



Strengthening the Early Childhood Workforce in Illinois: *A Policy Guide*

June 2022



ILLINOIS ACTION FOR CHILDREN (IAFC)

is a catalyst for organizing, developing, and supporting strong families and powerful communities where children matter most.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Illinois Action for Children thanks the W. Clement & Jessie V. Stone Foundation, Steans Family Foundation, and Robert R. McCormick Foundation for their generous support of this report.

We are thankful to Catherine Main, University of Illinois at Chicago and Kate Connor, Harry S. Truman College for providing feedback on the surveys. Thank you to our partners who helped us disseminate the online higher education surveys to their networks: Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies and Community College Trustees Association. Lastly, thank you to all the early childhood educators and higher education faculty and staff who completed the surveys and shared their experiences.

AUTHORS AND CONTRIBUTORS

Viridiana Luna, Senior Research Associate, Illinois Action for Children

Teresa Ramos, PhD, former Vice President of Policy, Research and Advocacy, Illinois Action for Children

Lilian Matsuda, Director of Advocacy, Illinois Action for Children

Michael Kim, Director of Policy, Illinois Action for Children

Maria Estlund, former Senior Policy Associate, Illinois Action for Children

INTRODUCTION

This policy guide identifies critical questions for individuals and institutions interested in pursuing solutions that seek to support the early childhood incumbent workforce in Illinois, specifically those pursuing a higher education degree. The critical questions for designing solutions proposed in this report are informed by survey data from a survey of 455 current and aspiring early childhood educators.

The critical questions below provide policymakers and decisionmakers with a way to design solutions to effectively address institutional and systemic issues in the field. This guide is for everyone working on policy design or redesign. However, it will be beneficial for public and private Deans of Colleges of Education and Presidents of higher education institutions, legislators, state agency leaders, and members of the Governor's office. These stakeholders have the power to assess policies and solutions using this policy guide.

The policy guide is more important than ever given Illinois' recent financial and resource investments in the early childhood incumbent workforce. The Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) was created in 2021 to improve the incumbent workforce's access to higher education degrees and credentials. Public 2-year and 4-year partners, who are mandated to participate, and private partners who opt-in to participate, will receive funding to support the Consortium work and serve students. As advocates, we are eager to support the important institutional, state agency and legislative policy changes that emerge from this Consortium.

SURVEY METHODS

In February and March 2021, Illinois Action for Children (IAFC) conducted two online surveys to understand how higher education institutions could better support incumbent early childhood educators in pursuing credentials. IAFC developed one survey for current or aspiring early childhood educators and a second survey for faculty and staff in Illinois early childhood college degree programs. We did this to inform our participation in the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) Strategic Plan Advisory Committee and to gather feedback on the solution areas initially proposed by the committee—as well as the Community College Baccalaureate Degree, already under IAFC’s consideration. We hoped to better understand the challenges that early childhood college students face to complete their degrees.

The survey for early childhood educators was shared on IAFC’s social media platforms and newsletters. It was distributed via Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) email lists and social media platforms. The survey was made available in English and Spanish. Individuals who completed the survey were entered into a raffle to win one of twenty \$50 gift cards. The higher education faculty and staff surveys were distributed by IAFC’s colleagues and partners at City Colleges of Chicago, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and the Community College Trustees Association.

WHO COMPLETED OUR SURVEY?

Current and aspiring early childhood educators

A total of 455 individuals that were interested in completing a degree in early childhood education or child development completed our survey. The majority said their home was in Illinois, however, some said their home was outside of Illinois. We suspect that those with homes outside of Illinois had been part of the

DEMOGRAPHICS OF CURRENT AND ASPIRING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS (N=455)	% (N)
GENDER	
Female	80% (366)
Male	18% (81)
Other/prefer not to answer	2% (8)
RACE/ETHNICITY	
White	47% (214)
Latinx	22% (102)
Multi-racial	13% (61)
Black	9% (40)
Other	3% (13)
Asian	2% (11)
American Indian or Alaska Native	3% (14)
EMPLOYMENT	
Employed in the early childhood field	82% (374)
Employed in another field	11% (49)
Currently not working	7% (32)
EARLY CHILDHOOD JOB (N=374)	
Assistant teacher	31% (140)
Teacher	31% (139)
Home provider	13% (58)
Director/owner	2% (9)
Other	6% (28)
COLLEGE ENROLLMENT	
Full-time	50% (228)
Part-time	31% (139)
Not enrolled	19% (88)
INSTITUTION STUDENT IS ENROLLED AT	
2-year college	55% (200)
4-year college or university	46% (167)
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT	
No college credit	5% (21)
Some college credit	53% (239)
Associates degree	15% (70)
Associates degree plus some credit	12% (56)
Bachelor’s degree or more	15% (69)

Illinois higher education system in the past, were out-of-state students attending an Illinois college, or relocated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Most respondents (82 percent) currently worked in the early childhood care and education field.

Most respondents (81 percent) were enrolled in a college program. Of the 367 respondents that were enrolled in college, 55 percent were attending a community college, and the rest were attending a 4-year college or university. Nearly half of all Black students (48 percent) reported having to leave their college program at one point, the highest rate of all racial/ethnic groups.

Higher education faculty and staff

We surveyed Illinois college and university faculty and staff in the early childhood field. Seventy-five faculty and staff completed the survey; 45 were employed at a 2-year college, and 30 were employed at a 4-year college/university. Some faculty and staff identified as having a student support related job (2-year: 16 percent and 4-year: 20 percent). However, it is likely that more of them support and advise students, but may not identify as student support staff.

POLICY GUIDE

Early childhood educators and college students shared their experiences in higher education and the obstacles they face to complete their degrees. From their survey responses, we identified themes and challenges to inform the development of the five critical questions to guide policy development. We recommend the field consider and adopt these questions when developing advocacy efforts and analyzing policies, to ensure equity and center the experiences of the workforce. For instance, when decision-makers are designing policies, they can refer to these questions to assess and review their ideas. In doing so, their policy solutions will, hopefully, adequately center the experiences of the early childhood workforce and put the system on a path towards greater equity.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS AND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS



Policy Guide Question 1:

Are classes easier to access and available at more flexible times for working adults and parents?



Policy Guide Question 2:

Are early childhood incumbent workers able to complete observation hours and field experiences while working in their current job?



Policy Guide Question 3:

Do students have access to mental health supports at their college or university?



Policy Guide Question 4:

Do students have support from advisors to make informed decisions about their education and careers?



Policy Guide Question 5:

Do working students and former students have the financial aid and resources to stay in school or re-enroll?



Policy Guide Question 1:

Are classes easier to access and available at more flexible times for working adults and parents?

“My local community college is close by, has child care for students, and has classes during the day. I have five children and need to take classes while they are in school, but also be available and close by if one of them needs me or has an emergency. I also like that there are only 3-4 professors for this major, so a close-knit relationship is established with them. It is also a lot cheaper. Tuition is cheaper, I am close to home to make meals, and I do not have to spend on a far commute or parking. Going to a university poses a huge financial problem for me, even if tuition is fully covered.”

—*Latinx mother, a full-time student in Cook County, and enrolled at a 2-year college*

More convenient college course offerings and delivery methods can provide working adults with the flexibility to complete their degree, while providing for themselves and their families. Having course options, such as online or weekend courses, which fit with students’ jobs and family obligations, can remove barriers to college completion and support students’ decisions to return to college. A faculty member from a 2-year college said, “*the biggest obstacle is they [students] are working while trying to complete their degree. There is often not enough time for everything.*”

Among the 122 students who dropped out of college at some point, 14 percent said this was due to the lack of time and lack of convenient and relevant courses:

- “*Not enough college courses could be offered online.*”
- “*I’m running out of community college courses that I can take.*”
- “*I got pregnant with my daughter and was unable to complete face-to-face courses. I started working full-time as a single mother without child care and was unable to take courses.*”
- “*Classes were not convenient.*”
- “*I wasn’t able to find a job that worked around my school schedule.*”



Among early childhood workers educators who left their college program, about a third said they left to care for their children (n=122)

Early childhood educators (75 percent) would prefer to attend college courses in their communities because it would allow them to avoid a long commute to another college campus, continue working at their job, and care for their children and families. Additionally, 53 percent of educators said they would be more likely to attend their community college if they could obtain a bachelor’s degree rather than a traditional 4-year university. They cited affordability and the convenient location as the top two reasons their community college would be a better option.

Working students and parents need the convenience of local college courses to continue their education:

- *“A program closer to where I moved. At the time, I had a two-year old and a newborn, and it just wasn’t feasible for me to continue. Then as time went on, it was harder for me to go back. I would have to travel for classes and don’t have anyone close to watch my kids.”*
- *“[If I worked and lived] right next to my community college, everything would be close, and I [could] manage working and school in one day without having to drive 40 minutes.”*

Early childhood educators and faculty discussed the need for affordable and accessible child care for college students. The affordability and accessibility of child care must be considered

when creating solutions for students. Survey respondents noted that making child care available in the evenings would allow students to attend classes at night. A faculty member shared: *“Many of my students who are in the workforce have children. It is difficult to work all day, then get their children home and leave for class. I think [making] child care [available] while in evening classes will be a benefit.”* One faculty member said they have had students *“bringing their children to class.”*

Of the early childhood educators who had to leave their college program at some point, 34 percent said the reason was related to caregiving responsibilities – this was the second most common reason reported after financial issues.

Mothers stepped in to care for their children and to support their families:

- *“My son was diagnosed with a disease that was soon deadly, so I had to rotate a lot of appointments for him [and] dealing with different doctors and therapy sessions.”*
- *“[I was] was pregnant with [my] second child and wasn’t able to return to school after having a baby.”*
- *“It isn’t easy for me to find the time and child care to get the help I need based on my community college’s tutoring sessions.”* ■

Over half of the early childhood educators surveyed said online courses would be convenient for them.

Courses that would be convenient for students (n=455)





Policy Guide Question 2:

Are early childhood incumbent workers able to complete observation hours and field experiences while working in their current job?

“Being able to work full-time in a center and take classes [would help me complete my degree]. So many early childhood courses require hours and hours of observations, and I can’t get the time off work at my child care center to complete the observations. It would be awesome to have an online video database that students could use for observations.”

—Early childhood teacher and mom from DuPage County and enrolled at a 2-year college

For many of the early childhood educators we surveyed, it was hard to balance their full-time work and their course load as students. Almost one-third of those surveyed (n=122, 28 percent) had to stop attending their college program at some point. Many cited multiple reasons for not continuing their college education, but the most common reasons were financial, family responsibilities, and having work obligations.

Survey respondents shared that the field experience requirements conflicted with their work schedules. Additionally, they faced their own child care barriers and needed financial assistance to pursue a college degree. Sixteen percent said they left college because they were unable to attend while still working:

- “Working full-time and couldn’t reduce my job hours to do clinical.”
- “The course load was too much with the demands of working at a [child]care center full-time. It was impossible for me to get the required time off to complete field experiences.”
- “Many child care classes are in-person or on weekends...When you work [child] care hours (6 am to 6 pm) and have a family, it is impossible.”

Asking child care programs to allow their staff to take time off to complete degree requirements is not an equitable solution. Instead, higher education institutions should adapt to meet the needs of the workforce and employers. Some of the higher education faculty and staff that we surveyed suggested that child care program directors should let staff take time off to attend classes; they viewed the lack of job flexibility and work schedules as barriers to degree completion. Some believed that child care program directors should be more considerate of their employees' course schedules:

- *"Honestly, a realization and support from their directors that they can't work 50 hours a week and take classes too."*
- *"The ability to leave a little early to connect to class."*
- *"Even with remote learning, students find it difficult to get away from their jobs to connect to synchronous online meetings."*

One faculty member suggested that students need *"financial support that would allow them to work part-time and attend school full time to alleviate stress."*

Asking child care center and home providers to reduce their work hours may seem like a good idea, at first. However, this solution shifts the burden to the providers and early childhood educators. It can put a strain on the quality of care or make child care less accessible for families because child care programs would have to make staffing changes and accommodations – at a time when there is a state and national workforce shortage. We recommend that solutions be designed without placing the burden on providers themselves to ensure equity and fairness.

Child care providers experienced economic hardships that have been exacerbated by the pandemic, including food insecurity, having to work more than one job, and struggling to pay housing and utility bills.^{1,2} One survey participant said they "had to work to support my daughter." Asking workers to leave their job to attend school, thereby forgoing earned income to support their family, is not an equitable solution. ■

¹ *Who Is Providing for Child Care Providers?* Rapid Assessment of Pandemic Impact on Development–Early Childhood. July 2021. University of Oregon's Center for Translational Neuroscience. Retrieved from: <https://rapidsurveyproject.com/our-research/who-is-providing-for-child-care-providers>

² *Who Is Providing for Child Care Providers? Part 2.* Rapid Assessment of Pandemic Impact on Development–Early Childhood. September 2021. University of Oregon's Center for Translational Neuroscience. Retrieved from: <https://rapidsurveyproject.com/our-research/who-is-providing-for-child-care-providers-part-2>



Policy Guide Question 3:

Do students have access to mental health supports at their college or university?

The current shortage of early childhood educators and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have negatively impacted the emotional well-being of early childhood educators and child care providers. Educators have had to adapt to a changing work environment and new safety regulations while being at risk of COVID-19 exposure at their jobs. Furthermore, the uncertainty of educators' work schedules is connected to increased emotional distress.³

Early childhood educators who were enrolled in college at some point during the pandemic may have experienced disruptions to their education. A few educators (n=6) reported that they left their college program due to issues related to the pandemic. One educator said they *"had to take an incomplete due to exhaustion and [contracting] COVID-19."*

Students and their families are dealing with physical and mental health challenges that have caused them to put their education on hold. Their reasons included:

- *"My child's illness and my own injury."*
- *"I became ill with a chronic illness but wasn't aware of medical leave or incompletes. My transcript looks awful due to it."*
- *"Depression, financial reasons, and not having anyone explain how to reach my goals."*

Students need mental health and socio-emotional support to be successful. Students would like their mentors, peers, faculty, and staff to be a source of encouragement and to have deeper understanding of their situations.

- *"Counselors or mentors that check in on you and make a personal connection. It feels like no one cares if you get your degree or not."*
- *"Emotional support. Telling me that it's all worth it in the end."*
- *"I got a lot of support from college staff and teachers who helped me and encouraged me to continue my education. I thank and appreciate all of them."*
- *"Email-based support for students who are stressed and need someone to talk to." ■*

³ *Who Is Providing for Child Care Providers? Part 2. Rapid Assessment of Pandemic Impact on Development-Early Childhood. September 2021. University of Oregon's Center for Translational Neuroscience. Retrieved from: <https://rapidsurveyproject.com/our-research/who-is-providing-for-child-care-providers-part-2>*



Policy Guide Question 4:

Do students have support from advisors to make informed decisions about their education and careers?

Early childhood educators need knowledgeable and supportive advisors and mentors to help them navigate degree requirements, transfer procedures, and re-entry to college. A faculty member at a 4-year institution emphasized the benefits of dedicated advisors to student success, *“Our individualized coaching is most beneficial with regard to retention and supporting students in their place of employment.”*

Students have challenges selecting courses and understanding early childhood education career pathways.

- *“It’s confusing trying to understand which degree is best for me. Also, which classes do I need to take?”*
- *“[Support] getting through Gateways and credentialed.”*
- *“[I wish there were a] person to tell me exactly which classes to take to have completed my degree.”*
- *“The type of support I would love to get is to be sure I’m taking the right classes and making sure I’m doing what I’m supposed to do to be able to get my associates degree.”*

Navigating higher education institutions can be especially challenging for students who are transferring credits or are re-entering college. Eighteen percent of early childhood educators who left their college programs said they need

“If my classes would have transferred, I would have thought about attending U of I many years ago. I moved to Champaign shortly after finishing my Associate of Applied Science Degree at Sauk Valley Community College. When I spoke with a counselor at U of I, I found out that a lot of what I had already taken wouldn’t transfer and I’d be taking a lot of classes over.”

—Parent educator and home visitor in Whiteside County with an associate degree

RESPONDENTS BY RACE THAT SHARED KNOWING THE EXACT EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS NEEDED TO QUALIFY FOR VARIOUS EARLY CHILDHOOD POSITIONS WOULD HELP

Black (n=40)	100%
Latinx (n=102)	94%
White (n=213)	90%
Asian (n=11)	82%
Multi-racial (n=61)	79%
American Indian or Alaska Native (n=14)	71%
Other (n=13)	69%

support from college faculty and advisors to transition back to college. One student said “very accommodating school and counselors” would help them re-enroll.

Nearly all the survey respondents (89 percent) said they would benefit from knowing exactly what degrees, credentials, and courses they need to qualify for early childhood positions.

Students have questions such as “*What degrees could I get and what positions would those cover?*” and they would like “*more information on early childhood such as jobs that are open.*”

Academic and career advising supports students stated would help them:

- Mentorship, including peer mentors
- A better understanding of degree requirements
- Support with transferring
- Support selecting coursework and knowing what classes they need to take
- Information and updates on Gateways credentials
- Academic advisors that are available, encouraging, and knowledgeable
- Information about career options and job requirements in the early childhood field
- How to apply for financial assistance ■



Policy Guide Question 5:

Do working students and former students have the financial aid and resources to stay in school or to re-enroll?



“I was taking classes at a university to obtain my bachelor’s degree, but before I finished the quarter, the university told me that I had a balance. I could not register for my next set of classes because of this and had to leave the university. But the advisor continued the registration process for the upcoming quarter. The university sent me to collections to pay for classes that I never actually took. This brought my balance to almost \$9,000.”

**—Spanish-speaking assistant teacher
in Cook County**

Note: Original quote was translated from Spanish to English

College tuition, particularly at 4-year colleges and universities, is not affordable for early childhood educators, and the expense has led many students to quit their college programs.

The most common reason students left their college program was because of cost-prohibitive tuition—44 percent of the respondents. Some students left their programs with student loans which created more complex financial issues. Despite having full-time jobs, their income—combined with limited financial resources—was insufficient to pay for their education expenses.

- “Could not afford the cost of tuition at a four-year [university].”
- “Too expensive. I don’t make enough money at work to cover college and other expenses at the same time.”
- “The main reason for stopping my education was funding. I had already accumulated thousands of dollars in student loans.”

Higher education institutions should provide more resources and support to students so that they understand their financial aid options.

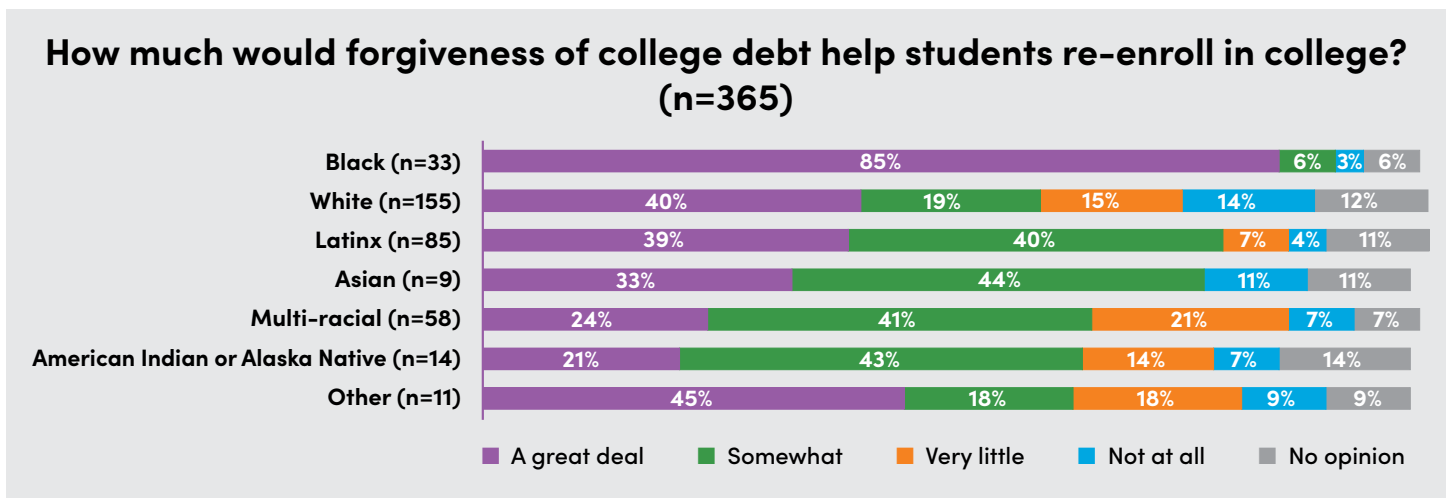
Nearly half of all the early childhood educators we surveyed (48 percent) said they need help completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). We asked early childhood

educators and higher education faculty what supports students need to complete their degrees and the most common response was financial assistance (33 percent of early childhood educators and 49 percent of faculty). Early childhood educators would like more financial assistance in the form of:

- Decreased tuition costs and funds to help pay for tuition
- Tuition and fee waivers
- Low student loan interest rates

Over half (55 percent) of early childhood educators who left their college program said that financial assistance would have helped them re-enroll:

- “More assistance with finances, someone to explain grants and loans to me.”
- “Being able to write off the [student loan] debt from over 10 years ago or come to an agreement [such as] if I pay this much right now, I can have the rest written off.”
- “Having someone explain the FAFSA process so I could have gotten financial aid sooner or see if I qualified back then. Have an advisor reach out to me.”





“[I’m] trying to complete my degree without adding on more debt. I qualify for some help through Gateways, but they only pay for 15 hours per year. It will take me so much longer at that rate. Being a home provider for over 20 years, I cannot justify taking on that much debt to complete my degree. More financial help is what I need.”

—Home provider in Williamson County enrolled full-time at a 4-year college



Free online course materials would help most students complete their college degrees (n=455)

Student loan debt is a barrier to degree completion. Forgiveness of past college debt would have helped more than half of the survey respondents (55 percent) who dropped out to consider re-enrolling. Student loan debt appears to be a more significant barrier to college re-enrollment for Black students, as 85 percent of Black students in our survey said that debt forgiveness would help them “a great deal.” In comparison, a smaller percentage of other groups (White: 40 percent, Latinx: 39 percent) reported that debt forgiveness would help them “a great deal.” It is important to note that Black early childhood educators are underrepresented in our survey. Nine percent of survey respondents reported being Black, while the percentage of Black teachers and assistant teachers in Illinois licensed child care settings is 20 percent in centers and 31 percent in child care homes.⁴

Financial holds have prevented early childhood educators from completing their degrees.

While our survey did not explicitly ask about financial holds, some students shared their stories with us. Therefore, we decided to include their perspectives and experiences in this report. Financial holds are restrictions put in place by higher education institutions because of fees owed by the student such as not allowing them to enroll in courses, withholding transcripts, and creating barriers to transferring credits.

Students described how financial holds affected their education:

- *“I had to leave due to tuition holds and life circumstances. I will be finishing my Associate of Applied Science Degree and will not be able to transfer because of a financial hold at another institution, so I can’t get previous transcripts.”*
- *“[I wish there was a more] clear understanding of how much you get and what you will need if your money runs out before you take your last*

⁴ Whitehead, J. (2021). Illinois’ Early Childhood Workforce 2020 Report. Bloomington, IL: INCCRRA.

class. Keeping someone's diploma if they owe money – there has to be a better way. Maybe roll over the money until the end of each year so if you need to pay for a class or two your senior year, you can use that money instead of putting a hold on your transcripts and not giving someone their diploma.”

PERCENT OF STUDENTS THAT SAID FREE TUITION AND FEES FOR LOW-INCOME STUDENTS WOULD HELP THEM	
Black (n=40)	81%
Asian (n=11)	91%
Latinx (n=102)	88%
White (n=213)	74%
Multi-racial (n=61)	66%
Other (n=13)	54%
American Indian or Alaska Native (n=14)	50%

These holds prevent students from retrieving their transcripts, enrolling, and receiving their degree. Through the funds appropriated through the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE), institutions received money from federal child care relief funding to help students relieve these types of holds. However, the amount of funding each institution received and the policies for disbursing the funds are unclear.

To address the issue of financial holds, during the 102nd session, state legislation was passed by the Illinois General Assembly, Senate Bill (SB) 3032: Student Debt Assistance Act, that would prevent higher education institutions from withholding a current or former student's transcript because of a debt that is owed by the student to the institution. It will also require higher education institutions to offer a debt repayment plan to any student who owes a debt of \$250 or more to the institution beginning the 2022-2023 academic year. We would also recommend an analysis of workforce data such as the Gateways to Opportunity Registry⁵ to know how many students would benefit from the Student Debt Assistance Act.

Financial support that covers all costs of attendance (e.g., books, transportation, and child care) can alleviate barriers to college degree completion. The cost of books and course materials were also cited as a barrier: *“I think that if I knew I did not have to worry about the money aspect of college, I would be able to focus on my future more. It's hard to focus on your future education when you have so many bills (books,*

fees, tuition).” Another student said, *“free books, or cheaper online books,”* would be a helpful support for them. Survey respondents said the following financial support would be helpful to them:

- A decrease in the costs of books and course materials
- Funds to help purchase course materials
- Travel allowances
- Emergency financial assistance
- Cash/money ■

CONCLUSION

This policy guide provides five critical questions to aid policymakers, decision-makers and early childhood leaders and stakeholders in creating systemic and policy improvements to higher education. By using these questions to support the design process, we hope that solutions will adequately reflect the experiences of the incumbent workforce and promote equity.

⁵ The Gateways to Opportunity Registry was established in 2009 to be the statewide data system for collecting and reporting on the characteristics of the early childhood education workforce in Illinois.



Illinois Action for Children
4753 N. Broadway
Chicago, Illinois 60640

@IAFC_Cares

www.actforchildren.org

