

Recommendation to the Early Learning Council Regarding Highest Need Families

Background

The Family and Community Engagement committee is charged with increasing access to the highest quality early learning programs for children, families, and communities with the highest need. The All Families Served subcommittee of the Family and Community Engagement committee was convened to identify the highest need families, the program and system barriers they experience, and effective strategies for serving them. The committee then developed and submitted recommendations to the Early Learning Council aimed at increasing access to early learning programs for a list of priority populations. This brief summarizes the conclusions of the subcommittee, as well as its recommendations.

Who are the highest need families?

The subcommittee identified the following criteria for considering priority populations:

- At risk
- Under-served (i.e. too many such families are not enrolled)
- Challenging for programs to find, reach, or serve
- Measurable at both the community and program level

The following populations meet these criteria:

- Children of teen parents
- Children in homeless families
- Children in families in poverty or deep poverty
- Children/families with Department of Children and Family Services involvement
- Children with disabilities, including those transitioning from early intervention to preschool or early childhood special education
- Children in family, friend & neighbor (license-exempt) child care
- Linguistically isolated families and families that experience significant barriers based on language
- Children of migrant or seasonal workers
- Other categories may be added by local communities or the subcommittee that meet the criteria

Families in the groups listed above tend to encounter obstacles to enrollment and participation in early learning programs, including:

- Lack of information about the benefits or availability of early learning programs in the community. Communication about programs has not effectively reached these groups.
- Transportation barriers such as no car, unsafe streets for walking, parent/caregiver disabilities, parent/caregiver is at home with babies, etc.
- Unusual work schedule making regular daytime attendance difficult
- Inadequate family or peer supports to help with parenting and solve family problems that hinder preschool attendance.
- Insufficient food and clothing

- Unstable housing arrangements
- Linguistic or cultural isolation
- Mistrust of institutions or government because of previous experience or legal issues
- Enrollment requirements that they cannot meet, such as immunization records, birth certificates, enrollment cut-off date months before the program starts, etc.
- Other strategies defined by local communities

What works to engage the highest need families?

The subcommittee identified several crosscutting strategies for engaging and serving high need families:

- Outreach strategies, including peer-to-peer, door to door, and dedicated staff
- Collaboration with programs that already serve the target population.
- Transporting children to and from the program, either by bus, “walking preschool bus,” or other arrangements.
- Delivering early childhood education and/or parent engagement activities in non-traditional settings and through innovative models.
- Scheduling early childhood education and parent engagement during non-traditional hours.
- Helping parents build relationships with other residents, parents, faith-based organizations and community organizations to help stabilize and support family life.
- Providing a more comprehensive mix of services, such as those offered by Head Start, in order to address obstacles and meet family needs.
- Other strategies based on the specific strengths of each community.

The Family and Community Engagement Committee Recommendation

The subcommittee utilized a review of data, promising practices currently in use, and the expertise of the subcommittee to develop the following recommendations for increasing access to high quality early learning programs for priority populations in Illinois:

- Encourage communities and individual early care and education programs to increase their service to these populations.
- Recommend to the Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development that the seven Early Childhood Innovation Zones (pilot communities) identified in the Early Learning Challenge Grant engage in planning to increase service to those populations.
- Ask the other Committees of the Early Learning Council to consider these populations as they conduct their work.

Next Steps

As the All Families Served Subcommittee continues its work, it will focus on continuing to refine the list of priority populations and data sources and making them accessible to communities for planning purposes, providing support to the Innovation Zones as they implement the subcommittee’s recommendation, and recommending policy, funding, and resource allocation changes to serve more high need families based on assessment of progress in the Innovation Zones.