

**Illinois Early Learning Council  
Data, Research, and Evaluation Committee  
Research Agenda**

**Summary**

The Illinois Early Learning Council (ELC), a public-private partnership, strengthens, coordinates and expands programs and services for children, birth to five, throughout Illinois. The ELC builds on current programs to ensure a comprehensive, statewide early learning system (preschool, child care, Head Start, health care and support programs for parents) to improve the lives of Illinois children and families. The Data, Research, and Evaluation (DRE) Committee of the ELC is charged with supporting the specific data, research, and evaluation needs of the ELC by acting as a resource for existing and current research in the field. Specifically, the DRE Committee collaborates with the other ELC committees to assist with current projects and acts as a resource for existing and current research in the field. The DRE Committee is also charged with providing recommendations that would define and address the larger scope of research and evaluation needs for early childhood programs and services throughout the state of Illinois. The ELC research agenda, curated by the DRE Committee, would inform research and policy development efforts in the state.

This research agenda seeks to articulate research needs for policy and practice in our state that will inform the early childhood community. It is based on the ten Key Policy Questions developed by the committee in 2011 and additional feedback collected over the course of succeeding years, particularly 2015. The agenda proposes the consideration of research in ten key areas of inquiry:

- 1. Program Access;**
- 2. Program Impact;**
- 3. Program Attendance**
- 4. Program Quality;**
- 5. Program Characteristics;**
- 6. Program Funding;**
- 7. Early Care and Education Workforce;**
- 8. Family Supports and Service Alignment;**
- 9. Cross-System Collaboration; and**
- 10. Health.**

The research agenda is envisioned as a comprehensive inventory of research questions from which specific areas of inquiry will be prioritized over time. The inclusion of questions in this document does not mean that there are not currently research results for that question available in the State of Illinois or elsewhere. Rather, it means that these are questions the Committee believes are worth asking. Furthermore, this document is by no means meant to be exhaustive. The DRE committee understands that this is a living document which will continuously be updated and it is meant to inform our research needs now and in the future. This document will continue to chronicle the journey of the shifting priorities in the field.

Our goal is that the research agenda remain posted on the Office of Early Childhood Development DRE Committee's website, where it could help inform researchers in prioritizing projects. It could also serve as a resource to the government and philanthropic entities at the state and local levels that support research. Additionally, it is the hope that this research agenda may be of use to other states.

The research agenda is a dynamic, living document meant to be updated and revised periodically. Accordingly, the DRE welcomes suggestions for additional research questions, or additional prioritized research questions. The DRE also encourages the submission of any available links to sources and points of contact to assist researchers in accessing data and other information relevant to particular research questions. Suggestions for consideration can be submitted electronically to the DRE staffer at [ielcresearch@ounceofprevention.org](mailto:ielcresearch@ounceofprevention.org).

The Research Agenda includes two sections. The first section is a set of prioritized questions that were identified by the DRE Committee as being of particular importance. It is the DRE's goal to have this list vetted by the Executive Committee and other members of the Council, and then be updated at regular intervals going forward. The second section is a comprehensive list of research questions generated by the Early Learning Council and its Committees; the questions in this working draft were generated through meetings of Council committees in 2014 and early 2015.

The second section is organized into areas of inquiry that include varying levels of specificity. When attempting to address a question from the inventory, it will be necessary to fully articulate the question by defining the scope, clarifying the question, and framing it to fit within the broader state policy and program conversations. Each question will look different depending on which early childhood program or group of programs are deconstructing the question. For the sake of this document, unless otherwise specified, early childhood education programs refer to those serving children birth to five – and the array of programs serving young children have a diverse set of purposes and eligibility requirements, which will undoubtedly influence research designs and the results of research studies.

The areas of inquiry and questions are meant to include all children and families in early childhood education. Unless otherwise noted, questions are meant to include all populations, including but not limited to: children of teen parents, children in homeless families, children with disabilities (including those transitioning from early intervention to preschool or early childhood special education), linguistically isolated families, and children in family, friend and neighbor (license-exempt) child care. These priority populations are a special focus of the Early Learning Council and of the Committee. As the landscape of early childhood education may include various cross-sections, it should also be understood that the questions posed are related to both publicly- and privately-funded initiatives. While many of the questions focus on children being served by state-funded programs, the Committee is also interested in the characteristics of children not currently being served, and the impacts of that lack of service.

While many of the research questions included in the research agenda are descriptive, it is anticipated that all of these research areas will be pursued with the ultimate goal of determining how they relate to outcomes for children. Different types of research methodologies will be needed to address diverse topics on this list, but many of these research questions will be easier to answer with a unified early childhood data system – and indeed, this list will hopefully help inform the development of that system in the next few years. The DRE committee understands the difficulty of answering the questions in this document and does not propose any specific methodologies for obtaining answers to particular questions.

#### *Contributors to the Research Agenda*

The following Early Learning Council committees and subcommittees have provided feedback to date:

- Executive Committee;
- Home Visiting Task Force;
  - Executive Committee;
  - Sustainability Workgroup;
- Program Standards and Quality Committee;
- Systems Integration and Alignment Committee;
  - Special Education Subcommittee;
  - Community Systems Development Subcommittee
  - Health Subcommittee;
- Family and Community Engagement Committee; and
  - All Families Served Subcommittee.

### *Defining At-Risk Populations*

For purposes of this document, the term “at-risk” will be defined using the U.S. Department of Education’s definition for “High-Need Children”:

High-Need Children means children from birth until kindergarten entry who are from low-income families or otherwise in need of special assistance and support, including children who have disabilities or developmental delays, who are English learners, who reside on "Indian lands" as that term is defined by Section 8013(6) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, of 1965, who are migrant, homeless, or in foster care; and other children as identified by the State.<sup>1</sup>

### *Appendices*

The appendices include research reports and agendas produced by other committees and organizations, to provide context on work that has already been undertaken. These include:

1. *Home Visiting Research Agenda* by Home Visiting Research Network; and
2. *What Does a Successful Early Childhood Partnership Look Like?* by Early Childhood Action Partnerships: Partner, Plan, Act and Illinois Action for Children; and
3. *Recommendation to the Early Learning Council Regarding Highest Need Families* by the All Families Served Subcommittee of the Family and Community Engagement Committee.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Definitions*. <http://www.ed.gov/early-learning/elc-draft-summary/definitions>

## I. Priority Questions

The Data, Research, and Evaluation Committee has identified some potential priority questions. These represent questions that members of the Committee felt were of particular importance, and are presented with the rationale for their inclusion. The DRE's goal is to have a small number of questions identified as key priorities to inform researchers and funders of research, and prepared this list for consideration by the Early Learning Council Executive Committee and other Council committees.

In developing this list, the DRE Committee noted that some of its key questions were ones that could only be answered with a research study, while others could be answered with raw data from the state – some of which may not be collected at this time. These priority questions are therefore sorted by what it would take to answer them: a research study, or improved data collection. We note that for all questions, it will be important to have data that has been carefully checked for accuracy, and ideally data that can be subdivided in multiple ways (geographically and demographically).

While the DRE Committee did not use a set of defined criteria to develop this list, in general it was guided by the question: what information would cause us to behave differently in policy and practice, in ways that would likely lead to better outcomes for young children? Our focus is accordingly on questions that, if answered, would help inform changes in policy and practice. Some of these questions are relatively broad, and we know that different researchers would answer them in different ways; our goal is not to dictate to researchers the terms of their work, but instead to identify some research projects that we believe would be useful and relevant to the Illinois early learning community. Over time the Committee may seek to develop more formal criteria, while recognizing that inclusion on this list will always be primarily dependent on the judgment of leaders in the Illinois early childhood community.

### *Factual Questions*

These are questions that we believe the state's Longitudinal Data System should ultimately be able to answer, presumably on an annual basis. Some of them can already be answered in significant part, but none of them should require academic-quality research to answer.

- What are the demographics of young children and families in the state?
- What are the demographics of at-risk children and their families in early learning programs?
- Do at-risk children have access to programs?

*Rationale: These questions must be answered to obtain an accurate understanding of populations served in early childhood programs. Accurate demographic information about the overall population served is necessary to calculate the percentage of children served by any portion of the system. Particularly, the Early Learning Council is focused on ensuring that Illinois is serving the most vulnerable populations.*

- How many at-risk children transition from (licensed and/or unlicensed) family child care and/or family, friend and neighbor care to preschool? How many at-risk children were placed in preschool as a result of home visits? What is the unduplicated headcount of at-risk children across different childcare and preschool settings?

*Rationale: Understanding the connections among programs is critical to shaping programs in a way that allow them to work in a complementary fashion. This baseline data would allow researchers to understand the interrelationships among programs, and lead to better study designs to measure their impacts.*

- What credentials do program staff, directors, and family child care providers currently have? What are the gaps in qualifications for program staff, directors, and family child care providers? How long have staff been in their current program or in the field?

*Rationale: The knowledge, skills, and competencies of the early care and education workforce are critical to implementing effective early childhood programs that improve outcomes for young children.*

- Are program staff and directors trained to deal with cultural differences?

*Rationale: Staff and directors must be able to address inclusion and other culturally-specific issues. If they do not have the proper training or resources, directors and staff will be inadequately serving children and families.*

- What languages do program staff and directors speak?

*Rationale: There must be alignment between the languages spoken by staff and directors to the population of families and children that are being served.*

### *Research Questions*

These are questions that we believe would require a research study to answer – in particular, questions about the expected impact of different early childhood programs.

- What is the impact of program access on a child's family?
- What happens to at-risk children who do not access programs?
- What happens to the children who don't receive special education evaluations or are found ineligible after they receive evaluations?
- What impact do early learning programs have on social-emotional development, trauma, special needs and inclusion?

*Rationale: Understanding the impact of access to early learning programs – and the impact of lack of access to early learning programs – is critical to shaping the state's early learning investment strategy.*

- What impact does the source of program funding have on program quality? (Note: To date, different programs have defined "quality" differently; how the state defines "quality" for individual programs or the system as a whole will impact research on this question.)
- What has been the impact of funding choices that have been made at the federal, state, and local level?
- What are the various cost savings associated with early learning programs?

*Rationale: Programs are supported with different funding levels to achieve different goals, and funding related to Illinois specific programs must be prioritized. As the funding climate changes within the state, the impact of funding on program stability must be evaluated.*

- Do programs with wraparound programming achieve better childhood outcomes?
- Do programs with blended and braided funding offering full-day, full year programming achieve better childhood outcomes? Or programs with part-day programming?

*Rationale: Programs operate in concert with other programs and services and should be assessed together and separately to determine how better outcomes for children are achieved.*

- What are some causes of absenteeism? What are the characteristics of families of children who have high absenteeism?
- Are health issues related to absenteeism? What other issues relate to absenteeism?

- What are the differences in absentee rates among programs, families, and program models?
- What is the relationship between absenteeism in early learning programs and absenteeism in later years?
- Are there some causes or patterns of absenteeism that are more or less correlated with negative outcomes?

*Rationale: Program attendance is related to many other areas such as issues related to transportation, family working hours, and spatial mismatch between a child's location and the location of their school or program.*

- How were transitions from home visiting to preschool planned and implemented between home visits and preschool? Between family child care (including Family, Friend, and Neighbor care) and preschool?
- Are there measurable differences in impact of the different approaches to transitions?

*Rationale: Understanding how programs link with each other and what practices are effective in that area can help lead to the design and execution of programs that better serve children and families.*

- What is the quality of Family, Friend, and Neighbor care (FFN)?

*Rationale: Many parents rely on family, friend, and neighbor care for their child care needs. These programs lack stringent oversight but offer care for children whose parents work nontraditional hours. Understanding the existing quality of this type of care can help determine the need for added supports, if any, to ensure that they are able to execute quality.*

- Are local collaborations advancing program quality?
- Are Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) effective in creating successful collaborations? Do MOUs truly reflect shared community understandings?
- What are the barriers to establishing effective formal agreements?

*Rationale: Local collaboration is a key strategy for the state, which would like to understand what is and is not working in community-level efforts.*

- Do staff and director training to deal with cultural differences have positive impacts on the children and families they serve?

*Rationale: If the state is investing resources in supporting training on cultural issues, it is important to determine if that training is effective and having the desired outcomes.*

- What technical assistance is being provided to programs, and what impact is it having?

*Rationale: The federal government, states, and localities are investing significant resources in technical assistance, and it is important to determine the impact of that investment.*

- Because home visitors work in a different environment than other early childhood education professionals, how are home visiting programs supporting their workforce? How are early childhood professionals being supported in the workforce?

*Rationale: All staff should have a supportive work environment and access to professional development opportunities. This will promote a better workforce, help with retention, and reduce overall job stress.*

- What is the organizational climate of early care and education programs?
- Which elements have the most impact on the effectiveness of the program?
- How have programs been able to improve their organizational climate?

*Rationale: If an organization fosters a culture of continuous learning, promotes trusting relationships and collaboration, and provides a workplace with supervisor support and equitable compensation, this will influence the effectiveness of the program and organization at-large.*

## II. Areas of Inquiry

### 1. Program Access

Our state should develop a comprehensive picture of who is accessing early care and education programs to inform policy and practice choices aimed at ensuring that high-quality care and education is available to all young children in need.

#### *Recommended research questions:*

- Which types of programs are located in which geographic areas? What gaps in services (across age, geographical region, demographic profile, and programs) exist for early learning programs?
- Which children are enrolled in multiple programs?
- What percentage of children in early learning programs are part of the priority populations identified by the Family and Community Engagement Committee?
- Which children have been enrolled in early intervention programs? Which children from “priority populations” are able to access early intervention services?
- What percentage of children enrolled in early learning programs live with a relative other than their birth parents?
- What percentage of children enrolled in early learning programs have moved within the last six months? How frequently are they moving? Knowing that children are moving regularly, how do we track them?
- How do successful programs recruit participants? Does this recruitment start prenatally?
- How is access impacted by programs charging fees above and beyond co-pays?
- Does access change if the quality of the program changes (due to charging higher fees)?
- Are we serving the most at-risk children in full-day programs?

### 2. Program Impact

High-quality early learning programs are proven to narrow the achievement gap and reduce future spending on remedial education services, child welfare and crime. Research shows that at-risk children who attend quality early care and education programs are more likely to graduate high school, attend college, and contribute more to the economy. Our state should better understand whether our programs are having this same impact on the young children and families they serve.

#### *Recommended research questions:*

- How many hours a day of service do children receive? What is the impact of changes in program dosage? Does the program’s length of day (part-day versus full-day programs) make a difference?
- Are children enrolled in early learning programs less likely to end up in the juvenile justice system? In the child welfare system? In the mental health system?
- What indicators are being used to measure children’s developmental progress? And what are the trends?
- Do assessment trends over time indicate a closing of the achievement gap?
- How do children enrolled in early learning programs fare in K-12? (Re: test scores, attendance, drop-out rates, etc.)
- Do children receive special education services in the public school system? Do children from high quality early learning programs have a reduced need for special education?
- How do program goals vary by program type and/or funding source? How do program providers accessing multiple funding streams reconcile those different goals?



- What kind of comprehensive services have a significant impact on children going from preschool to kindergarten?
- How do children who had home visits and then transitioned to preschool do in later grades?
- What results have been obtained for children on validated instruments measuring different developmental domains? (Because “assessment” is sometimes used as a broad term that encompasses both screening and assessment paired with curriculum, research should focus on the both types of assessments used by programs and how they are used and measured.)
- What types of training do those assessing children receive?

### **3. Program Attendance**

Emerging research has shown that early childhood education services are only valuable if children and families maintain consistent attendance. As a state, we should investigate more closely attendance rates across programs and funding streams as well as the basic causes of early childhood absenteeism for both children and families.

Recommended research questions:

- When do attendance problems begin? Do attendance problems begin at the prenatal visits of the mother or at well-baby visits?
- In the subset of families who are missing preschool, are they doing so because of lack of prenatal visits? Or are those missing preschool not receiving prenatal or well-baby visits because of their early childhood attendance rates are low?
- Are the same clusters of families experiencing health risks in prenatal/early stages the same families with children experiencing attendance issues at age 8?
- What do children miss if they receive services intermittently?

### **4. Program Quality**

As Illinois moves forward with quality improvement efforts such as ExceleRate Illinois, we should gather data on how these efforts are being implemented and what challenges and barriers exist for programs as they work toward a higher level of quality.

*Recommended research questions:*

- What metrics are being used to measure program quality? Are they the best metrics?
- Are an increasing number of programs meeting established quality standards?
- Is the number of accredited programs increasing?
- What is the trend over time regarding the number of programs that are externally evaluated?
- How many programs administer self-assessments?
- Do programs receive the necessary level of funding needed to meet the level of quality policymakers demand? Are we providing enough money to meet the standards?
- How should the field promote and measure fidelity in implementing home visiting innovations (i.e., scaling up effective practices while maintaining quality)? How are such decisions made now? What are the factors associated with successful adoption of innovative practices?
- What are some similarities and differences in the core elements of existing home visiting models? What is the strength of each element’s evidence base?
- How are home visiting services actually delivered? How faithful are services to the service model and how does the implementation system adhere to what is intended?

## **5. Program Characteristics**

A fuller understanding of the characteristics of early care and education programs is essential to ensuring that programs and services are tailored to serving the youngest and most vulnerable children in the right setting at a sufficient dosage to make a difference.

*Recommended research questions:*

- What curriculums are used by programs? Why are they using such curriculums? In what setting is the program delivered?
- What is the staff-to-child ratio?
- How are programs engaging parents and caregivers? How are family child care providers approaching the work?
- Who provides Family Child Care (FCC) and FFN? What are the characteristics of those who provide these services?
- What are the barriers that these FCC and FFN providers face?
- What do FCC and FFN programs provide for families?
- What is the potential of these FCC and FFN providers – given that they're small businesses – to support their communities economically?

## **6. Program Funding**

The availability and stability of funding can have a profound effect on service provision and child outcomes. More information on how funding impacts early childhood providers and the children they serve is critical to creating the policies and infrastructure needed to support a robust and effective early childhood system in our state.

*Recommended research questions:*

- What are the costs associated with each program (e.g. transportation, mental health services, etc.)? What are the funding sources for each program? How are programs combining funds to provide service, and what impact does that have?
- How does the stability of funding influence programs?
- What are the incremental costs of additional program dosage?
- What is the impact of using contracts rather than vouchers on program quality?
- What is the impact of co-pays and fees on parents? Is that affecting access? Are there communities where parents can't meet guidelines? What's the relationship between co-pays, fees on parents, and the quality of the providers/program?

## **7. Early Care and Education Workforce**

The early childhood workforce plays an essential role in successful early care and education programs by creating the environment in which children learn and thrive. A comprehensive understanding of this population, including strengths and challenges, is necessary to inform policy decisions and investments that will create and support a skilled and stable early care and education workforce.

*Recommended research questions:*

- What are the qualifications for program staff, directors, and family child care providers?
- What education, preparation, and training have program staff, directors, and family child care providers received?
- What are the demographics of program staff, directors, and family child care providers? Do they reflect the families they serve?

- At what rate and for what reason does turnover occur? Which programs experience the most/least turnover?
- What are the characteristics of early childhood professionals who stay in the field? Of those who leave the field?
- What salaries and benefits does the program provide staff?
- What technical assistance is provided for workforce development?
- For home visitors, what are the assets and needs of the current workforce? How is staff development measured?

## **8. Family Supports and Service Alignment**

The early identification and management of all developmental and health needs of children and families, including social-emotional and mental health needs, is instrumental to achieving good outcomes. More data on the resources and services that are being provided to young children and families outside of early learning programs, as well as a fuller understanding as to how data is being used to align, prioritize and mobilize resources, is fundamental to ensuring that our state's early care and education programs address the needs of the most at-risk children and their families.

### *Recommended research questions:*

- What percentage of birth mothers received prenatal and/or interconception care?
- What is the percentage of children living in medical homes?
- What medical and dental services have children received? Where are services being provided? Are services connected to an early education and care program?
- What are the demographics of the parents/families caring for children in early childhood programs? What percentage of caregivers breastfeed? What are the rates of maternal depression? What are the rates of maternal health insurance coverage?
- What developmental screenings has the child received? What were the outcomes of those screenings?
- How are needs of children being identified in programs? When needs are identified, what follow-up occurs to ensure those needs are met? Are caregivers being provided with information about what services are available to address needs?
- Have children been referred for medical and social service needs? Did they receive the services? How much time passed between the referral and receipt of services? Which agencies provided the services?
- What are the costs associated with providing additional services?
- How do programs ensure services are provided after making a referral?
- Does targeted outreach and community engagement to non-traditional providers make the transition from FCC and FFN care to half-day preschool easier?
- How do we create pipelines that are community-focused rather than program-focused?
- How should home visiting programs improve family recruitment and engagement? What are the current recruitment practices? How do these practices compare to one another in terms of effectiveness?

## **9. Cross-System Collaboration**

At-risk families face a variety of challenges and must navigate a complex system to find the supports they need. Many factors are critical to the healthy development of young children beyond early care and education programs, and effective collaboration at the local and state levels is critical to reducing barriers faced by families as they seek to access services. A local early childhood partnership brings

together individuals, professionals, organizations, agencies, and community members to address and solve existing and emerging problems that could not be solved by a single organization, group or sector. A successful partnership working towards improved outcomes for all children and families within the defined community focuses efforts on broad-sector coordination, rather than the isolated intervention of individual organizations. While the elements of successful cross-system collaboration may vary from community to community, research into what works and what does not is vital to shaping successful collaboration efforts.

*Recommended research questions:*

- Do children have access to programs and services participating in community collaborations?
- Are children receiving services from programs within a community collaboration showing positive child outcomes? (Kindergarten Readiness Assessment, health indications, etc.)
- What impacts do successful collaborations have?
- How do we measure collaboration, and what makes collaborations more or less effective?
- What are the incentives to building effective community collaborations?
- What are elements of successful collaboration that lead to improved outcomes? How do organizations collaborate to create seamless “pipelines” that succeed for at-risk children?
- How are referrals being tracked? Where are the development screenings taking place? Who receives these screenings?
- Do children feed directly into the next “level” of service?
- Do we know if we’re reaching at-risk children? What’s the experience of those kids once they’re a part of the community collaboration? What are the barriers to building high-functioning community collaboration? Lack of resources? Competition for funds and clients? Administrative rules and regulations? Decentralized programs and services? Lack of leadership and staff to facilitate coordination?

## **10. Health**

Early childhood programs are in a unique position to address determinants of health that influence a child’s future risk for disease, or vulnerability to disease or injury. Early childhood programs can mitigate the harmful consequences of social factors that contribute to health disparities the at risk families face.

*Recommended research questions:*

- What is the length of time between subsequent births?
- What percentage of mothers are screened for domestic violence, trauma and maternal depression?
- What percentage of children are breastfed and for how long?
- What percentages of mothers and children have health insurance?
- What percentage of children are fully immunized? How often are their immunization documents reviewed?
- How many early childhood providers have access to the Illinois Statewide Provider Database?
- How many children served by the early childhood system in Illinois have families whose incomes are at or below the federal poverty line?
- How many children are assessed by developmental and social-emotional screenings? Vision screenings? Lead screenings?
- If children are screened, what percentage of children have problematic screening results?

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- What percentage of children receive well-child services?
- What percentage of children have Body Mass Index above 85<sup>th</sup> percentile? 95<sup>th</sup> percentile? 99<sup>th</sup> percentile?
- How are parents participating in the wellness activities of their children?