



START
EARLY'S
CHICAGO
POLICY
AGENDA



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OUR VISION FOR CHICAGO

Start Early's vision is for every child in the City of Chicago to have access to a continuum of high-quality early childhood services before birth and through age five that is equitable and culturally, linguistically and ability- responsive. Our work is cemented in our commitment to advancing racial equity and heavily informed by research, practice and the lived experiences of the families and professionals we serve at Start Early. Our latest Chicago policy agenda, covering city fiscal years 2024 through 2027, lays out our vision for policy and systems change that will promote access to quality early care and learning programs and services and effectively meet the needs of the children and families who need them most. Below we share an overview of Start Early's key strategies and goals for Chicago over the next four years.



OUR CURRENT CONTEXT

Chicago has a strong history of investing in a mixed delivery system of early childhood services, but despite this investment, the vast majority of Chicago's children continue to arrive at kindergarten under-prepared in math, language and literacy, and social emotional learning. Disparities in preparedness exist among children of color and are even more acute for children who are low-income, English Learners, and children with disabilities. These outcomes suggest that Chicago families continue to face significant challenges to accessing supports that ensure the health, safety, well-being and education of their young children before birth through age five.



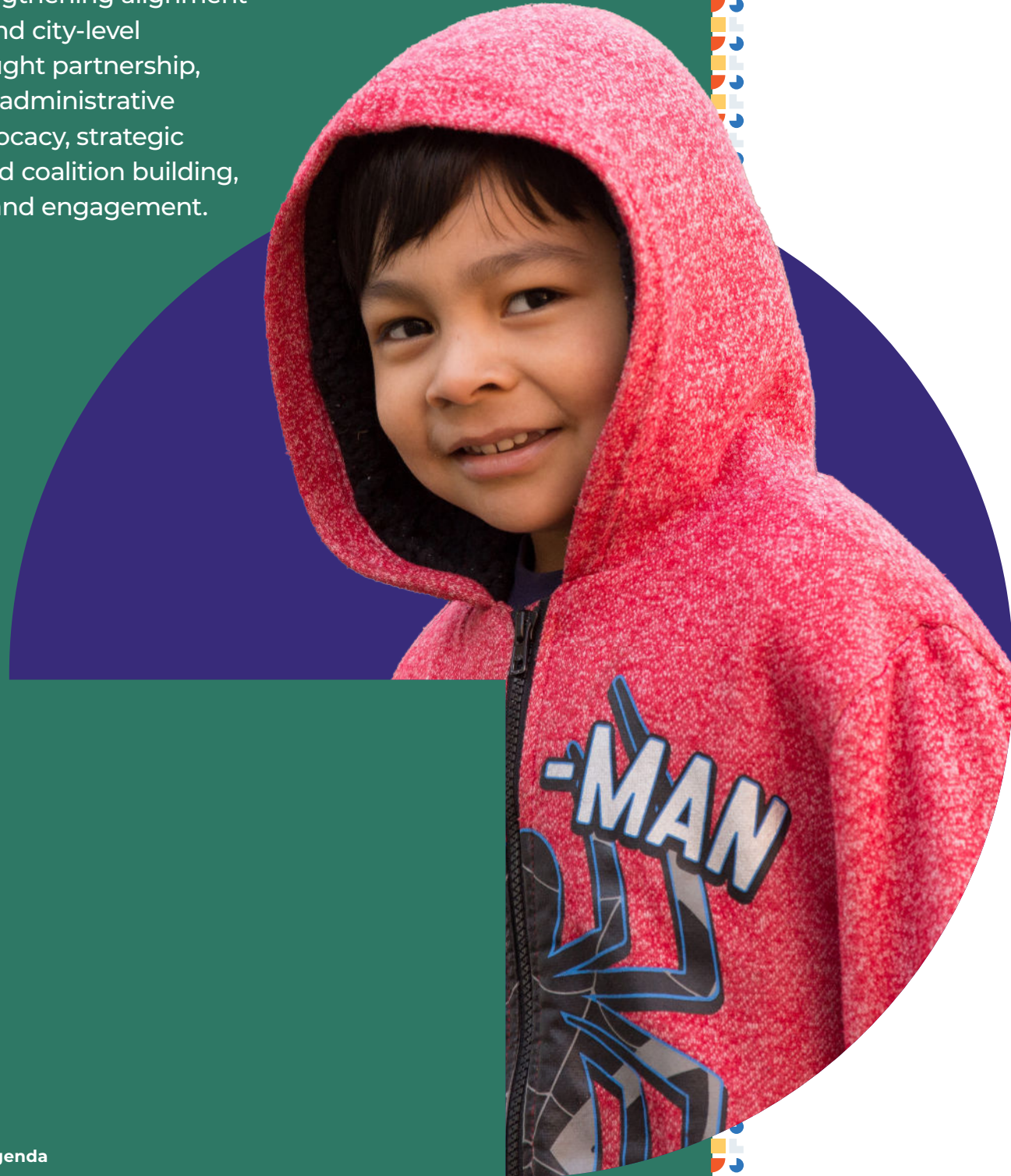
Despite the challenges, Chicago is positioned to make great strides toward a higher-quality, more equitable early care and learning system. Collectively, early learning stakeholders in Chicago will need to come together to address issues like the growing early childhood workforce crisis that leaves programs understaffed, staff underpaid and families without options that work for their schedules and the specific needs of their child. These stakeholders will need to reckon with a system of complicated funding that pits school-based and community-based providers against each other and incentivizes models of service that are not always inclusive or comprehensive. Doing so will require increased investment in and strengthening of Chicago's early learning infrastructure, including the Chicago Early Childhood Integrated Data System, the Chicago Early Learning Workforce Scholarship, and the expansion of Family Connects Chicago universal newborn supports.

Start Early is committed to contributing to these efforts and working with our public and private partners over the next four years to develop and pursue an aligned, comprehensive vision for improving the complex system of early care and learning supports for families with young children in Chicago.



OUR STRATEGIES IN CHICAGO

To address our policy priorities in the City of Chicago, Start Early employs several strategies, including strengthening alignment across state- and city-level initiatives, thought partnership, legislative and administrative policy and advocacy, strategic relationship and coalition building, and outreach and engagement.



Thought partnership, leadership & consultation

We provide expertise and support on policy solutions to Chicago systems leaders, including in the Mayor's Office, Chicago Public Schools, the Department of Family and Support Services, the Chicago Department of Public Health, City Council, and other public-private governing and advisory bodies. We work to continually develop, deepen, and share comprehensive cross-system content knowledge on aspects of early care and learning policies, programs, services, and related topics. We conduct background research, perform data and policy analyses, and synthesize complex information to use in developing policies and programs.

Coalition & partnership efforts

We participate in, build, and support coalitions of advocates and other stakeholders to leverage the power of collective action. We partner with other organizations, parents, and practitioners to identify shared policy and advocacy priorities and collaborate to make change. We also actively work to create alignment across partners and stakeholders to build greater influence.

Administrative advocacy

We work with state and city-level administrative and governmental agencies – such as the Department of Family and Support Services, the Chicago Department of Public Health, and Chicago Public Schools – that have authority and discretion over the implementation of early childhood programs and services to create or revise policies and procedures to optimize impact of these programs. Administrative advocacy can include staffing and participating in advisory bodies to city agencies – including Every Child Ready Chicago, the Family Connects Citywide Advisory Council and others – as well as directly providing recommendations to and advising public partners individually.



Legislative advocacy

We work with elected officials and their staff in City Council to advocate for sustained and increased investments in Chicago's early care and learning system. We also work with elected officials and their staff in the Illinois General Assembly and the Illinois congressional delegation to sustain and bolster investments in foundational early learning and care programs and strengthen statutory language that undergirds those programs and services.

Outreach & engagement

Start Early's 40 years of experience providing early care and learning services in Chicago enables our policy team to focus on developing bidirectional relationships with families, practitioners, and other stakeholders most proximate to early care and learning issues, ensuring our policy and advocacy priorities are not only grounded in research but are also informed by family and provider voice and reflective of their priorities, expertise, and preferred solutions. We work to increase stakeholders' knowledge of early care and learning programs and critical issues facing the field and provide timely updates on topics of policy that are relevant for early care and learning program leadership, staff, and families. We also mobilize practitioners, families, and other stakeholders to take action to support the early care and learning system in Chicago.

OUR GOALS

Start Early organizes its work in Chicago toward a sustainable, equitable, and accessible system of high-quality early care and learning around four primary systems-level goals. These goals include:



Strong infrastructure

Chicago's mixed delivery system is complex, fragmented, and under resourced—conditions which can create inequities for families and early childhood professionals, blunt effectiveness of programs and services, and threaten the overall sustainability and impact of the system. Families' needs vary, and it's important to preserve a range of options for them, while providers would benefit from more coherent, accessible funding opportunities. With this in mind, we work to increase investments in Chicago's early care and learning system, strengthen and streamline system governance, integrate and align supports across the system, engage and empower communities to have a better defined and resourced role in system governance, and strengthen data systems and research to build stronger, more cohesive, system infrastructure.

Well-designed and administered programs and services

Decades of research support the connection between quality early care and learning programs and services and positive outcomes for children and families; however, programs and services must be designed and administered to ensure full access and responsiveness to the evolving needs and desires of families, communities, and early childhood professionals. The Illinois Policy Team continuously identifies areas for improvement and optimization across the core early childhood programs and services in Chicago—child care, Early Intervention (IDEA Part C), evidence-based early childhood home visiting and doula services, Early Childhood Block Grant programs (Preschool for All, Preschool for All Expansion, and Prevention Initiative), and Early/Head Start—and engages with national, state, and local system leaders to strengthen policies and implementation.

Thriving, representative workforce

Early childhood professionals are the lifeblood of early childhood programs—children and families literally can't be served without them. Working with young children and their families is complex, important work. Research shows that the qualifications of, and supports provided to, early childhood professionals are critical for providing quality programs and services and achieving positive child and family outcomes. Further, research shows the benefits to children and families when they have access to teachers, home visitors, doulas, therapists and other providers who reflect their culture, race and language. Unfortunately, the early childhood system is in the midst of a national workforce crisis, which has significantly decreased access to programs and services for families and children in Chicago, and across the country. Addressing this crisis is among the most urgent priorities for the Illinois Policy Team, and as such we are heavily focused on advancing strategies that attract and increase retention of representative staff, ease pathways toward higher qualifications, and strengthen the perception and reputation of early childhood professionals.

Healthy, safe & economically secure families

Families and children can benefit most from all that quality early childhood programs have to offer when they are healthy, safe, and economically secure. Lack of access to healthcare, unstable housing, inadequate wages, and lack of paid sick and parental leave not only present serious barriers to participating in early childhood programs but are also associated with poor outcomes for families and children. Recognizing the importance of health and well-being to positive child and family outcomes, we work to improve early learning programs to enhance the opportunity for health, mental health and other supports to be delivered within programs and also support policies and initiatives that improve access to these critical supports.

STRONG INFRASTRUCTURE

- Promote state-level policies and regulations that promote an inclusive, well-resourced early childhood system in Chicago.
- Grow city funding for Chicago's early childhood programs, system infrastructure and supports.
 - Deepen city investment in an early childhood local collaboration system with defined functions connected to aligned, effective regional and state council infrastructure.
- Establish a coherent, consolidated early childhood administrative/governance structure in the city of Chicago, centering the experiences of families and providers, especially those families furthest from opportunities and with the most complex circumstances.
 - Strengthen the Every Child Ready Chicago public-private advisory and other policy making tables to improve bi-directional communication across families, communities and system leaders.
 - Promote early childhood, bilingual, and special education expertise on public policy-making bodies, including the Chicago Board of Education and City Council.
 - Improve the mechanisms by which providers receive public funds to preserve the mixed-delivery system of school- and community-based programs and provide greater stability and adequacy.
- Establish a system to provide inclusive special education services to children with disabilities in early care and learning programs across all settings;
 - Work with Chicago Public Schools to ensure delivery of special education services in community-based early childhood programs.
- Promote the sustainability and expansion of a city-wide system for Universal Newborn Screening and Support services.
 - Identify public and private funding for and ensure integration of Family Connects Chicago into broader prenatal-to-three health and early learning services.
- Strengthen early childhood data systems, capacity, and the utilization of data in policy/decision making.
 - Promote sustainability of the Chicago Early Childhood Integrated Data System (CECIDS) and the Early Childhood Research Alliance of Chicago (EC-REACH).

WELL-DESIGNED AND ADMINISTERED PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Early Intervention

- Increase number of Chicago children served in the Early Intervention program, with a focus on children under age 1 and children who meet automatic eligibility criteria.
- Improve the process of transitioning children from Early Intervention to Special Education.
- Strengthen direct communication with providers and families to increase active engagement in improving the system and their ability to advocate for their children.

Early Childhood Block Grant

- Ensure the supply of adequately funded early childhood slots in a range of settings (including full-day, full-year), particularly in areas of highest need.
- Increase equitable distribution of funds and program slots across Chicago Public Schools, community-based programs, and family child care.
- Increase supply of adequately funded center-based slots for children birth-three.

Child Care

- Improve supply and quality of center- and home-based child care, with a focus on infant-toddler slots and inclusion of children with delays or disabilities.

Home Visiting & Doula Services

- Raise the profile of and strengthen the role of home visitors and doulas in the broader mixed delivery system of early care and learning.
- Improve family participation rates in home visiting and doula programs through increased public awareness of the program and supporting the development of new models or promising practices to better meet family and community needs.

Head Start and Early Head Start

- Increase family enrollment and participation in Chicago's Head Start and Early Head Start programs.
- Increase the availability of center-based Early Head Start slots.
- Improve alignment, collaboration, and cohesion across Chicago's Early Head Start and Head Start grant recipients.

THRIVING, REPRESENTATIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE

- Increase recruitment and retention of early childhood professionals, including those with specialized skills in bilingual and special education.
 - Increase compensation with a focus on pay parity and competitive benefits between community-based providers and Chicago Public Schools teachers.
 - Strengthen opportunities for professional development, reflective supervision, and infant and early childhood mental health consultation.
 - Strengthen the perception and reputation of the early childhood field by partnering with city agencies to promote early learning careers as desirable for youth.
- Increase credential, degree, license, and endorsement attainment for the early childhood field, including in bilingual and special education.
 - Expand access to the Chicago Early Learning Workforce Scholarship and other supports for candidates.



HEALTHY, SAFE AND ECONOMICALLY SECURE FAMILIES

- Strengthen the alignment and integration of the health and early care and learning systems.
 - Inform and support policies and initiatives that promote safe and healthy early care and learning environments
 - Increase access to culturally and linguistically responsive health care for families with young children and pregnant people, including preventive and specialty care, mental health and substance use recovery care.
 - Improve access to public and private health insurance for families with young children and pregnant people.
- Increase economic supports for families with young children, including paid family and medical leave, access to public benefits and tax credits.
- Inform and support policies and initiatives that promote safe and healthy neighborhoods, housing and environments and positive social and community supports.



