

**Illinois Early Learning Council**  
**Preschool for All: Reaching At-Risk Children First**

Prepared by Chicago Metropolis 2020 for the Public Awareness Committee Work Group on Capacity

**Introduction**

In July 2006, the Illinois legislature passed the Preschool for All Children Act, which expands the state's Pre-Kindergarten for Children At Risk of Academic Failure program. When Preschool for All is fully funded and implemented by 2011, all 3- and 4-year-olds in the state will have access to high-quality preschool programs in a range of settings. While Preschool for All will eventually be provided to all 3- and 4-year-olds whose parents choose it, the General Assembly directed that during the phase-in period, the first priority for new funding will be programs serving primarily children who are identified as at-risk of school failure, and the second priority will be given to programs serving children primarily from families earning up to four times the federal poverty level (or \$80,000 for a family of four).

In order to ensure that the phase-in of Preschool for All follows these priorities – serving at-risk children first, then middle-income children, and finally all children whose parents choose it – we need to understand where these children are and how they are currently served. This is a complex task because Preschool for All is designed to be a comprehensive system that incorporates State-funded preschool, child care and Head Start. Preschool for All will take place within many existing and new settings, including public schools, child care centers, Head Start centers, charter schools, universities, colleges, community organizations, private preschools, park districts, faith-based organizations, home-based child-care networks, and other settings.

Preschool for All programs are funded through a competitive grant process. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) instructs applicants to demonstrate need based on a thorough understanding of how children are served within a community. But ISBE can only respond to applications it receives, and in some cases the communities where the need is greatest either do not apply or have not developed high-quality, fundable applications. During the build up of Preschool for All, the Early Learning Council wants to build capacity to produce more good quality applications for Preschool for All funding in those communities with the most at-risk children who do not have high quality early education services available to them.

**What do we know about how at-risk children are served by state-funded preschool and other early childhood services?**

Early care and education in Illinois is administered and funded through a number of agencies. In order to build a comprehensive Preschool for All program that fosters collaboration, and to truly understand how children are served, policy makers need to see data from all funding agencies along with demographic data showing where children are located. As a first step, the Early Learning Council is collaborating with Chicago Metropolis 2020, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, public agencies, and foundation funders to create the Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map, a web-based data system. An interim early childhood data collection is now available at <http://iecam.crc.uiuc.edu/>.<sup>1</sup>

This interim data collection brings together information on how children are served in Illinois counties, along with demographic information related to eligibility for different programs. Currently, the information available on IECAM is at the county level. Reviewing the data at this level provides

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<sup>1</sup> IECAM is not the first effort to collect and analyze early childhood data, and builds on previous systems such as the Ounce of Prevention Fund's Illinois Birth to Five Project. In 2003, the Illinois Facilities Fund produced the report, *Moving Toward a System*, one of the first comprehensive publications to analyze demographic data and information on early childhood services to understand the need and capacity for early childhood care and education in Illinois' counties. Chapin Hall and the Chicago Department of Youth Services also maintain data systems for the City of Chicago.

decision makers with a “birds-eye view” of early care and education services. By summer of 2007, more detailed information will be available to better understand how children are served at the township and other levels.

The information available on IECAM combines the most recent administrative data available from agencies with 2000 census data. Because there are multiple data sources with different data collection standards and definitions, data analysis often raises more questions than it answers. Nevertheless, in order to better understand the early care and education landscape and to make good decisions about resource allocation, it is worth using the best available data to inform decision making.

In this spirit – recognizing that the IECAM data is the best currently available - the Early Learning Council used the preliminary data to begin to understand which counties are already serving most children who are at-risk because of low income, and which counties still need to build capacity for strong applications for Preschool for All funding in order to serve these income-at-risk children first. The data suggest that in the 26 counties listed in the table below the number of low-income 3- and 4-year-olds is likely to be greater than the combined number of state-funded Pre-kindergarten and Head Start slots.<sup>2</sup>

The counties on the list are those in which the number of 3- and 4-year-olds in families with incomes at or under 185 percent of the Federal Poverty Level in 2000<sup>3</sup> exceeded the number of combined funded spaces for Head Start and PreK in 2007. This analysis used the 185 percent of poverty statistic because it is considered a good proxy for children who are at-risk of school failure for reasons of low family income.<sup>4</sup> There are many other risk factors for school failure, and the data does not quantify these. At this time, this statistic is the best number we have to work with from the published census data. It includes those children eligible for Head Start – which serves children whose families are under 100 percent of the Federal Poverty level. It is important to note that since the demographics are based on census data, they may not fully represent the scale of the undocumented immigrant population.

The numbers on the following chart are not definitive, and do not tell the whole story – certainly there are particular communities in other counties where at-risk children remain to be served, just as there are communities within these counties where most at-risk children are served. Nevertheless, this analysis compares the best available numbers showing funded PreKindergarten and Head Start spaces to the number of three and four-year-olds with incomes at or below 185% of poverty in order to identify target counties where the Early Learning Council and its partners should look more closely at local capacity to serve at-risk children, and consider providing additional technical assistance during the Preschool for All Request for Proposal (RFP) funding period. Clearly the counties vary dramatically in size and population, and the magnitude of technical assistance, outreach and effort will vary based on the scale of local need. All counties and communities are encouraged to look beyond this analysis and to collect additional information – both qualitative and quantitative - to assess the scope of need that may not be represented by census-based information.

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<sup>2</sup> This list should be reviewed and revised if appropriate when updated demographic information becomes available.

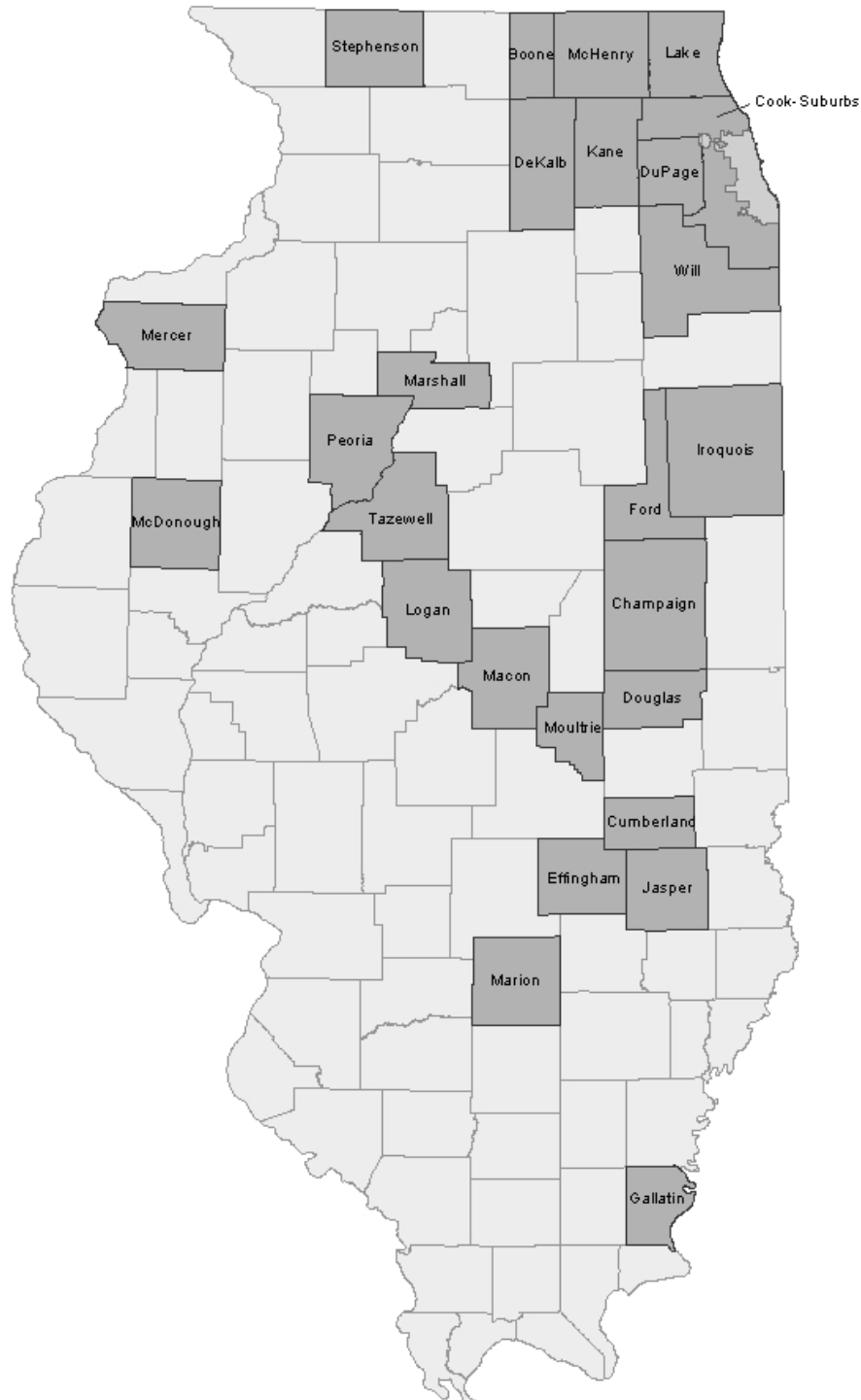
<sup>3</sup> In 2000, 185 percent of the FPL for a family of four was \$31,542.

<sup>4</sup> For example, children with family income at or below 185% FPL are eligible for free and reduced price lunch in schools. It is also closely approximates the 50% of the state median income, which is the eligibility criteria for IDHS child care assistance.

<b>County</b>	<b>No. of 3- &amp; 4-year-olds (2000 Census)</b>	<b>No. of 3- &amp; 4-year-olds at four times the FPL 2000 Census</b>  Identified priority group for Preschool for All	<b>Approx. No. of 3- &amp; 4-year-olds at or below 185 %t of the FPL Level 2000 Census</b>  <i>Proxy for "at-risk"</i>	<b>Approx. No. of 3- and 4-year-olds at or below 100 % of the FPL 2000 Census</b>  <i>Head Start eligibility</i>	<b>PreK children served in 2006 &amp; est. for 2007</b>	<b>Head Start funded enrollment</b>	<b>Combined PreK 2006 &amp; estimated 2007 children served and Head Start funded enrollment<sup>5</sup></b>
<b>Gallatin</b>	155	150	101	63	40	30	70
<b>Cumberland</b>	298	275	124	52	62	44	106
<b>Jasper</b>	303	280	128	42	41	34	75
<b>Marshall</b>	334	285	121	32	72	18	90
<b>Mercer</b>	340	275	91	32	59	28	87
<b>Moultrie</b>	348	275	135	36	111	20	131
<b>Ford</b>	379	315	122	34	31	29	60
<b>McDonough</b>	565	460	295	160	138	56	194
<b>Douglas</b>	605	455	255	77	140	34	174
<b>Logan</b>	755	665	255	86	80	76	156
<b>Iroquois</b>	775	655	265	107	165	54	219
<b>Effingham</b>	1,076	855	394	147	243	111	354
<b>Marion</b>	1,130	1,015	494	242	227	229	456
<b>Stephenson</b>	1,185	970	461	200	212	172	384
<b>Boone</b>	1,370	1,035	344	161	212	34	246
<b>DeKalb</b>	2,199	1,655	539	216	301	121	422
<b>Macon</b>	2,970	2,540	1,253	685	810	378	1,188
<b>Tazewell</b>	3,289	2,470	901	299	443	353	796
<b>Champaign</b>	4,252	3,275	1,423	632	764	435	1,199
<b>Peoria</b>	5,071	3,955	1,970	1149	884	670	1,554
<b>McHenry</b>	9,008	4,665	1,171	364	718	251	969
<b>Kane</b>	14,116	9,250	3,347	1322	2,168	629	2,797
<b>Will</b>	17,668	9,835	2,579	1057	1,033	693	1,726
<b>Lake</b>	21,925	11,565	4,360	1697	2,059	698	2,757
<b>DuPage</b>	26,390	12,120	3,155	1091	1,216	444	1,660
<b>Cook-Suburbs</b>	69,631	42,385	15,165	6111	9,073	2,967	12,040

<sup>5</sup> This combines numbers that are not completely parallel. Head Start provides number of "funded enrollment," while ISBE PreK provides number of "children served," and for 2007 the number is an estimate based on the application. These numbers should therefore be seen as an approximation and a guide rather than an absolute.

**Counties where capacity is needed to serve all at-risk three and four-year-olds**



### **What the data do not tell us**

The IECAM Interim Data Collection provides information not previously available in one place so that policy makers can begin to understand the early care and education landscape across the state. Comparing county-level early childhood service data with data about low income children is an important start, but just the start. The resulting numbers tell us which counties need a closer look to identify whether there is sufficient capacity to serve more at-risk children. In looking more closely at communities in these counties, local and state leaders need to gather additional information in order to better understand:

○ **Recent population changes that may suggest that there are more (or fewer?) at-risk children than the 2000 census suggests**

IECAM does not currently have information at smaller units of geography than the county level, nor does it include updated demographic projections. While the 2005 American Community Survey has updates for counties with populations over 65,000, the margins of error for single-year cohorts of children are very high. The University of Illinois currently has a team of demographers developing projections that will be available by summer 2007. In the meantime, communities can use a variety of local sources such as school report cards and municipal planning data to better understand local population dynamics. These sources – as well as other information gleaned from less conventional sources – may also shed light on at-risk immigrant children who may not be reflected in census data.

○ **How other risk factors in addition to income level affect children's and families' needs in each community**

IECAM draws on collected demographic data, such as family income and language isolation of families, to provide a portrait of at-risk children. Language isolation – defined as a household where all members 14 years old and over have at least some difficulty speaking English -- was not taken into account for this preliminary analysis because reliable information on numbers of children in language-isolated homes is not currently available. Other important factors such as the incidence of developmental delays and disabilities also can determine a child's risk of school failure, but those numbers are not readily available. Communities should consult other sources such as school report cards to further understand the local situation.

○ **How children are served by the range of early childhood programs on a local level**

These numbers are only part of the story. In assessing each community's needs, local leaders must understand specific local factors. They should ask probing questions, such as:

- Are existing Preschool and Head Start programs fully enrolled?
  - Are there waiting lists for these programs?
  - If they are not fully enrolled, why not? For example, are there marketing challenges, parental choice issues, or location considerations?
- What is the capacity of local child care providers to collaborate with school districts and Head Start to provide high quality early learning experiences?
- Are children being served nearby across county lines?
- What kinds of Preschool for All settings are likely to be successful in meeting full enrollment, based on parents' preferences and needs?
- Do sufficient facilities exist to meet local needs?
- What is the scale of local need? How many additional classrooms and teachers would it take to serve all at risk children in our community?

Answers to these and other questions will provide a more complete picture of the local landscape and enable local leaders to plan effectively for a comprehensive Preschool for All system.

### **Next steps**

The data suggest that Illinois is well on its way to fulfilling the General Assembly's requirement that programs serving primarily at-risk children receive priority for new Preschool for All funds. In order to continue this success for the next round of funding, the Early Learning Council will work with the Illinois State Board of Education, the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, and numerous other partners to:

- 1) Target outreach and technical assistance efforts in the 26 counties where data suggest that there are insufficient state-funded PreK plus Head Start slots to serve the lowest income children. Tailor this assistance appropriately to the scale of the need in each county – in other words, examine the local need levels within each county and devote appropriate resources to each area depending on the magnitude of the need. In addition, ensure that this technical assistance is designed to address issues of cultural diversity within each local area, and that is linguistically, geographically, and culturally appropriate.
- 2) Encourage communities in these counties – and throughout the state – to thoroughly examine how children are served locally, and how local providers can best collaborate to ensure access to high quality early learning experiences.
- 3) Build on past applications that may have been approved but not funded due to limited resources.
- 4) Continue commitments to collecting detailed, accurate data and making it easily available for collaborative early childhood planning throughout the state.
- 5) Plan for long-term capacity building technical assistance -- in addition to immediate outreach strategies -- to enable communities to apply successfully for Preschool for All funding in future years.

### **Conclusion**

The State of Illinois has made an unprecedented commitment to expanding early learning through Preschool for All. During the expansion of this comprehensive system, the State wants to invest dollars first in the areas where the need is greatest. Preliminary analysis of currently available data suggests that the State has made remarkable progress in serving at-risk low income children in most counties. This analysis also suggests that building capacity to submit quality applications in the remaining 26 counties should help bring the state closer to its first priority goal of providing Preschool for All to at-risk children in all of Illinois' counties and communities.

The Early Learning Council can play an important role in meeting the State's priorities for allocating Preschool for All Funds in two ways:

- 1) **Technical Assistance:** The Early Learning Council will support efforts by the Illinois State Board of Education and the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies to deliver outreach and technical assistance during the 2008 Preschool for All Request for Proposal (RFP) period. This may include community meetings, publication of a "tool kit" on the internet, and other activities. These efforts will build the foundation for long-term technical assistance strategies that will enable communities to plan effectively for early learning, educate providers and school districts about best practices, be culturally and linguistically competent and foster collaboration to meet the needs of children throughout Illinois.
- 2) **Data Collection and Analysis:** The Early Learning Council will encourage its members to continue to assemble and contribute accurate meaningful data to a robust Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map system. The ability to analyze data is critical to the responsible and effective phase-in of Preschool for All, and to effective collaboration between multiple agencies. Creating and using the IECAM system is a first step – informing it with detailed data from the administering agencies and keeping it up to date must be an ongoing priority.