

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UPDATED COMPREHENSIVE STATEWIDE NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF INDIANA'S EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION SYSTEM



**A Preschool
Development
Grant Birth
through Five
Renewal Activity**



**Office of Early
Childhood and Out
of School Learning**



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**INDIANA
DEPARTMENT of
EDUCATION**

Over the past five years, Indiana has made substantial investments in their birth to age 5 early care and education (ECE) system. To combat the effects of COVID-19 on the supply of child care, the federal government delivered an unprecedented \$1.2 billion in supplemental child care funding to Indiana that has been used to deliver support for working families, help programs regain stability, and build the infrastructure and capacity of the child care system. Additionally, Governor Holcomb created the Office of Kindergarten Readiness within the Department of Education, expanded access to Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) and On My Way Pre-K vouchers, and recently, set a priority to strengthen and grow the ECE workforce. Although Indiana's birth to 5 ECE system remained resilient through the challenges of COVID-19, gaps in service access and delivery still exist today.

Indiana was awarded the Preschool Development Grant: Birth through Five Renewal Grant in January of 2023. A research team from the Center for Early Learning at Purdue University was hired to execute an updated statewide needs assessment that describes the availability, accessibility, and quality of existing ECE programs serving children birth to age 5. This needs assessment was systematically designed to demonstrate change in the ECE landscape since the 2019 needs assessment was published, and ultimately, support understanding and action among early learning partners. This executive summary highlights key findings and recommendations from the full needs assessment report.



RECOMMENDATION 1:

Grow the Supply of High-Quality Funded ECE for Infants and Toddlers

The demand for ECE among families with low incomes who have infants or toddlers far outweighs the supply of ECE in Indiana. In fact, data from this needs assessment suggests infant and toddler care is less accessible than care for preschoolers, even though there is capacity to serve a greater share of infants and toddlers relative to preschoolers. Infants represented only 9% of all children in Indiana with active CCDF vouchers in 2023. In fact, most Indiana counties provided funded care to less than half of the infants and toddlers in poverty who were eligible to receive services in their area. According to the Economic Policy Institute, the average cost for infant care in Indiana is \$1,051 per month compared to an average of \$796 per month for preschool care. Thus, families may struggle to access infant/toddler care both because of the low supply but also because of the lack of financial support. A recent report from the First Five Years Fund estimates the economic impact of challenges with infant and toddler care costs Indiana \$2.2 billion every year.

Child Trends highlights state strategies to support infant and toddler ECE with the following recommendations:

1. assist family child care homes in navigating licensing requirements,
2. ensure quality standards are equitable for all program types,
3. offer facilities grants to incentivize improving or renovating sites that serve infants and toddlers,
4. implement a tiered reimbursement system based on the number of infants and toddlers served,
5. dedicate contracted slots to providers serving infants and toddlers,
6. develop public-private partnerships to support coordinated delivery of care, and
7. provide tax credits to businesses for employer-sponsored ECE.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Build and Sustain a High-Quality ECE Workforce

The number of high-quality programs in Indiana has significantly increased over the past five years. This increase was almost exclusively driven by growth in programs rated as Level 3 on the PTQ. The increased supply of high-quality ECE combined with policy changes raising the income eligibility for families to receive subsidies resulted in OMW enrollment more than doubling over the same time period. Despite these strengths, more work is needed to ensure that children's experiences within high-quality programs are leading to positive developmental and learning outcomes. For example, a study conducted by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) found overall low levels of instructional support across Indiana ECE programs and concluded Indiana lags behind other states with respect to preschool quality. They recommended redesigning the PTQ to ensure educators have sustained support to enhance language and cognitive development. Therefore, investing in the training, education, and retention of the workforce to facilitate the delivery of high-quality ECE should be a top priority for the state.



The Bipartisan Policy Center recommends a comprehensive 10-step approach for state administrators to professionalize and stabilize the workforce that fall within four broad buckets:

1. define the child care workforce,
2. ensure competency and quality,
3. determine the cost of the system, and
4. identify financing.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Adopt Transition Policies that Leverage Collaborations with Early Intervention Services

Children and families faced unprecedented disruptions to their daily lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. One consequence for children's well-being has been a greater prevalence of behavioral problems observed in preschool children. The data presented in this needs assessment shows increased engagement with First Steps across nearly all Indiana counties over the past five years. Yet, these early intervention services typically only reach a fraction of the population in need. Early intervention services are a critical resource to families by providing early detection and referrals and ensuring that families have help during the transition to formal schooling. However, Indiana is one of many states who has not adopted formal policies to guide the transition process from preschool to kindergarten, although they do offer a newly developed transition toolkit that outlines recommended practices. Strengthening collaborations with First Steps and expanding access to early childhood mental health consultants are two approaches that the state may consider to further support families during this critical time. The Office of Head Start proposes several additional strategies for promoting mental health in young children.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

Learn from Model Counties and Develop Local Partnerships

The summaries contained throughout this needs assessment highlight counties that may serve as exemplars based on their progress in addressing ECE gaps over the past five years. As local key players and invested parties examine data from their respective areas, it may be beneficial to develop partnerships with neighboring or adjacent counties, or counties with similar needs, to pool resources and tackle problems at-scale. Additionally, taking lessons learned from model counties, replicating, adapting, and implementing their proven strategies may serve to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the ECE system.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

Invest in an Early Childhood Integrated Data System

Developing a comprehensive picture of ECE often necessitates merging publicly available and administrative data sources. However, definitions of variables, data collection procedures, documentation strategies, and timelines often differ across sources. For example, in consolidating data for this needs assessment, we identified several inconsistencies, gaps, or duplicates in the data, such as when trying to compile and estimate enrollment data by PTQ level, that prevented us from drawing accurate conclusions. A concerted effort to ensure consistency and coordination of ECE data sources can help Indiana better identify needs, set more achievable goals, and more effectively track progress. Establishing an Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS) can also increase equitable access to early childhood programs through better understanding families' experiences in the ECE system and supporting strategic planning for resource allocation. One way to improve data systems is to foster collaboration and communication between agencies whom families interact with from birth through formal schooling. Progress has been made with the Indiana Management Performance Hub, but the state still lacks a longitudinal data source that tracks children and families through their interactions with ECE programs. The National Center for Education Statistics outlines several approaches for states to consider for selecting an ECIDS model that best meets the needs for states. Further, Child Trends offers a synthesis of how other states are using PDG funds to address data integration needs.