayor Brandon Johnson," Education Subcommittee Vision, page 53.

² Chicago for the People, "Transition Team Report to Mayor Brandon Johnson," Health & Human Services Subcommittee Vision, page 95.

organizations, and community stakeholders. We recommend investing city funds to support additional roles in the Mayor's Office that can focus on key areas of coordination—family engagement and outreach, workforce, public-private partnerships, and data—staffed with subject matter experts representing communities facing historical disinvestment. In particular, this additional capacity can ensure plans for universal pre-k expansion are transparent and considerate of the implications for all stakeholders involved. It can also ensure that the existing public-private partnership, Every Child Ready Chicago, is better utilized to meet the needs of the stakeholders.

- *Strengthen the existing referral system for early learning services including the hotline and centralized application.* Part of the Chicago Early Learning infrastructure, the hotline assists tens of thousands of families in navigating the array of available early learning options that they can apply to using a centralized application. Adequate funding coupled with consistent ongoing data and information on all available options between CPS and community-based ECE providers will aid in filling empty slots, reducing waitlists, and addressing inequities.
- *Increase investments in community collaborations embedded in communities and conducting outreach on the ground to understand families' needs and desires and match them with appropriate programs and services.* Currently only two community organizations receive city-funded mini-grants to go beyond the hotline to engage families and promote Chicago Early Learning enrollment at the community-level. We recommend increasing support of the existing community collaborations and funding additional collaborations in communities identified with under enrollment in early learning programs. The focus on the community-level ensures the outreach is tailored and accessible to its families' needs, including those with language barriers and cultural differences like many of the newly arrived migrants, and that community-identified challenges, such as lack of slots for 3 year olds, can be surfaced and addressed. Additional community collaborations will also require an increase in the funds available for the training, capacity building, and technical assistance that support them.

Build and sustain the full spectrum of ECE workforce

- *Increase the City's Corporate Fund investment in the Chicago Early Learning Workforce Scholarship (CELWS).* The City of Chicago is experiencing an early childhood workforce crisis that predates—but was also greatly exacerbated by—the pandemic. A direct way to create accessible pathways for new educators is to increase funding for CELWS through the allocation to the Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS) budget that comes from the City's Corporate Fund. The scholarship supports approximately 600 students each year—around 200 new

awardees plus those continuing. Meanwhile, approximately 945 new applications were received for the 2023-24 academic year, a 46% increase. To fully meet this demand and fund all scholarships at 100%, the budget for the CELWS would need to be \$19.9M total, which means there is a gap of \$14.9M. At the very least, the scholarship will need an additional \$470,000 in local funds in order to maintain the same rate of awards in the coming year, due to the loss of this funding from the reduction in the City's Head Start grant. We encourage the City to commit to further increasing funding for the scholarship over time to begin to fill this gap.

- *Acknowledge the critical work of early childhood professionals by dedicating City funding to increase support and compensation for the workforce.* We agree with the transition report that all jobs should be “good jobs” that raise working families’ living standards and intentionally benefit historically excluded workers and communities. Although there is substantial work underway at the state level to address workforce issues, Chicago is uniquely suited to address some of the challenges faced by the city’s early childhood workforce and provide additional and much needed supports. As the City works to structurally and sustainably address the gap in pay parity between educators in school-based early childhood settings and community-based settings in the long-term, funds from the city budget should be used to increase compensation for these essential workers in the short-term. The City should consider premium pay or short-term investments in compensation for early childhood workers—including those working in center-based and family child care homes, Early Interventionists, home visitors, and doulas—that other cities have adopted.
- *Increase the City’s Corporate Fund investment in Family Connects Chicago (FCC) to sustain its existing operations.* FCC is a universal newborn support model that combats disparities in maternal and infant health outcomes by offering a nurse home visit to every birthing family in Chicago. Administered by the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH), this program serves as one of the earliest components of the prenatal-to-five system. Building trust with families and communities from the start is critical to ensuring everyone has the services they need to grow and thrive.

Continue investment in the modernization of Chicago’s early childhood data infrastructure

- *Invest City funds in the Chicago Early Childhood Integrated Data System (CECIDS) to ensure this public good is providing real-time, accurate data that is essential to advancing a clear understanding of the City’s ECE landscape and equity in accessibility.* Chicago’s 180,000 young children, ages birth through 5 are served through a variety of early childhood programs and funding streams, each with its own data system, set of eligibility guidelines, and compliance requirements. CECIDS

was developed out of an imperative to mitigate this fragmentation that exacerbates inequities and limits program improvement.. Last year, we rallied behind the imperative of modernizing our early childhood data infrastructure, resulting in a \$529,000 annual allocation. Continuing this investment through 2024 is paramount. CECIDS bridges the gaps between disparate early childhood programs and funding streams, offering an integrated platform that provides all stakeholders insight on Chicago's progress towards its goals for equitable access to high quality early childhood education and care and fair compensation for the early childhood workforce. As we strive for educational justice and comprehensive services, CECIDS is the cornerstone that will align our goals and elevate our city's progress.

Key to achieving a unified vision for a successful prenatal-to-five system will be partnership with Chicago's community stakeholders and organizations that advocate for and provide services to thousands of families with young children across the city of Chicago. We appreciate the consideration given to these recommendations and stand ready to partner with the Mayor's Office and City Council to plan for a budget that provides the best possible services and supports to the families of Chicago.

Sincerely,

Mike Shaver, President/CEO, Brightpoint

Martin S. Castro, CEO, Casa Central Social Services Corporation

Bela Moté, President and CEO, Carole Robertson Center for Learning

Edgar Evaristo Ramirez, President and CEO, Chicago Commons

Anita Andrews-Hutchinson, Steering Committee Member, Child Care Advocates United

Libby Shortenhaus, CEO, Christopher House

Sara Ray Stoelinga, President and CEO, Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford

Valerie Coffman, Associate Director of Education, Enlace Chicago

Veronica Cortez, Associate Director of Policy, Erikson Institute

Dara Munson, President and CEO, Family Focus

Maricela Garcia, Chief Executive Officer, Gads Hill Center

Jason Kaiser, Executive Director, Howard Area Community Center

April Janney, Chief Executive Officer, Illinois Action for Children

Dr. Rebecca Vonderlack-Navarro, Director of Education and Research, Latino Policy Forum

Ashon McKenzie, Executive Director of Illinois, Start Early

Nicole Robinson, CEO, YWCA Metropolitan Chicago