

Population and Participation Data Priorities: What Matters Most for Chicago Early Childhood Programs

By Emily Wiegand, Leah Gjertson, Serah Fatani, and Nick Medrano

This brief presents insights from a collaborative effort to strengthen data use cases for population and enrollment among early childhood education providers and system leaders in Chicago.

In summer 2025, the Chicago Early Childhood Integrated Data System (CECIDS) team, together with researchers from NORC at the University of Chicago (NORC) set out to refine the early childhood research and data needs of the CECIDS stakeholders, a group that includes program managers, city leaders, advocates, and funders.

At this time, CECIDS is a mature integrated data system, bringing together data from 5 large early childhood providers, the city of Chicago, and Chicago Public Schools. This project focused on refining a series of use cases that were originally defined and prioritized by the CECIDS Executive Committee in fall of 2023 and reaffirmed by the Committee in August 2025.

Methods

Our approach emphasized reacting to what's been done to understand what more is needed. Through document review, as well as interviews with program administrators, advocates, funders, public agencies, and researchers, we explored what questions stakeholders are asking, how they intend to use data, and what gaps limit their ability to act.

[A companion brief](#) describes the strategies that were most effective throughout our engagement with the CECIDS community and recommends best practices for getting clarity about what information decision-makers need. A [corresponding toolkit](#) provides more specifics about our approach and includes protocols and other templates for anyone seeking to replicate the process.



Focal Use Cases

1. **How many children ages 0–5 live in Chicago?** What are their demographics and family employment (e.g. single income household) characteristics?
2. What are the **long-term population trends** in neighborhoods? How might supply and demand change over time? Where should we be recruiting?
3. **What children are eligible for each type of early childhood program?** How many families are eligible for Head Start or Preschool for All but not for childcare due to low work hours?
4. What is the **geographical distribution of services** by program type (including family day care homes), size?

Key Findings

CECIDS partners know about and access existing materials that include population and eligibility data.

Interviewees report using available data resources to address information needs related to the data use cases. In addition to CECIDS data, the most frequently cited resources are Census data and internal data, along with materials and reports produced by public and private Illinois and Chicago agencies and organizations.

The use cases were standing in for a set of information needs that went beyond the specific numbers and details.

In our first round of individual interviews, we found that the use cases are proxies for deeper program- and system-level information needs. When we asked respondents to talk about their own need for information in the areas described by these use cases, they used language that was broader and incorporated topics not explicit in the original use cases. We captured seven guiding questions (“North Star Questions”) that expressed the underlying information need. These questions incorporate the value and intended use of the information, adding breadth while also specifying the information need at a level not apparent in the original use cases.

The first four North Star Questions address program and service needs, capacity, and strategies for targeting and outreach to connect children and families to programs and aligning enrollment across Chicago. These topics closely relate to the population and enrollment focus of the original use cases.

- 1 Which families aren’t currently being served by any ECE program, what services do they likely need, and how can we reach them (e.g., what services or programs do they currently interact with or what communications reach them)?
- 2 Why is my program underenrolled and how do I reach families who might be interested in enrolling (e.g., what services or programs do they currently interact with or what communications reach them)?
- 3 If I were to open another center, program, or service, where could I best place it to serve more of the kinds of families I prioritize?
- 4 Do we have the capacity to serve all the children in our community?

The remaining three questions highlight areas not directly represented in the initial use cases but repeatedly raised by stakeholders as priority concerns: service needs for children with special educational needs, the early care and education workforce, and how programs support kindergarten readiness.

Data Sources Cited

- U.S. Census Bureau
- Internal data systems
- Illinois Early Childhood Asset Mapping (IECAM) Project
- Chicago Department of Public Health or the Chicago Health Atlas
- Early Childhood Research Alliance of Chicago (EC*REACH)
- Illinois Department of Child and Family Services (IDCFS) Sunshine database
- CECIDS
- Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS)
- Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)
- Illinois Action for Children
- Chapin Hall
- Diversity Data Kids’ Child Opportunity Index

- 1 Which children with special needs are not getting services or experience barriers to service delivery? What is the geographic distribution of children with special needs across the city?
- 2 If we recruited more ECE workers or increased salaries, how would it impact system quality and availability of services? Where and for whom would service quality and availability change?
- 3 Do our programs improve kindergarten readiness?

There were specific places where additional data are needed and might be obtained. Participants described how current data can and cannot meet their information needs for program planning, targeting, and resource allocation. Through discussions about how specific data points would be used, we clarified how this information supports operations and decision-making. Reviewing these data needs against currently available data, we pinpointed a series of data gaps. In small group co-interpretation sessions, respondents from advocacy and program management roles ranked seven gaps by relative priority.

These data gaps are framed more specifically than the North Star Questions, setting the stage for identifying existing data sources and defining potential analyses. For example, the gap “How do Teaching Strategies GOLD scores correlate with Kindergarten Individual Development Survey (KIDS) scores?” connects to the North Star Question, “Do our programs work to improve kindergarten readiness?,” but specifies an actionable analysis between existing data sources that speaks to one aspect of the overarching question.

Identified Data Gaps

Relative Priority	Identified Data Gaps
Very high	Basic workforce information: How many open positions are there, what is the current composition and credentials of the workforce, and what are the demographics of the unemployed labor force in certain communities?
High	Where are children with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) enrolled, and which children are experiencing delays in services?
High	Where do Head Start eligible families live? (specific block groups)
Moderate	What are participation patterns for specific programs that are often not included in existing analyses (e.g., home visiting or food assistance for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC))?
Low	Where are program catchment areas for home visiting?
Low	How do Teaching Strategies GOLD scores correlate with KIDS scores?
Low	Which providers have openings right now?

The North Star Questions raise information needs that will not be addressed using descriptive analysis of existing data. The identified data gaps presented above do not fully address the information needs expressed in the North Star questions. The remaining gaps are around topics such as understanding causality, motivation, and how families and providers respond to changes in a complex system. Descriptive analysis of existing data can only ever approximate these answers. However, in our conversations with early childhood researchers they emphasized that carefully designed studies or new data collection could provide more insights to speak to these information needs.

One point researchers particularly raised was the need to understand more about the families who are not engaging with services. Analyses to date have focused on basic counts that reflect family income and program eligibility, but do not account for the complex mix of family characteristics (for instance, employment, disability, home language, or family composition) that impact enrollment decisions. Projects that start with a universe of families for whom richer data are available (for example, families receiving food assistance) and look at program participation for those families may uncover new insights. Alternately, small scale systematic data collection, such as mining waitlists or conducting a series of interviews with individuals knocking on doors to recruit for early childhood programs, could provide richer detail on drivers of underenrollment.

Second, research respondents emphasized a need for analyses to consider family enrollments in the context of the full early childhood landscape, including not only publicly-funded center-based programs but also participation in home visiting, especially for children with at least one non-working adult family member. To the extent that representations of child care capacity foreground one type of program they may overstate need for that program and understate coverage by other program types.

Next Steps

We can make progress towards addressing outstanding population and participation data needs through ongoing, iterative conversation around information needs, balancing shorter-term accessible data wins with strategic longer investments aimed at answering more complex, but high priority, questions.

Support and maintain data resources that are meeting current needs. This project confirmed that existing data resources are important information sources for Chicago early childhood organizations.

Build on existing pathways to implement processes for iterative communication around high-priority information needs between data users, data providers, and researchers. After data priorities have been identified, dialogue and iteration are essential to keep data providers, data users, and analysts in sync to ensure resulting data resources are targeted, accessible and actionable.

Take steps to address unmet priority data needs actionable in the short-term. This project identified several information gaps where there appear to be accessible paths to providing data to meet those needs. Developing more information on the local early childhood workforce is a particular priority.

Identify and pursue actions that make progress towards high priority information needs. Complex analyses, new data sharing and integration efforts, or primary data collection all require more time and resources than descriptive analyses of existing data. However, in some cases these approaches are the best way to create meaningful information to address gaps in what program and policy stakeholders need to know.

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