

Elevating Parent Voices: **An Evaluation of the Family Advisory Committee of the Illinois Early Learning Council in Year Two**

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In 2022, the Research Department of Illinois Action for Children (IAFC) conducted an evaluation of the Family Advisory Committee (FAC) of the Illinois Early Learning Council (ELC).¹ IAFC's Advocacy team, which manages training and support for the FAC, requested this evaluation. The evaluation had two goals. It aimed to describe the successes of the FAC following its establishment in November 2020 and to identify opportunities for supporting the FAC in meeting the original goals set forth for it.

The following pages outline a summary of key findings, followed by the full evaluation results and recommendations.

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¹ Funding for the evaluation came from IAFC's subgrant to support the FAC under Illinois' Preschool Development Grant.



Key Findings

In its first two years, the FAC made significant progress in fulfilling its founding vision. In addition to getting the FAC off the ground, the inaugural cohort of 16 parent members:

- Implemented best practices for family engagement (e.g. meeting times, stipend, translation services) that have become a model for other parent engagement groups.
- Provided family voice to guide the work of organizations, researchers, GOECD and other agencies working to improve early childhood services.
- Developed their own leadership capacity and confidence.
- Created agreed upon goals for the FAC to advance within the ELC.

The FAC made this progress despite challenges. Parent members described being uncertain of the FAC's role and purpose within the ELC and faced barriers to meaningful participation within the ELC. Stakeholders felt the parents were stretched too thin. As planning begins for the second FAC cohort, the FAC and ELC can take the following actions to support its efforts:

- Create more meaningful ways for FAC members to participate in the ELC:
 - Define the FAC's role within the ELC more clearly.
 - Establish formal channels of communication for the ELC to solicit input from the FAC and for the FAC to provide input.
- Determine which activities are of most value for the FAC, given the parent members' limited time and the great amount of work to be done. For example, how should the FAC prioritize several activities that have been proposed, including: formulating and advancing their own goals within the ELC, providing input on ELC recommendations, consulting with outside organizations and researchers, and building connections with parents within their home regions.
- Determine if the current amount of diversity among FAC parent members is sufficient or whether the FAC should be more representative of the underserved parents most impacted by state policy decisions.

Methodology and Background



Methodology

For the evaluation, IAFC researchers interviewed 13 people in September and October 2022. These included six of eight parent FAC members selected randomly, and seven stakeholders including FAC mentors, support or training staff and individuals involved in the original design of the FAC. We developed a set of questions and interview protocols for each group and conducted interviews over Zoom. The interviews lasted 30 to 100 minutes. We analyzed the interviews in NVivo, a software program for qualitative data analysis, to assemble the key themes presented in this evaluation report.

Background

Early calls for an FAC registered in 2016 when the ELC began to create an avenue for parents and families to have intentional input and participation within the ELC and the Illinois early childhood system. The ELC created the Family Engagement and Implementation Subcommittee (FEIS), which was comprised of parents, parent advocates, and community and agency representatives. The charge of the FEIS was to research and propose the best way to include the parent voice needed on the ELC. The recommendation from the FEIS was to create a standing Family Advisory Committee within the Council.² The ELC Executive Committee approved the recommendation in February of 2019. Securing funding for the FAC occupied the next 18 months and, once funding was obtained through the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5), the FAC was formally established in November 2020.

For the purpose of this evaluation, we first attempted to identify the goals originally envisioned for the FAC and to classify them as short, medium and long-term goals. We searched for goals in the original FAC proposal, and we clarified them with stakeholders and former FAC staff people. The evaluation concentrates on the short-term goals that might be accomplished during the FAC's first two years. We identified these goals:

Short-Term Goals

1. A diverse, representative cohort of FAC members is established.
2. FAC members deepen their early childhood system knowledge and leadership capacity.
3. FAC members agree on shared values and a set of goals.
4. FAC and ELC incorporate best practices that allow for inclusive parent engagement.
5. FAC members voice parent perspectives in ELC policy discussions.
6. FAC members voice parent perspectives in other forums to inform state policy.
7. FAC engages parents in their respective regions on early childhood issues.

Medium-Term Goal

1. A clear feedback loop exists between the FAC and the larger ELC, and FAC feedback influences ELC recommendations.

² Governor's Office for Early Childhood Development website, <https://www2.illinois.gov/sites/OECD/EarlyLearningCouncil/Pages/Family-Advisory-Committee.aspx>

Long-Term Goals

1. State-wide decision-making tables implement best practices in parent engagement (stipends, language translation, time of day)
2. More state-level early childhood policies are developed with parent input

FAC Membership

Illinois parents of young children were invited to submit applications for membership on the FAC. An original cohort of 16 parent-members was selected to join the FAC from over 100 applicants. Applicants had to describe their participation in their communities, including in early learning and elementary school programs, and their leadership roles. Members represent seven regions across the state. The original plan stated that FAC members would hold a three-year term that would end in November 2023. Recruiting a second cohort of the FAC depended on securing new funding.

FAC members are compensated \$300 per month for their time working on FAC business. In return they agree to maintain a professional and ethical working relationship with all partner agencies involved in the work of positively impacting Illinois early childhood systems. Members agree to attend an orientation, FAC meetings, ELC meetings and required trainings as scheduled, and they agree to seek an excused absence from the FAC staff person if they are unable to attend a required meeting. Members also commit to stay abreast of early childhood issues and policies in Illinois and work with families, communities and the other FAC member in their region to identify specific early learning needs and issues within their region. Finally, they agree to recruit new parents to the FAC as needed. Two members needed to be replaced in the first two years.

Supports for the FAC

The new FAC members received parent leadership training from COFI (Community Organizing and Family Issues), an organization that specializes in parent leadership education and advocacy. The Governor's Office of Early Childhood contracted with Illinois Action for Children to be the "backbone" organization that supports the FAC in working with

the ELC and coordinates FAC training on Illinois' early learning system and the functioning of the ELC. Finally, as a part of the original design, a group of seven parent mentors from the initial Family Engagement and Implementation Subcommittee (FEIS) attended FAC meetings and served as thought partners to the parent members. After 18 months it was determined that ELC members should serve as mentors.

Work of the First Two Years

The FAC meets every other month. It began holding public meetings in May 2021. Except for a period of ELC restructuring, FAC members also attended quarterly ELC meetings as well as some ELC committee meetings.

In early FAC meetings, members established their own "community agreements" about how the committee would function and set very ambitious initial goals. The Governor's Office for Early Childhood Development (GOECD) webpage summarizes these goals:

- **Goal #1:** Due to the pandemic and staffing shortages, enrollment is down in early childhood education and care settings across the state of Illinois. This committee will seek to identify additional barriers and brainstorm solutions to increase enrollment.
- **Goal #2:** Create a standardized process that effectively supports and embeds parent engagement across all early childhood education and care programs and systems in the state of Illinois.
- **Goal #3:** Identify barriers and potential solutions for inclusion related to disabilities, racial disparities, economic disparities, and culturally responsive practices in Early Intervention and within early childhood education and care settings.

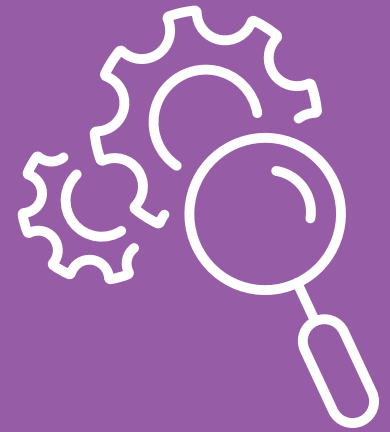
Over its initial two years the FAC consulted with a variety of organizations and consultation firms in its role to "add parent voice, perspective, and experience to the early childhood system and policy landscape through participation in the ELC and its committees."³

Evaluation Questions

1. In its first two years, to what extent has the FAC met the seven short-term goals outlined above?
2. What support or changes are recommended to meet these goals?

³ GOECD, <https://www2.illinois.gov/sites/OECD/EarlyLearningCouncil/Pages/Family-Advisory-Committee.aspx>

Findings: Successes and Challenges in Meeting FAC Goals



Short-term Goal 1:

A diverse, representative cohort of FAC members is established.

There were intentional efforts to recruit a set of parents to the FAC that represent a diversity of perspectives. A stated expectation of the FAC proposal was for the membership to be “racially, linguistically, geographically, ethnically diverse, and low-income inclusive (consider gender and parents with children with disabilities).” The tables to the right show some of the characteristics of the current 16 members.

In terms of the racial and ethnic make-up, half of FAC members identify as White, a quarter as Black, and the remaining quarter as Latinx, Middle Eastern or multi-racial. All speak English as their first or second language. Regarding gender, 15 identify as female and one as male. Parent occupation was not a criterion for selection, but it turns out that half of the membership works in the early childhood field and half do not. The fact that so many members are employed in the field could be because parents were recruited through various early childhood programs and because a stated goal for membership is that “members should be connected to their early childhood community (programs and/or collaborations) to make sure information is shared in two directions.”

Information is not available on the members’ education level or socio-economic status. Geographically, membership aligns with the original intent and consists of two members from each of the seven Department of Public Health regions in Illinois. The Cook County region has two additional members for a total of four – two from Chicago and two from suburban Cook County.

Race / Ethnicity of FAC Membership

White	50%
African American	25%
Latinx	13%
Multi-Racial	6%
Middle Eastern	6%
Indigenous/Native American	0%
Asian American	0%

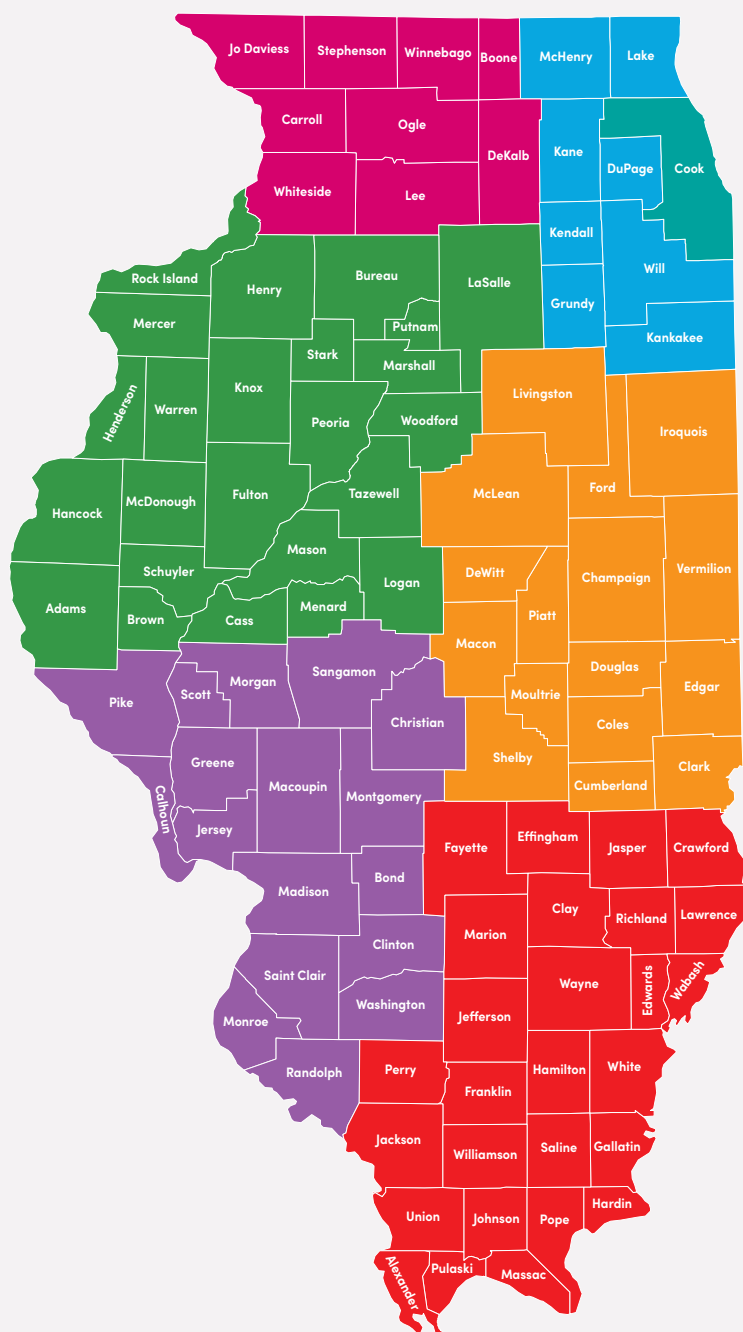
Gender

Male	1
Female	15
Non-Binary/Non-Conforming	0

Profession

Early Childhood Field	8
Non-Early Childhood Field	8

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The six parent members that we interviewed for this evaluation shared the view that the composition of the FAC represents a diversity of parent perspectives. They noted the FAC's geographic, socio-economic, racial, and ethnic diversity. They also commented on the diversity of their children's needs, including children with a variety of disabilities. One parent said, "You can hear that [diversity] in any of our conversations." Another parent said of the membership, "We're living in very different economic circumstances. We basically live in different worlds." One parent felt the group could be more diverse in terms of gender.

Stakeholder remarks suggest that the answer to whether the FAC is a diverse representation of parents depends partly on how diverse representation is defined and what type of diversity was sought. In response to critiques that the FAC is "too white," one stakeholder pointed out that the racial make-up of the group reflects that of the state as a whole, and in that sense is racially representative. Some areas of Illinois do not have much racial or ethnic diversity. Also, in some areas recruitment of parents was challenging regardless of parents' race. This suggests there could be a trade-off between geographic diversity and racial diversity.

Another stakeholder felt the original vision for the FAC was to elevate the voice of the most under-resourced parents. For this reason, this person was surprised to see that the FAC was largely "middle to upper class, educated, and mostly white." In retrospect, they believed racial equity should have been a bigger consideration during member recruitment. They acknowledged that under-resourced parents can be harder to recruit and engage consistently due to instability in their lives, but this is the nature of family engagement work; efforts should be made to support this group and help them stay involved. They felt efforts should also be made to ensure that these parents are tapped for opportunities, such as speaking opportunities, as much as parent members who are "easier to work with" because their lives are more stable.

A second stakeholder agreed that the FAC should be more racially diverse and has heard this from others closely connected to the FAC. This person also questioned whether it is appropriate for the FAC to have members associated with the state or larger state early childhood infrastructure through their jobs or professions. They considered this relationship a potential conflict of interest and also felt that the FAC is a table for parents not already "associated with certain powerful decision-making bodies."

Finally, one stakeholder felt that for the FAC to be truly diverse it needs to include parents who are not fluent in English, because only these parents can convey the struggles and barriers they face every day.

We appreciate these difficult conversations about diversity that stakeholders shared with us.

Short-term Goal 2: **FAC members deepen their early childhood system knowledge and leadership capacity.**

Parents discussed their personal growth while on the FAC and felt their participation either enhanced their leadership skills or at least provided a valuable opportunity to practice their skills.

An important area of growth for several parents was gaining confidence to speak up for what they and other parents need. One parent became a stronger advocate for their own child in obtaining services and grew more confident in their ability to talk about the FAC work. "The trainings and the support that I received through the FAC has allowed me to come out my shell, be able to advocate about the importance of parent voice, teaching individuals that they don't have to talk like the professionals across the table to advocate for their children." Another parent gained the confidence and communication skills to reach out to their elected officials. "I'm helping other parents who may not be getting these services...we need to ask the leaders, 'why aren't you helping these families?'" One parent grew in their ability to voice their perspective in FAC meetings "when there's other strong personalities kind of taking up the space."

Other parents felt they gained new knowledge that enhanced their leadership capacity, including how the Illinois early childhood system, the Early Learning Council, and the government operate. “I learned that there’s an Open Meetings Act...I learned so many different things like that, it’s hard to put into words like how much I’ve learned,” said one parent. Deeper knowledge about fellow parents’ viewpoints and challenges to accessing early childhood services was also something parents gained.

Additionally, parents gained new skills such as goal setting techniques and organizational skills. Two parents described applying what they learned through the FAC in other roles. The leadership training taught one parent the power of collaboration and they applied this to their professional role by partnering with a local organization to bring new services to their clients. “I would’ve never learned how to connect the dots, do all of that, advocate and partner, if I wouldn’t have been a part of the FAC,” they said. Another has advocated for change with local organizations to improve interactions with families: “I’ve been able to hold my center more accountable for the things that they’re doing and ways to better their communication.”

One stakeholder also commented on the development of the parents as leaders during their time on the FAC. “I’d say we’ve been very successful. Whether it’s through the [training] that has been provided for the FAC or just through the opportunities outside the FAC.”

Role of the Parent Leadership Training and FAC Orientation

Some parents credited the parent leadership training when talking about their growth. They particularly valued the trainers and specific training sessions. The trainers were passionate and were able to motivate people. They brought experiences from different parts of the state. The trainers also shared useful tools and taught how parents can effect change on a small and large scale. Parents appreciated the visioning session that helped them think about what an ideal Illinois early childhood system would look like. They appreciated the one-on-one and small group discussions, which one parent said helped FAC members to build camaraderie and compare experiences.

However, one parent struggled to understand the relevance of parts of the leadership training to the FAC work. “It did feel like they were trying to make this community organizing model that they’re used to fit this kind of statewide advisory committee model... it didn’t seem to quite match up.” This comment may relate to a larger issue of confusion about the role of the FAC (which is discussed later). Similarly, another parent who was very interested in COFI’s organizing work said, “a lot of what COFI has to offer, we as FAC members may not necessarily be able to do; and every time we tried to do something we have to get approval through X, Y, and Z because we’re FAC.” This member apparently felt that the FAC is not allowed to engage in advocacy or organizing work. Again, this speaks to a more general uncertainty about the FAC’s role.

As part of their orientation, parents received information about the early childhood system during their FAC meetings. Some parents described feeling confused at times as they tried to absorb the new information. Two parents felt that a more formal, comprehensive training on the early childhood landscape would have been helpful. More background was also desired about the ELC, such as its goals, purpose, structure and, importantly, how the ELC relates to the FAC. “That [information] would have framed what...the Family Advisory Committee’s purpose was. I think we kind of struggled as a group to figure out what our purpose was at first.” Another parent said, “I didn’t realize at first that the FAC was affiliated with the ELC at all, or that that was part of the, you know, GOECD...Going forward when we have new members...a better explanation about how the whole system works would be good.”

Adult learning styles vary, and FAC orientation and trainings might need to accommodate that fact even more than they do. One parent felt that attending the ELC meetings was the best way to learn about it. “I think you can give a lot of information but unless you’re there and see how it is, it’s not going to be applicable.” Similarly, another parent learns best by doing and suggested that the FAC receive real-time training around actionable items. Finally, one parent reported being less comfortable sharing in the large group and would have benefited from more small-group discussions in the leadership training.

Usefulness of the Mentor Model

Parents felt positively about the potential of parent mentors to support the growth of FAC members even if they did not personally benefit from it as much as others did. They said mentors shared inspiring stories and experiences, offered input during brainstorming, and provided help through one-on-one pairings, particularly with information-gathering projects. One member appreciated how their mentor explained the system to them and told them exactly what they needed to do on a project, while another appreciated having someone to bounce ideas off or compare notes with. Some members, however, said they did not work with an individual mentor either because the mentor did not reach out to them or due to their own time constraints. One parent sees potential in continuing to have mentors for new FAC members and is willing to serve as a mentor but feels greater clarity is needed on the mentors' role to be effective. The FAC is currently pursuing a new mentor model which pairs FAC parents with members of the ELC.

Short-term Goal 3: FAC members agree on shared values and a set of goals.

Creation of Goals

The FAC was successful in establishing a set of goals for the committee, and several parent members cited this as one of their accomplishments. They acknowledged that meeting their goals would be a long-term process. One stakeholder said the FAC has not had time to get started on their goals because so much time was spent giving feedback or doing work for other organizations or the GOECD. Some parents and stakeholders pointed to ways the FAC goals could be stronger.

- One parent pointed out that the FAC did not have many action items for its goals. They attributed this partly to the lack of clarity on what the FAC is allowed to do and to the belief that certain activities need ELC approval.
- Another parent said it was not clear what the FAC's goals meant for the ELC and felt that more collaboration was needed to align FAC goals with ELC efforts. Another parent agreed with the need for more coordination of work between the FAC

and ELC, generally. At times, they felt the FAC's work had duplicated the ELC's or the FAC was told that the ELC "has already got it covered and they should work on something else."

- A stakeholder involved in crafting the original vision for the FAC would like to see the group's goals relate more to specific policy and practice. This would align with what this person considers the FAC's main role: to identify things that should change about the early childhood system and recommend these changes to the ELC.
- Finally, one parent said the FAC goals were not formulated in a way that helped the members know if they were being successful, and additional training on how to do this would be useful.

Short-term Goal 4: FAC and ELC incorporate best practices that allow for inclusive parent engagement.

Overall, parent members felt that the structure and practices of the FAC accommodated their needs and allowed for inclusive parent engagement but practices of the broader ELC were less accommodating.

FAC Practices

The FAC meeting structure accommodated its parent members in multiple ways. The meetings were scheduled in the evenings which enabled parents who worked during the day to attend, and they were scheduled well in advance so parents with busy schedules could plan ahead. The virtual nature of the meetings meant parents did not need to travel and could join even when they had to be somewhere else due to family responsibilities. If members were unable to attend a meeting, they could review the meeting notes or connect with the co-chair and other members to get updates. Finally, Spanish interpretation services became increasingly available during the meetings so Spanish-speaking members of the public could participate.

FAC members felt adequately compensated for their time and work. Most members expressed appreciation for the stipends they received, and some were not initially expecting to be paid. One member's family had financial struggles, so the stipend was helpful and unlike the other unpaid family engagement

opportunities they participated in. They said, “unfortunately, I don’t have the ability to not worry about money. And so, it’s nice that, you know, I’m giving my time for this and they’re paying me for it.” Another member felt the stipend amount was generous and “makes a statement like, this is work that we want you to do and that we want to be done.”

One member felt that the training schedule at the start of the FAC was very demanding and the stipends may not have reflected the true level of commitment required during that stage. The parent wished they had known earlier about the extra time commitment.

In terms of additional supports that would help FAC members, one interviewee felt the FAC should have resources available to FAC members should they need them including social, emotional, and mental health resources. Some members faced particularly challenging family circumstances while on the FAC, and a stakeholder said it would have been helpful to have resources in place to support these parents rather than seek outside resources in each case.

A stakeholder said the FAC staff could adopt practices that support participation of parents that have fewer resources and less stability in their lives. One suggestion was making reminder phone calls to parents in advance of FAC meetings. Another stakeholder agreed that it is important to help parents to stay engaged once you have them at the table because they encounter many obstacles, such as child care and job schedules.

ELC Practices

Compared to the FAC meeting times, ELC meetings times were not as accessible to parents, though recent changes accommodate FAC members better. For much of the past two years, ELC meetings were scheduled during regular business hours, typically between 1 pm and 4 pm, which made it difficult for working FAC members to attend. Half of the FAC members interviewed said they regularly attended the ELC meetings, including one member who works in the early childhood field and could attend during work hours because ELC meetings are work related. The other half of the members said they were unable to attend because they worked or were in school during these hours. At first, one member used

vacation time from work to attend ELC meetings but received pushback from family members for doing this and now no longer attends ELC meetings. In response to repeated FAC requests, including a request from all FAC members by video recording, the ELC has recently begun to offer evening meeting times.

In addition to difficult meeting times, FAC members and stakeholders named other ways that the ELC meetings seemed “unwelcoming” to parents. The public policy and early childhood jargon was alienating to FAC members who were still learning about this field of work. Spanish interpretation was not provided in most meetings. Meetings were long (sometimes up to three hours), and there was no formal forum to engage FAC members’ views.

Most FAC members said they felt comfortable being in the meetings and found them to be interesting and meaningful. Yet one member described the feeling of “imposter syndrome” because they did not have the same level of knowledge and experience as ELC members. Two others felt their lack of prior knowledge about meeting discussion topics or about the early childhood system made it difficult to follow along, as did the number of acronyms used in the meetings. One member said the ELC could be more supportive of FAC members by understanding that they are new to the early childhood field and may not know all the acronyms used in the meetings. Stakeholders agreed that the language used at meetings was not easy for parents to understand. One stakeholder said, “it’s not the most welcoming place...I struggle in those [meetings], and this is my job.”

Stakeholders had mixed opinions on the need for Spanish interpretation during ELC meetings. Some stakeholders did not feel that interpretation services were needed, but two commented that the lack of translation services from the start set the expectation that this was not a Spanish-speaking friendly space and discouraged Spanish-speaking parents from engaging. They explained, “What happens is they offer it one time without letting people know it’s going to be offered. Nobody goes to the meeting because you already know that meeting doesn’t have interpretation, but nobody uses a resource at one time. They’re like, nobody needs it. And they stop and it’s a miscommunication.”

A final challenge pertaining to both FAC and ELC participation was the overall number of meetings and trainings FAC members had to attend. These include the regular FAC meetings, ELC meetings which were often lengthy, and ELC committee meetings that some members attended. Six of the seven stakeholders and one FAC member said that the high number and frequency of meetings were challenging to manage with their families' schedules.

Short-term Goal 5: FAC members voice parent perspectives in ELC policy discussions.

Some interviewees, particularly stakeholders, noted the progress of the FAC in elevating parent voice within the ELC. They shared that FAC parents were actively engaged in conversations and the larger ELC was very responsive to parent input. Some FAC members were actively engaged in committees of the ELC as well, which provided another avenue to elevate the voices of parents. However, both stakeholders and FAC members felt the FAC's influence in the ELC was limited and shared thoughts on the reasons for this.

The ELC does not have a systematic way to hear FAC members' input and request their feedback, both during the ELC meetings and more broadly.

Currently, most interaction between FAC members and the larger ELC occurs during the ELC meetings. FAC members who attend can give comments during the public comment time and in occasional break-out sessions. Often FAC members resorted to entering comments in the chat feature of video sessions, and one stakeholder felt that that silenced parents. Several FAC members commented that there is little opportunity in the ELC meetings to offer input and noted that they mostly observe. "There's not a lot of opportunity to share, really. Though you can put thoughts in the chat," said one member who wishes they had the opportunity to have more discussions when they have an idea. Some FAC members want the ELC to be clearer on what it expects from them during meetings and how the ELC would like to receive their feedback/comments.

Additionally, when they did speak, members had mixed views on whether they felt heard. Two FAC members felt the ELC listened to them but three did not feel that way, particularly in the early launch of the FAC. One member said things have improved over time, "I remember there were several times feeling frustrated that they weren't listening to us as parents and we're like, what was the point of this if you're not going to listen to us, you know. But I feel like that has been less in recent months." Another parent shared always feeling welcome as an observer but not feeling their voice carried the same weight as other members. "I feel like if I had an opposing opinion of an ELC member...what I said would kind of be pushed to the side or, on the other hand, if I had something to say that was similar to an ELC member, kind of what they said would take recognition. And so...it was like, well, you're the FAC and you work kind of with us, but you're really not with us. You're not a part of us." This led the member to participate less during ELC meetings. A stakeholder shared that ELC leadership has often in meetings referred to FAC members as "guests," reinforcing the feeling that they are not equal in status to other ELC members.

A more systemic issue raised by one FAC member is the need for better communication channels between the ELC and FAC that would allow the FAC to give thoughtful feedback and be more engaged during ELC meetings. This member thinks the ELC should share the topics it wants FAC's feedback on in advance of ELC meetings so the FAC can discuss them as a group prior to the meeting. This would allow the FAC to prepare feedback that reflects the whole FAC perspective, not just the attending member's personal perspective. Furthermore, this approach can "help FAC members feel more prepared" to speak during meetings. This would require the ELC to be more intentional about identifying areas they want family input on. One stakeholder agrees that there is benefit to the FAC speaking on issues collectively rather than individually: "I think it could be more powerful."

Others suggested that two-way communication between the FAC and ELC could increase if all ELC meetings had a dedicated time on the agenda for the FAC. One stakeholder elaborated, "the FAC should be on the agenda at every meeting. They should have an allotted time slot on the agenda to give updates and ask for what they need."

The role of the FAC within the ELC is not clearly defined and the current structure is limiting for the FAC.

A common sentiment among the FAC members interviewed is that they would like greater clarity on what their role is in relation to the ELC. They want to be useful in supporting the goals of the ELC and to feel they are having an impact. One FAC member asked how exactly the FAC was supposed to support the ELC, “is it just to take away information they’re presenting? Are you looking for my opinion while I’m there? How can I contribute?”

Stakeholders, too, felt the FAC needs a more defined role and avenue by which to share their ideas and work but note that integrating the FAC under the existing structure and practices of the ELC may be difficult. One stakeholder felt that it does not help that there is insufficient clarity around the purpose of the ELC itself and that if the purpose of the ELC were better defined, it would be easier for the FAC to determine their role and align their work.

Some stakeholders familiar with the early vision of the FAC said the FAC has veered somewhat from this vision. For example, one believed the FAC should function more as a partner that contributes ideas to the ELC or other state organizations rather than as consultation group that is sometimes solicited. “What I have seen is that early childhood stakeholders and partners were very excited to tap into a group of parents that are ready to give feedback that they do not have to put any effort or resources into. And that was not the goal or the intention of the FAC. They’re not this consultation on the side, tap in whenever you need them, they’re supposed to be a partner. And that hasn’t come through.”

Stakeholders also did not foresee some of the limitations that come with the FAC being part of the ELC and the rules in which it has to work, though one person felt that some of these restrictions are open to interpretation and could be changed. Notably, as an advisory committee of the ELC, the FAC is not allowed to conduct advocacy work. One stakeholder said, ideally, the FAC would be able to speak with lawmakers about what parents need “if there was something they really believed in and there was legislation, that they’d be able...to somehow support it, but that is not allowed.” Another stakeholder said that many members came in thinking they would be doing advocacy, and so this has been a point of frustration for them.

Additionally, the FAC has sacrificed some independence because it is a committee of the ELC. One member said the FAC has had to vet certain activities it wanted to do through the ELC to get approval, limiting action steps it could take on its goals. The member did not clarify if these activities were related to advocacy. This member was also exasperated that the ELC edited the mission statement of the FAC crafted by the FAC. In another instance, the FAC wanted to create a statement on inclusion, but because the ELC already has an inclusion statement, the FAC could not create its own.

Finally, some interviewees raised the need for increasing the number of parents on the ELC. One stakeholder felt that to truly elevate parent voice, the ELC should, at a minimum, have 20 percent of its council be parents. Others felt that both of the FAC co-chairs should be parent-members of the FAC (one co-chair had previously been the FAC support staff). This would result in two parent members being part of the ELC Executive Committee. As one stakeholder said, the focus should be on parent leadership and therefore it “absolutely needs to be two parents that co-chair.” Also, logistically, this would prevent a member leadership vacuum should the single member co-chair have to step down.

The ELC has not fully embraced the FAC

As noted by one stakeholder, successful integration of the FAC into state decision-making involves developing the two sides: developing the parents’ capacity and confidence in their own power AND “changing mindsets of the receiving bodies such as the Early Learning Council.” They felt the ELC continues to do “business as usual” and would like to see more training, engagement, or commitment from the ELC in terms of how it would partner with the FAC. Some ideas in the original proposal that have yet to be carried out include an annual orientation for ELC members on “the importance and principles of authentic and meaningful family engagement” and an annual training that includes reminders on ways the ELC can facilitate parent participation. “More than anything, what they could do is just ask the FAC ‘what can we do to make this space more welcoming and accommodating for you?’”

Short-term Goal 6: FAC members voice parent perspectives in other forums to inform state policy.

During its two years, the FAC gained recognition as a resource for parent input and a number of organizations sought the FAC's feedback. One stakeholder shared, "I know that the state has championed this group...the goal of it being a place where other people can come and ask for parent input has been met. Other external partners or groups have reached out to us to contact the FAC for those reasons. So, I think that the communication of the FAC as a group has been somewhat positive throughout the state." One example of an organization that sought the FAC for parent feedback was the Greater Chicago Food Depository, which invited FAC members to participate in focus groups to get parent input on their experiences accessing the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC).

FAC members did not always recall which groups came to them for input but they did recount instances when they worked with researchers or consultants on survey wording or possibly how to reach families for a survey or focus group. Members who commented about these experiences said they felt heard by these groups and felt useful to them and believed they made an impact. One parent said the researchers treated FAC members as experts of their own experiences. Researchers also circled back to show them how their suggestions were put to use and to present their research results. One parent gave an example of input that was incorporated, "they started using the word disability instead of special needs, and that I thought was really important." For one member, working with the research groups was a highlight of their FAC experience because these were instances where they felt their perspectives were heard, valued, and being used to inform decisions around early childhood. The parent shared, "that felt really good to be able to give that kind of advice or, you know, be that advisory committee before something was rolled out...[It] was empowering in a way, like you care about what we're saying and we're actually being useful." Another member expressed their desire for the FAC to be consulted earlier in the process, such as at the beginning of a project, but understood that the FAC was still establishing themselves.

Some members felt that although the FAC was beginning to become known as a resource, it could be used a lot more. One felt further promotion of the FAC is needed to spread awareness that it is an available resource. Another felt this would happen organically if the ELC begins to include the FAC more in its decision-making.

Some stakeholders expressed reservations about the use of the FAC by state partners and organizations. These stakeholders felt that the original intent was for the FAC to be a partner to the ELC and state organizations and its use as a consultation group was exhausting for FAC members and prevented the group from achieving its own goals. Another stakeholder observed that the FAC parents have been overwhelmed by the number of meetings and agencies asking for their feedback on surveys and interviews. The stakeholder explained, "They are exhausted, and we haven't really been able to focus on our work and what we want to focus on. There's also been a flurry of additional meetings as of late that are related to the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) grant. But it's really taxed this body and they're just tired."

Short-term Goal 7: FAC engages parents in their respective region on early childhood issues.

An original intention of the FAC was that the parent members would engage parents in their respective regions on early childhood issues so that the FAC was representative of more parents in the community. One stakeholder shared, "the original recommendations covered the idea of bringing parents from across the state ..., but there was also a component around building local capacity by offering these trainings at the local or regional level, building a cohort of parents, and then hiring parents that had gone through the process of being on the FAC or who just have roots in the community to staff and mentor that group of parents...so that the people on the FAC are not just representing themselves but representing their communities." Currently this vision for local parent engagement led by the FAC parent members has not come to fruition.

- One stakeholder explained that it is too early in the process to expect this type of local parent engagement when the FAC is still focused on building its identity, but it is a goal for the future of the FAC.

- Several stakeholders expressed that they would like to see more parents and caregivers involved at meetings but also understood the undeniable challenge for 16 parent members to engage all parent communities.
- One stakeholder saw local parent leadership development as an area for future investment of resources. These local parent leaders could then connect with the FAC.
- Some stakeholders suggested increasing the number of FAC members to 4 per region to increase parent representation.

Parent members agreed that more parents need to be involved. Some suggested that the first step to accomplishing this is to raise awareness about the FAC so that parents know they can go to the FAC with issues they are facing and work together to have an impact on policymaking. One member felt that local parent engagement would happen with time as the FAC builds its credibility and achieves more clarity around the FAC's purpose and integration with the ELC. Some FAC members also felt that more needed to be done to recruit local parents. Currently the way members are reaching other parents is simply through the organizations in which FAC members are already involved, but one member suggested an effort should be made to reach out to parents through state programs such as Preschool for All, Early Intervention, or the medical community, since "those are the voices we'd want to hear first." No one interviewed recommended ways that the FAC could work with the new Birth to Five regional parent councils, though this will likely be a point of discussion as the councils develop.

Progress on Medium and Long-Term Goals.

Interviewees discussed progress made on some of the medium and long-term goals, although these were not the focus of the evaluation. Discussion related to the medium-term goal of establishing a clear feedback loop between the FAC and ELC can be found above under short-term goal 5.

State-wide decision-making tables implement best practices in parent engagement.

Overall, most stakeholders interviewed believe that the FAC accomplished this long-term goal in that the FAC established a precedent for parent

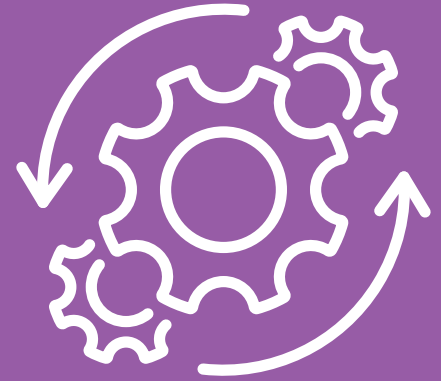
engagement and the development of parent leaders. One stakeholder shared, "a huge accomplishment is that the FAC spawned other parent councils. The creation of more intentional family engagement within the advocacy world has led to agencies hearing more from parents." Some specific examples provided by stakeholders were that the Raising Illinois Coalition was inspired by the FAC to create their own parent councils, and that other organizations such as Every Child Ready Chicago are trying to adopt a similar model. The FAC also helped to raise awareness across state agencies on the importance of paying parents a stipend, adjusting meeting times to accommodate family schedules, and providing translation services at meetings to be inclusive of all families.

More state-level early childhood policies are developed with parent/family input.

Another long-term goal for the FAC is that the state develops its policies with parent/family input. Some stakeholders felt that the foundation has been set to begin accomplishing this goal because the FAC provides parents with a seat at the table, which has increased transparency on the early childhood issues and policies.

- One stakeholder shared, "we're making sure now that all parents are going to be at these different tables when issues come up. They're just trying to make sure that parents are engaged. That's the most important piece, make sure that parents and childcare providers are all at the table because nobody knows family needs better than them."
- Another stakeholder said, "I think that the FAC is the inaugural group of parents that's trying to do that...amplify the voice of parents and caregivers. And so, to that end, I would say yes, we are, we have made a big mark in the EC (Early Childhood) sector in terms of bringing voice and bringing transparency to the issues of early childhood. Having transparency on issues and policies in the early childhood sector gave parents the chance to speak and elevate issues that were important to them."
- A third stakeholder believed progress toward this goal is being made, "I think it's happening. The strategic plan for the state, for example. We're just now hearing about that and getting the opportunity to give some more feedback on that as it's being finalized. And so, I'm confident that we'll be able to see the fruits of our labor."

Recommendations to Support and Improve the FAC's Work



Based on the results above and suggestions offered in the interviews, the following is a summary of possible ways to strengthen the FAC and its ability to elevate parent voice as it moves into its next cohort. The FAC could regularly assess how it is doing in these areas and change the items as needed.

1. Clarify the purpose of the FAC and its role within and outside of the ELC.

Several members noted that they were unclear about the purpose of the FAC and the role it would serve within the ELC. There was also confusion and possibly frustration among some members about the limitations of the FAC as a committee of the ELC. In the process of clarifying the relationship, it may be helpful to take a step back and answer the following questions:

- Is it satisfactory that the FAC is only an advisory body? What does this mean for the FAC in terms of the goals or work they can and cannot pursue?
- Is the current placement of the FAC as a committee of the ELC the right fit? Is improving the FAC's role mostly a matter of improving coordination with the ELC, or does this placement need to be re-thought?
- Which rules related to the current FAC-ELC relationship can or should be reworked? (e.g., rules related to engaging in advocacy, expressing an independent voice, and the number of parents on the FAC.)

It is important that parents have accurate expectations of their role. Once clarified, the FAC's role and ELC guidelines for the FAC should be written down. And during the FAC application process, they should be shared with parents.

2. Increase ELC support for the FAC.

The ELC made some positive changes to help integrate the FAC, such as providing accessible evening meeting times and providing translation services for Spanish-speaking parents. These changes have made the ELC more accessible to families, but some members and stakeholders feel that more could be done to incorporate the FAC as a partner to the ELC. Some recommended ways the ELC could better support the FAC are:

- Be more intentional in seeking FAC input in discussions. This involves identifying areas for parent input and giving the FAC advance notice to discuss and prepare a collective response.
- Remove barriers to parent participation in ELC meetings. This involves having a conversation with the FAC about how the ELC meetings can be more welcoming and accommodating. It likely includes being mindful of the use of jargon and parent's different levels of knowledge of the early childhood system. One suggestion is to have a dedicated agenda space at every ELC meeting for FAC members to give input or raise issues.
- Offer regular training or orientation for ELC members on best practices for engaging the FAC and on any agreed-upon feedback loops.
- Continue to develop a mentor program between ELC and FAC members.

3. Revisit FAC protocols for making recommendations to the ELC.

The FAC could assess the effectiveness of its current process for contributing input to the ELC and other bodies, and revise this process as needed.

Interviewee suggestions include these:

- Provide feedback to the ELC collectively as a group as well as on an individual level; set aside time to discuss and prepare this feedback in advance of ELC meetings.
- Develop a set of values to guide the making of recommendations.
- Identify specific changes to policy or practice that would benefit parents.
- Give clear recommendations to the ELC on what it can do to help the FAC recommendation process be most effective.
- Make both FAC co-chairs parent members in order to increase FAC parent-member representation and communication on the ELC Executive Committee.

4. Determine how FAC time can be used most effectively.

To respond to the issues of the FAC being overworked, having too many meetings, and ELC meetings being so lengthy, the FAC can consider ways to use its time most effectively. Proposed solutions include:

- Have more focused quarterly meetings where the FAC develops specific feedback solicited by the ELC and formulates its own requests of the ELC.
- Reduce ‘required’ presence at ELC meetings to only the meetings or portion of meetings that pertain to the above items, or during an allotted FAC time on the agenda.

5. Evaluate FAC representation and diversity.

Currently, half of the FAC members are White, and half had professions in the early childhood field. Some FAC members and stakeholders felt that more can be done to increase the racial and socio-economic diversity of the FAC members. They feel the FAC needs more representation of underserved parents most impacted by state early childhood policy decisions, although as we reported above, they also acknowledge that increasing this representation can be challenging. Several important questions around diversity of the FAC were raised and could be considered when determining selection criteria for the next member cohort, including:

- Should the FAC be intentional about increasing representation of non-White parents from the most underserved groups? If so, is there an existing equity rubric that could aid in the selection process?
- Should the FAC be intentional about increasing representation of male and non-binary parents?
- How connected to the early childhood field should parents be? How much is too much?
- Should the FAC work to increase representation among parents who are not fluent in English?

6. Ensure FAC has adequate resources

Stakeholders identified three potential areas for further investment for the FAC.

- In addition to filling current support staff vacancies, ensure the FAC has adequate staffing to support the engagement of parents facing more challenging life circumstances who may need extra support. This would facilitate greater voice from the most underserved.
- Provide a way for FAC parents to connect to needed resources including social, emotional, and mental health resources as challenging situations arise in their lives.
- Provide more resources to develop parent leaders at the most local level and connect these parents to the FAC.

7. Bolster FAC training and supports

Several FAC members mentioned that the trainings they received were interesting and informative but were not always applicable to the work they could do within the ELC. Additionally, since members have different levels of knowledge about the early childhood field, some members desired additional training. The following are suggestions based on FAC member comments related to their orientation, parent training and mentoring.

- Offer FAC members a more comprehensive training on the early childhood system.
- Clarify to members the goals of the parent leadership training as it relates to the parent's role on the FAC – where the two converge and diverge; or consider if the training should be revised to ensure a good fit.
- Offer training and support on setting measurable goals.
- Offer on-the-job training specific to the FAC's work or projects.
- Ensure trainings adapt to different learning styles (e.g., a good balance of large and small group discussions).
- Continue to develop the mentor model for new FAC members and clarify the role of the mentors.

8. Logistical Recommendations

To capture the progress of the FAC, we recommend better documentation of the work of the FAC and the policies on which they have had an impact. Several members shared that they had received leadership opportunities, consulted with organizations on several research projects, and participated in some policy discussions, but there is no clear record of these instances. Better tracking of the FAC's work can help the FAC parents identify their progress on their goals and evaluate time-spent on each activity and whether those activities are aligned to their goals.



Going Forward

With the above recommendations for supporting the FAC, interviewees highlighted three large themes to address in the third year of the FAC and beyond. All involve achieving greater clarity about roles and facilitating that clarification in practice. First, the relationship between the FAC and the ELC needs to be clearer to FAC members and ELC members alike. FAC members need clarity about what initiatives they may and may not take, and ELC members need clarity about how to engage the FAC in their work. Furthermore, are FAC members to participate like any parent in the open ELC meetings, or do they have a more formal place in ELC policy discussions? If the latter, what should that formal place be and how should it be realized in ELC deliberations?

Second, more clarity is needed about the best use of FAC members' time. Given that parents have many competing obligations to family, employment and the ELC, among others, would it make sense to limit the amount of time FAC members spend in meetings or in giving feedback to proposals brought to them? Should the FAC spend more time championing and

shepherding parent participation across the early childhood system? Should it develop and advocate for its own initiatives and agenda? Finally, should the number of FAC members be increased so that they can divide the different aspects of FAC work?

Third, clarity is needed regarding how FAC members should truly represent parents' voices and how they should represent the diversity of Illinois parents. Should they act more intentionally as representatives of Illinois parents, or is it enough for them to act from their own personal perspectives as individuals? Does it make sense for them to spend more substantial amounts of their FAC time engaging with parents in their own regions or communities? If so, should this activity be formalized, and should resources be devoted to supporting this activity?



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