

# DuPage Early Childhood Community Profile Executive Summary



**BRIGHT & EARLY  
DUPAGE**

A DuPage Foundation Initiative

Report commissioned by DuPage Foundation

Prepared by DuPage Federation on Human  
Services Reform, *September 2021*



A DuPage Foundation Initiative

### **About Bright & Early DuPage**

Bright & Early DuPage (B&ED), an initiative of DuPage Foundation, is a unique program designed to leverage area resources to ensure that all DuPage children from birth to age five receive the comprehensive support critical in preparing them for success in kindergarten and beyond.

Community by community, B&ED is engaging and uniting local organizations and individuals to build awareness for and facilitate access to early childhood education and support services for DuPage children and their families. Each year, the B&ED initiative provides grant funding to local community organizations to help establish and build early childhood collaboratives. B&ED also serves as a voice for early learning and child-friendly policies at all levels of government.

### **Vision**

Every DuPage child will be ready to succeed in kindergarten.

### **Mission Statement**

To build sustainable, coordinated, local early childhood systems that actively work to increase access to quality education and support for children and families with limited resources.

To learn more about the initiative, please visit [dupagefoundation.org/brightandearly](http://dupagefoundation.org/brightandearly).



### **About DuPage Foundation**

Established in 1986 to raise the quality of life throughout DuPage County, DuPage Foundation helps area residents and organizations realize their unique charitable goals; provides impactful support to our community's not-for-profits; and fosters key partnerships to address critical issues affecting DuPage County. As a 501(c)(3) public charity, the Foundation receives contributions and bequests from individuals, corporations, organizations and foundations seeking to make a difference for our community and the causes that matter most to them. Since its inception, the Foundation has awarded more than \$60 million in grants to not-for-profit organizations serving the residents of DuPage County and beyond. To learn more, visit [dupagefoundation.org](http://dupagefoundation.org).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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It was our privilege while conducting this study to have the generous support of trust, time, interest and candor of 29 parents of young children, who each participated in one of five focus groups. Their love for their children is inspiring. We thank them for giving voice to the perspective of parents. We are indebted to the staff of Bridge Communities, YWCA of Metropolitan Chicago, and Woodridge North KinderCare for their conscientious engagement of parents for focus groups. Their commitment to their clients, students and staff is magnificent.

Professionals who partner with parents and other professionals in order to ensure that children can thrive are the backbone of an effective early childhood system, and we are honored that 24 of these professionals from government and community organizations including schools, libraries, human service organizations, health care and public health entities each gave us an hour of time and shared hard-won knowledge and experience. We thank them for being the heart of this study. We hold their names in confidence, and we strived to keep specific opinions and quotes anonymous in this study. We promised to acknowledge the organizations that provided time for them to contribute to this study:

- Addison Early Learning Center
- Addison Library
- Addison School District 4
- Bridge Communities
- C.A.B.S Autism and Behavior Specialists
- Casa Hernandez Home Daycare
- DayOne PACT
- DuPage Children’s Museum
- DuPage County Health Department
- DuPage County Community Services Department
- DuPage Health Coalition
- Easterseals DuPage & Fox Valley
- First Presbyterian Church of Wheaton Preschool
- High Point Church Toddlers Campus Preschool
- Metropolitan Family Services DuPage
- Teen Parent Connection
- Warrenville Public Library
- Wheaton Public Library
- Woodridge North KinderCare
- Woodridge Public Library
- Woodridge School District 68
- YWCA Metropolitan Chicago

We appreciate the expert insight and advice provided for this study by Brenda Huber--Bloomingtondale Township Children's Network, Nikki Cameron and Darby Pool--Metropolitan Family Services DuPage, Kathy Niedorowski--West Chicago School District 33, Shelley Bromberek-Lambert and Danette Connor--YWCA of Metropolitan Chicago.

This study was begun with superb design and preparation by Jordan Durrett, who was Research Analyst at DuPage Federation until she followed a dream to a new career path. We could not have accomplished this study without her contributions, including the capacity building that she did with us over a five-year term.

DuPage Foundation has been the premier strategic champion for early childhood system development in DuPage County, catalyzing the county's most capable service providers, school leaders, health care and public health leaders, and community philanthropists to envision and work for a community where every child has the opportunity to thrive, and no one is disadvantaged. We are grateful to Barb Szczepaniak, Vice President for Programs and the Bright & Early Committee for funding this study.

With appreciation,

The Early Childhood Study Team at DuPage Federation on Human Services Reform

Amy Snodgrass Mukanda, Associate Executive Director

Carolyn Rivera, Program Coordinator (Spanish language focus group leader)

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Jackie Wellman, College of DuPage Human Services Intern

Mimi Doll, President, Candeo Consulting

## **ABOUT DUPAGE FEDERATION ON HUMAN SERVICES REFORM**

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DuPage Federation on Human Services Reform is a collaboration of government and key community organizations that identify ways a local community can address its human services needs using its own resources and resourcefulness. Our mission is to generate cross-sector solutions that leverage expertise to address the human service needs of the DuPage County region.

DuPage Federation was formed in 1995 by a governor's office initiative as one of five 'learning laboratories', whose role was to demonstrate a new approach to collaboration between government and community to support of families with low income to thrive. Since that time, our role has evolved far beyond those origins.

Today, DuPage Federation is a non-profit planning and change management organization that has been intimately involved in the development of the access to health care, access to human services including public benefits, and promoting a welcoming community where language is not a barrier to essential health and human services.

For more information on DuPage Federation on Human Services Reform please visit our website at [dupagefederation.org](http://dupagefederation.org).

For questions, please contact David Roth at [droth@dupagefederation.org](mailto:droth@dupagefederation.org).



According to UNICEF, “[e]arly childhood offers a critical window of opportunity to shape the trajectory of a child’s holistic development and build a foundation for their future. For children to achieve their full potential, as is their human right, they need health care and nutrition, protection from harm and a sense of security, opportunities for early learning, and responsive caregiving with parents and caregivers who love them.” In addition, “[w]hen we give children the best start in life, the benefits are huge, for every child and for the societies we share. Providing early childhood development interventions to all young children and families is one of the most powerful and cost-effective equalizers we have at our disposal.” (UNICEF, n.d.)

### **Purpose of Research**

In August 2016, DuPage Federation on Human Services Reform published *Early Childhood: Baby Steps to a Brighter Future in DuPage County*. We presented recommendations regarding childcare capacity, preschool enrollment capacity, developing a qualified and culturally competent workforce, building economic stability for families, demonstrating impact of collaboration, reducing food insecurity and improving child health, and improving transition from private daycare and preschool programs into public schools.

Since that time, the focus, energy and development of the early childhood system in DuPage County has increased. In DuPage County, striving parents and dedicated professionals partner together to ensure that the early childhood system provides the highest level of support for every child, so that no child is disadvantaged by race, origin, language or other identity.

### **Research Questions**

A key champion for the early childhood system development is DuPage Foundation and its donors, through the Bright & Early Initiative, which has strategically funded collaboration to build early childhood system capacity and impact. DuPage Foundation commissioned this study to improve our understanding of what is needed now to improve the early childhood system. This study seeks to answer three questions:

1. What has changed in the early childhood system since 2016?
2. Do early childhood collaboratives help early childhood systems succeed?
3. Are there ways early childhood systems can be improved?

When we began this study in March 2021, a pandemic had disrupted our families, our early childhood system, and our entire economy, with disproportionate harm to the families that the early childhood system is designed to support because they face disproportionate harm in the areas of health and well-being. Despite the disruption, the pandemic has also helped uncover the value of collaboration in the early childhood system in DuPage County.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

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### What has Changed in the Early Childhood System<sup>1</sup> Since 2016?

DuPage County has changed for the better according to data regarding enrollment capacity. Most early childhood system program types increased enrollment capacity, including Early Head Start (EHS), the Prevention Initiative (PI), Home Visiting (HV-including Health Families Illinois and Parents Too Soon), Preschool For All (PFA) and Preschool For All-Expansion (PFA-E). PI and PFA/PFA-E showed the most growth. An exception to the enrollment growth is Head Start (HS), which lengthened the service day for enrollees in 2017, but as a result reduced the number of children enrolled.

The following are key points obtained while conducting research and interviews with regard to changes in the early childhood system since 2016:

- It is alarming that childcare capacity for infants and toddlers decreased by one quarter.
- The number of children living at or under poverty thresholds has decreased slightly, so the number of children meeting income eligibility requirements for income-tested programs has reduced.
- Parents note a significant change regarding access to services. It is easier today to conduct one's own research about services, and tap into personal networks, with social media and more information available.
- Parents note that while COVID-19 has generated problems, including deteriorated childcare availability, dissatisfaction with new virtual and remote therapies and services for children, it has also brought increases in public benefits such as SNAP.
- For key informants, the disruption of COVID-19 was also profound. Early childhood collaboratives shifted toward meeting basic needs of families and welcoming new partners with language access capacities and basic needs resources.
- Key informants identified positive changes. School district attitudes to early childhood system collaboration have improved. In addition, there has been an increase in the number of children receiving screenings for developmental needs in some communities. Many key informants see improvement in community commitment to early childhood. Equity has a new prominence of importance, and is essential as a planning guide, and they feel it ought to be threaded throughout the entire early childhood system framework, rather than an isolated committee or function.
- Key informants noted greater language diversity and increased need for language access services.

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<sup>1</sup> See our definition on page 11

## Do Early Childhood Collaboratives Help Early Childhood Systems Succeed?

Key informants make a direct connection between early childhood system success and the presence of early childhood collaboratives, especially in reaching families in need, and coordinating the early childhood system. Early childhood collaboratives add value in the following ways:

- creating awareness about services, resources, opportunities and the importance of the early childhood system among parents and partners, especially in the promotion of developmental screening and services
- offering training to build capacity for screening, and hosting professional development events and hosting community events that bring families, schools, and providers together
- recruiting access points for parents to engage screening
- providing a reliable and direct link between providers and school district screening resources
- facilitating the link between childcare providers and school districts
- adding value to school districts by coordinating multiple services and resources
- building strong working relationships to facilitate trust and coordination
- collaborative data analysis to improve instruction and communication with families
- developing solutions to barriers to service

Our slot gap analysis finds a correlation between enrollment capacity and the presence of early childhood collaboratives. Communities (as measured by school district boundaries) with early childhood collaboratives provide more enrollment capacity per student than communities without early childhood collaboratives. The difference is highest for ES, HS, and PI.

## Are There Ways Early Childhood Systems Can be Improved?

*The slot gap analysis, parent focus groups, and key informant interviews aligned to identify the following problems that call for improvements:*

- Early childhood system enrollment needs to be expanded in every community in DuPage County. There is insufficient early childhood system enrollment capacity in every community, including the communities with the best capacity. The gap between estimated need for service and available enrollment spaces is large. At the best performing end, the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) subsidy serves 20% of estimated eligible children. The largest gap is in Home Visiting services, where fewer than 2% of estimated eligible children are served.
- Early childhood system service availability needs to be consistent and equal in every community. There is inconsistent availability of early childhood system services across the county. Commitment to early childhood is uneven, early childhood system services are not equally available across municipalities, communities or school districts, and some have very little to offer.



*Parent focus groups and key informant interviews align to identify the following problems that call for improvements:*

- The early childhood system workforce needs to be increased and strengthened. Early childhood system services lack qualified staff. Workers are underpaid, staff vacancies result in wait lists for children with identified needs.
- The early childhood system needs to create and implement ways to engage all families, so that no families are disadvantaged by race or origin, language or culture, income status, immigration status, nontraditional work hours, or extreme busyness earning low incomes. There exists an inability to connect with all families who would benefit from services, including those with the greatest need. Awareness of services is insufficient. Technology is a barrier, where it requires parents to do their own research, but time for this is not available. Finding the right program, for which their child is eligible and the schedule works, is difficult. For parents and key informants, what is lacking is a timely, updated, accessible listing or database of early childhood resources. Relatedly, parent engagement is not equally available to parents with lower incomes, longer work hours, evening and weekend shifts, as well as parents who are not documented and fear detection.

*Parent focus groups bring a unique perspective to identify problems that point to these improvements:*

- Acquisition of affordable, accessible, flexible childcare needs to be improved. Though many parents expressed satisfaction with their provider, childcare for working parents was identified as a huge challenge. Getting a job, acquiring a childcare provider, qualifying for CCAP, maintaining eligibility, are a huge challenge to align. Parents who are working believe childcare is too expensive. Parents who earn just above the eligibility level for childcare subsidy report working several jobs to make ends meet. They identified the inequity of not having flexibility to align with available childcare hours when they work nontraditional hours, and the challenge of communicating with staff. They risk losing the childcare subsidy if they cannot find a provider to fit their hours. And they are pressed by employers who are not sensitive to working parent issues;
- Discrimination and bias on the basis of race, language, public benefits status, immigration status must be ended, and the practices of organizations and the behaviors of staff members must be changed for the better. Discrimination is a problem. Parents expressed appreciation for ways that providers in the early childhood system have engaged, empowered and partnered with them. Parents noted an increased capacity in programs for overcoming language barriers, but also noted they are treated differently based on language or immigration status. They shared feelings of disrespect by service providers, where concerns were not taken seriously because of their race and their public benefits status;
- Government commitment and investment in the early childhood workforce should be increased and improved. Although parents express high satisfaction for many services they receive, they perceive limited government investment in the early childhood system as a problem. They see other community priorities – anything economic-related -- as getting more attention and limiting services in early childhood, resulting in early childhood teacher

pay that is inequitable and causes turnover, concerns about quality, and limited availability of service.

*Key informant interviews bring a unique perspective to identify problems that point to these improvements:*

- New strategies are needed to ensure parents are leaders in the early childhood system. Although there are parents engaged as system leaders, they are the exception, and not sufficient to ensure parent leadership in planning and policy;
- New organizing and communication strategies are needed to bring Healthcare providers and businesses are not engaged in the early childhood system;
- New coordination tools and behaviors are needed to ensure that all children have access to service, with no one disadvantaged by geography. Coordination among providers of early childhood system services is not uniform; for instance, some children receive multiple developmental screenings, and others receive none.

The ten areas of improvement that are listed above serve as our ten Recommendations for Improvement on page 62, where we offer and discuss strategies for achieving the recommendations.