Illinois Early Childhood System Scorecard: Establishing a Baseline for the Transition to IDEC

Establishing a Baseline for Illinois ' Early Childhood Transition

As Illinois consolidates early childhood programs under the new Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC), understanding how the system currently performs is essential to measuring progress in the years ahead. While the state collects substantial data across individual early childhood programs and agencies, it has lacked a comprehensive, systemwide measure of performance. This makes it difficult to assess how the system is functioning as a whole, identify areas for improvement, and track progress over time.

The Civic Federation developed this scorecard to address this gap. The scorecard establishes a comprehensive baseline across six areas: 1) child and family outcomes; 2) access; 3) quality and inclusion; 4) workforce; 5) financing; and 6) governance.

Illinois received an overall grade of C, reflecting mixed performance across the early childhood system, with areas of comparatively stronger performance alongside persistent challenges in financing, quality, access, and workforce stability. The measures presented in the scorecard reflect performance before the establishment of IDEC and should not be interpreted as an evaluation of the new Department. Instead, they provide a starting point against which future improvements in Illinois' early childhood system can be measured as the transition moves forward.

The Baseline at a Glance

Domain	Score (0–100)	Grade	Where Illinois stands
Access & Participation	59.5	C	Strong Early Intervention reach; only 21.6 licensed infant/toddler slots per 100 children
Governance & System Functioning	58.3	C	Substantial public data, but fragmented across programs
Workforce & Provider Stability	51.9	C	Well-credentialed staff; 31.5% annual turnover
Child, Caregiver & Family Outcomes	48.9	C	Only 29.9% of kindergarteners ready in all areas
Quality & Inclusion	38.9	D	Only 23.5% of centers rated Silver or Gold
Financing & System Performance	16.7	F	Child care subsidies at 37.4% of market-rate benchmark
System Index	**45.7**	C	
Equity Index	63.9	B	Some resources evenly spread, but large outcome gaps remain

The Equity Index is scored separately. A B does not mean access is adequate: groups can have similar access while all remain underserved.

Source: The Civic Federation, Illinois Early Childhood System Scorecard: Establishing a Baseline for the Transition to IDEC (October 2026). Available at civicfed.org.

Five Key Findings

- 1. Child and family outcomes are mixed, with substantial disparities. Illinois demonstrates strengths in some areas, but significant differences in outcomes persist across populations.
- 2. Access to early childhood services remains uneven. Availability and participation vary by program, age and geography. Even where services are distributed relatively evenly, overall capacity may still be insufficient to meet families' needs.
- 3. Quality and inclusion remain significant challenges. Many programs fall below higher quality benchmarks, and gaps in available data limit understanding of quality across all care settings.
- 4. The early childhood workforce is relatively well qualified but faces instability. Low wages, high turnover, a decline in available providers and staffing shortages threaten the sustainability of services.
- 5. Financing is the system's weakest-performing area. Funding falls below established benchmarks, and fragmented financial reporting makes it difficult to assess how resources are distributed and whether they are reaching areas of greatest need.

Data Gaps are Accountability Gaps

Illinois collects substantial program-level data, but fragmented systems and inconsistent measures limit its ability to assess early childhood system performance as a whole. Important gaps remain in understanding:

- Families' actual child care costs and affordability
- Quality of care outside licensed settings
- Children's outcomes across programs and over time
- Workforce shortages by region and profession
- How early childhood funding is distributed and whether it reaches communities with the greatest needs

More integrated data and transparent reporting would help policymakers better understand where resources are needed and whether investments are improving outcomes.

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