

Lessons from the Family Advisory Committee & Family Engagement Workgroup

Recommendations for Family Engagement in
the Illinois Department of Early Childhood



Purpose of this Report

This report is designed to serve as a roadmap for family engagement in statewide early childhood decision-making. It outlines best practices that could be adopted by any group looking to improve family engagement strategies.

The work of the Family Advisory Committee of the Illinois Early Learning Council and the Family Engagement Workgroup was made possible by the Administration for Children and Families and the United States Department of Health and Human Services Federal Preschool Development Grant Birth through 5 (PDG B-5) Planning Grant—grant number 90TP0122. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official view of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

About IAFC



IAFC is a catalyst and champion for real change and better life outcomes for children and families in Illinois. Our mission is to be a catalyst for organizing, developing, and supporting strong families and powerful communities where children matter most.

About COFI



Founded in 1995, COFI exists to build the power and voice of parents of economically challenged communities, primarily Black and Brown mothers and grandmothers, to shape the public decisions that affect their lives and the lives of their families.

In October 2023, Illinois Governor JB Pritzker announced the intention to create a new single statewide agency for early childhood programs and services—creating a “simpler, better, and fairer” system that reduces inefficiencies and makes it easier for families to access critical services.

SHORTLY thereafter, transition leadership shared a vision for centering families in the transition process and in the new Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC). At the same time, several projects focused on early childhood family engagement¹ were underway in Illinois, funded through federal Preschool Development Grant Birth-Five (PDG B-5) funds. These included:

THE FAMILY ADVISORY COMMITTEE (FAC), a family-led committee of the Early Learning Council (ELC), backboned by Illinois Action for Children (IAFC) and supported by Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A FRAMEWORK FOR EQUITABLE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT in the state’s early childhood system, led by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago.

¹In the context of this report, “early childhood family engagement” means connecting with and getting feedback from adults who interact with early childhood systems in support of their child, including but not limited to biological, adoptive, and foster parents; grandparents, legal and informal guardians; uncles, aunts and adult siblings.

THE FAMILIES serving on the FAC had committed to 3-year terms, which expired at the end of 2023. However, with the state embarking on a process to center families within IDEC and the extension of [Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five](#) funding through 2024, there was an opportunity for IAFC to continue to support a family-led table to inform NORC’s project and the state’s approach to family engagement as part of the design of the new state agency. This resulted in the launch of the Family Engagement Workgroup (FEW), a short-term ad hoc family-led table consisting of a mix of FAC members and other families from across the state, convened by IAFC.

WHILE THE report produced by NORC includes many of the recommendations made by members of the FEW there were additional learnings that emerged from IAFC’s long-term engagement with these families that provide insight into how IDEC can create an infrastructure for family engagement. Furthermore, since the ultimate goal is to support and uplift family voice, IAFC and COFI felt it was important to support the creation of a report that could be fully owned by the families across these two groups. Thus, this report seeks to coalesce the findings from these two groups into a single document, which is designed to serve as a roadmap for family engagement in statewide early childhood decision-making, as well as share best practices that could be adopted by any group looking to improve family engagement strategies.



BACKGROUND

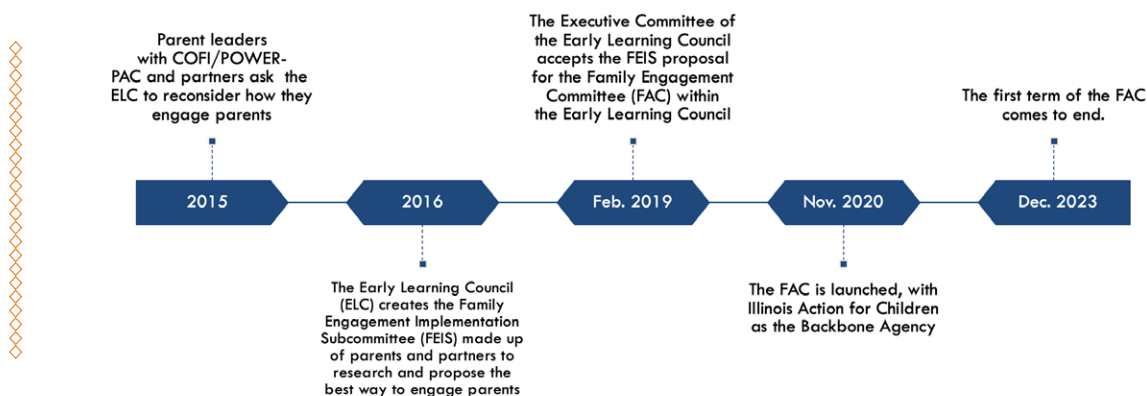
Background on the Family Advisory Committee (FAC)

The Family Advisory Committee was a family-led table within the Illinois Early Learning Council (ELC) and was active from 2020–2023.

The Early Learning Council was created by [statute in 2003](#) with the goal of, “fulfill[ing] the vision of a statewide, high-quality, accessible, and comprehensive early learning system to benefit all young children whose families choose it,” through public-private partnership among system leaders. Membership in the ELC was determined through gubernatorial appointment and work was done through committees.

In 2013, members of POWER-PAC IL (Parents Organized to Win, Educate, and Renew–Policy Action Council), a cross-cultural parent leader membership organization of COFI, asked the ELC to reconsider how they engaged families. Families found it difficult to follow and participate in the ELC and subcommittee meetings and were unclear how their engagement influenced decision-making.

In 2016, the ELC created the Family Engagement Implementation Subcommittee, made up of families and partners, to research and propose a better way to engage families. This work led to the recommendation for the creation of a Family Advisory Committee, which was accepted by the Executive Committee of the ELC in 2019. In 2020, following the award of federal Preschool Development Grant Birth-Five funds, the FAC was officially launched, with IAFC as the backbone agency.



- Monitoring the budget and deliverables for the PDG B-5 grant
- Planning meetings alongside FAC co-chairs
- Meeting administration (creating Zooms, developing slides, lining up interpretation support, facilitating meetings)
- Monitoring the status of work in between meetings
- Sharing additional leadership opportunities with members
- Coordinating training (with the COFI team), and
- Issuing stipends to members of the FAC.

VIRTUAL MEETING AND SUPPORT FOR IN-PERSON GATHERINGS: To accommodate families throughout the state, meetings were completely virtual. There was one optional in-person meeting for which food was provided, gas and/or transportation was covered, and a child care stipend was paid.

COMMITMENT TO CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT (CQI): In April 2023, the Sylvia Cotton Center for Research and Policy Innovation, powered by IAFC, published an [evaluation of the first two years of the FAC](#). The evaluation demonstrated IAFC’s commitment to engaging in a real-time continuous quality improvement² process within the FAC, and recommendations that could be implemented within the remaining timeframe were implemented. The evaluation also helped guide the development of the Family Engagement Workgroup (FEW), which grew out of the FAC.

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Strengths of the FAC

FAMILY CO-CHAIRS: The FAC model included two co-chairs, elected by the members of the FAC, that served as leaders within the committee as well as members of the ELC Executive Committee. One of the co-chairs was a FAC member on the committee, and the other was a member of the FAC support staff. The decision to have one of the co-chairs serve as support staff was influenced by ELC protocols. Per the FAC evaluation, IAFC recommends that all co-chairs of any future family tables be family leaders.

OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD COMMUNITY: The FAC meeting structure and training opportunities prioritized relationship-building between members by adding activities to get to know each other and their families. The FAC developed relationships of trust, support, and care with one another.

TRAINING: Training was provided by COFI and included their *Phase 1: Self, Family, & Team*, *Phase 2: Community Outreach & Action*, and *Phase 3: Policy & Systems* training. The training helped families build relationships and recognize themselves as leaders in their families, communities, and the early childhood system and grew their skills as advocates. Additional and ongoing guidance and tools were also provided by IAFC staff. FAC members participated in hands-on training and activities to set collective SMARTIE (specific, measurable, achievable/ambitious, realistic, time-bound, inclusive, equitable) goals.

BILINGUAL MEETINGS: FAC meetings were open to the public, and while no members of the FAC were monolingual Spanish speakers, interpretation was offered at every meeting to support bilingual attendees from the public.



GOALS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE FAC

The FAC was designed to serve as both an advisory group of the ELC and a family-directed group. Because of this, goals and accomplishments by the FAC reflect both the goals they set for themselves, and changes made to the ELC and to family engagement processes in general because of the FAC. Both are outlined below.

The FAC identified three long-term 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.

HOW THIS GOAL WAS ACCOMPLISHED

FAC members accomplished this goal through a combination of community outreach and engagement with decision-makers. Members conducted a systems scan in their regions and reached out to providers to share information about enrollment efforts and other supports. They also participated in statewide opportunities to give feedback based on what they were hearing in their communities, which included participating in ELC meetings and focus groups and supporting the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development in their research efforts around enrollment and staffing issues.

GOALS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE FAC

Goal 2: Provide family voice on ELC and committee work that impacts families through engagement opportunities, and work with the ELC to embed a protocol for including family voice in the work of the ELC, including revisiting how the ELC/FAC work together.

HOW THIS GOAL WAS ACCOMPLISHED

The FAC, supported by IAFC and COFI, developed [General Recommendations for Engaging Parents in Early Childhood Systems at the State Level](#), a document designed to provide guidance to early childhood system leaders in the development of future family-led bodies, as well as to serve as an advocacy tool to support continuous quality improvement on existing decision-making bodies that include families. The FAC presented these recommendations, along with their personal stories about what kept them in this work despite obstacles, at a moving meeting between ELC leadership and FAC members in December 2023.



GOALS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE FAC

Goal 3: Review and respond to the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) [Advancing Preschool Inclusion in Community-Based Early Childhood Education Programs](#) report on barriers and potential recommendations for inclusion related to disabilities, racial disparities, economic disparities, and culturally responsive practices in early childhood education and care settings to identify gaps in data, themes, and patterns [and] highlight findings about FAC member's life experiences.

HOW THIS GOAL WAS ACCOMPLISHED

This goal was born out of the FAC finding that typically, families are only engaged in the information-gathering process of a project, and rarely have an opportunity to reflect on the end product of that process or support the implementation of any recommendations that result from the process. Because the FAC model allowed for a more lengthy and robust engagement of families, members decided to set a goal for 2023 to read a report related to early care and education that had not yet been fully implemented and identify gaps in data, themes, and patterns rooted in FAC members' lived experiences. Given their extensive personal and professional experience related to the issue of preschool inclusion, the FAC chose the ISBE report [Advancing Preschool Inclusion in Community-Based Early Childhood Education Programs](#) for this goal. Supported by IAFC, members of the FAC conducted a close reading of the report and identified gaps, which coalesced into a [set of recommendations](#). One of the primary findings of this goal was how important it is to include family voice beyond focus groups and into development of recommendations and eventual implementation. This finding informed the development of the Family Engagement Workgroup.

Other FAC Accomplishments

Beyond achieving its own goals, the FAC improved important family engagement practices around the state, outlined below.

CHANGING TIMES FOR ELC AND OTHER MEETINGS: Statewide decision-making advisory bodies, such as the ELC and the Transition Advisory Committee (TAC)³ recognize the importance of family input and have therefore begun meeting at night to accommodate family schedules.

INTERPRETATION AT MEETINGS: The TAC offers simultaneous Spanish interpretation, a standard set initially by FAC meetings.

DEVELOPING FAMILY LEADERS: Family leaders from the FAC have served on a wide variety of other groups, including the TAC, new early childhood workgroups, and in the new FEW. These experienced family leaders have been, and will continue to be, key strategic partners in the development of the Illinois Department of Early Childhood and in supporting the next generation of family leaders.

³The Early Childhood and Care Transition Advisory Committee (TAC) is a group of parents, providers, advocates, and experts with diverse perspectives from across the state who serve as an external advisory committee as the state moves toward a single early childhood agency. The TAC gathers stakeholder input in preparation for the transition, with a particular emphasis on understanding what families need from a comprehensive early childhood system for Illinois children.



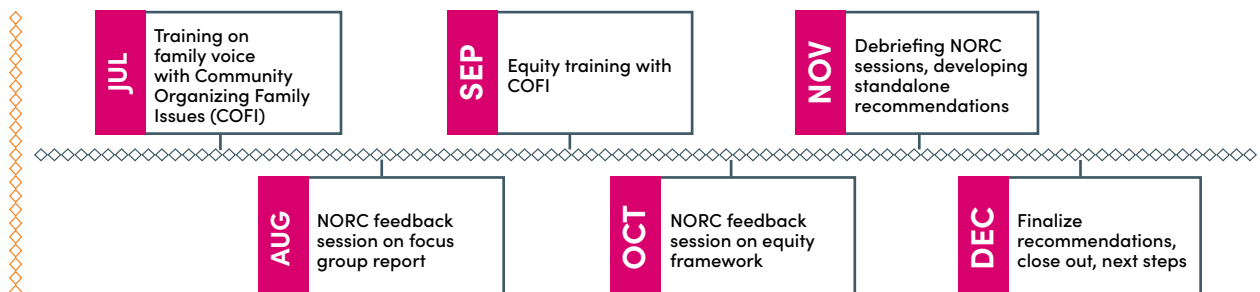
EVOLUTION

Evolution from the Family Advisory Committee to the Family Engagement Workgroup (FEW)

When the FAC members' terms ended on December 31, 2023, statewide family engagement work paused for a few months so NORC could continue its work and so state leaders could consider how family engagement might be restructured within the context of the new state agency.

IAFC RECOGNIZED, however, that there may be a need for family feedback in the transition and applied for a no-cost extension of PDG planning grant funds to support any ad hoc needs that might emerge in the first year of the transition.

ONE LEARNING that had emerged from FAC work was that families wanted opportunities to provide feedback beyond the information-gathering phase of a project, which sparked the idea of bringing together a table of FAC and new families to provide feedback on the NORC work as it developed. State leaders approached IAFC and NORC in the spring of 2024 with this suggestion, and both agreed that family feedback in the report development process would strengthen the final product. This new Family Engagement Workgroup (FEW), with ongoing training from COFI, was convened from May–December 2024 with the goal of partnering with NORC at the University of Chicago to ensure family feedback is integrated at every step in the development of NORC's recommendations for statewide family engagement in early childhood decision-making.

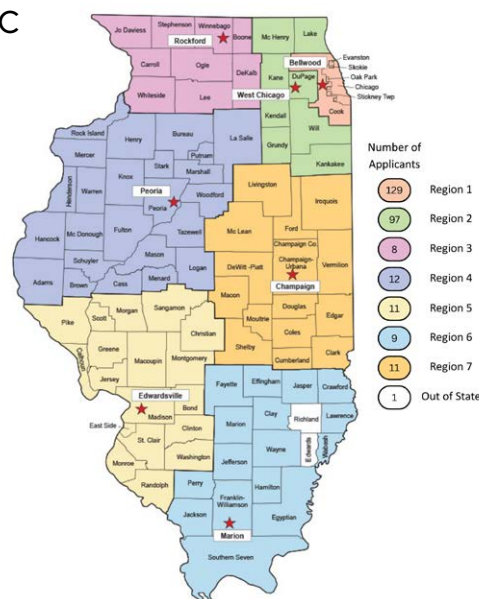


FEW Recruitment

Because the group was intended to include both FAC and new families, an invitation was first sent to members of the FAC asking if they would like to be a part of this new group. Six agreed. IAFC chose to use the same number of families and regional breakdown as used in the FAC, given the short time available for recruitment.

IAFC adapted the original application for the FAC, offering more points for diversity, engagement in other family leadership groups, use of services, and for an interest in early childhood systems. Total points were reduced slightly for families working in early childhood, so that the primary perspective of the group would be as a family navigating the system. Because monolingual Spanish speakers had not successfully been recruited into the FAC, IAFC ensured that both the application and the information about the FEW was available in English and Spanish, and that outreach was being conducted to Spanish-speaking communities about the opportunity. Applications were shared widely via [Illinois Parent Survey Panelists](#), [COFI parent leaders](#), [Birth to Five Family Councils](#), and the [We, the Village](#) and [Raising Illinois](#) coalitions. 278 families applied (240 English-speaking; 38 Spanish-speaking) and ten were selected (8 English-speaking; 2 Spanish-speaking).

The high number of applicants illustrated to IAFC how many families are excited and ready to participate in early childhood decision-making and the need for additional opportunities to engage these families.



FEW Staffing and Supports

IAFC sought to build on learnings from the FAC in the development of the FEW. In addition to maintaining the staffing supports, virtual meeting structure, and compensation used with the FAC, additional supports were added based on learnings from working with the FAC, the FAC evaluation, and across other family engagement spaces.

Note: The strengths outlined below were developed by IAFC based on feedback received by the FEW across their meetings. The list of strengths was reviewed, added to, voted on, and universally supported by members of the Family Engagement Workgroup.

STRONG, ONGOING COMMUNICATION: Staffing for the FEW enabled strong ongoing communication between members and staff. Before each meeting, reminders were sent out via email and/or text message. Following the monthly meetings, follow-ups were sent with invoice forms, meeting notes, and reminders about upcoming meetings for stipends. FEW members expressed appreciation for the frequency and variety of reminders and follow-ups.

FULLY BILINGUAL COMMUNICATION AND MEETINGS: Two Spanish-speaking applicants were selected for the FEW. To support their engagement, all communications (emails, text messages, invoice forms) and all presentations were translated, and live interpretation was utilized on all meetings both for presentations and to support conversations between English and Spanish-speaking members. From a staffing perspective, this requires the use of a paid translator/interpreter and staff time from a member of the IAFC team who speaks Spanish to support members in between meetings.

Note: When these supports were brought to the FEW for review and approval, they identified this as one of the elements of this engagement opportunity that they appreciated most and that most enabled their participation.

FEW Staffing and Supports

MULTIPLE MEETING OPTIONS: Because of the short timeline between launching the FEW and drafting and finalizing the NORC report, IAFC was not able to establish a regular monthly meeting time for families. Instead, IAFC polled families for their availability and scheduled two meetings a month to cover the same content, so families could choose the date that worked best for them. FEW members expressed a strong preference for this model and attendance ranged from 94-100% for all meetings when two options were given.

* Note: When these supports were brought to the FEW for review and approval, they identified this as one of the elements of this engagement opportunity that they appreciated most and that most enabled their participation.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY LANGUAGE: All materials and communication were drafted in family-friendly, easy to understand language. Staff avoided acronyms when possible and created a list of acronyms for FEW members to reference when needed. When FEW members were interacting with external reports or materials, staff asked the external partners to present easy to understand language and information. Staff also anticipated any background information needed to participate in each meeting and ensured that families had all the information they needed to engage with the material, such as definitions and explanations of terms and ideas used.



FEW Staffing and Supports

TRAINING TO SCAFFOLD CONVERSATIONS: In the first meeting, IAFC provided an overview of the background and history that led to the Family Engagement Workgroup – including an overview of the ELC, FAC, the transition to IDEC, and the NORC work. This background was designed to help members understand the purpose of the group and the work that had led to it, as well as scaffold future conversations. Additionally, in the month before the group’s first conversation with NORC, COFI provided training that would support the next month’s conversation. In the July meeting, COFI adapted elements of their *Phase 1: Self, Family, & Team* training to help families begin to think of themselves as leaders and imagine what they needed to lead effectively in the early childhood system. This paved the way for their feedback on NORC’s initial recommendation for family engagement. In September, COFI offered FEW members an equity training, which primed members to digest and make additional recommendations on NORC’s draft recommendations for equitable family engagement.

CLEAR DIRECTIVES FOR EACH MEETING AND CONTINUOUS FEEDBACK LOOP: In the first meeting of the FEW, IAFC laid out the calendar for the rest of the year, describing how the work from each month would feed into the next month’s work. Because of this, FEW members could see how training scaffolded feedback discussions, as well as how feedback was being utilized to make changes to NORC’s recommendations.

Note: FEW members shared that the clarity of purpose and use of feedback were some of the elements of the FEW work families appreciated most. Because they understood the exact purpose of the group and could see their feedback being utilized in real time, they maintained a sense of purpose that kept levels of engagement high throughout this process.

These supports and engagement practices directly impacted the strength of the recommendations outlined below and demonstrate what can be learned from families when best practices for family engagement are implemented.

FEW RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD'S FAMILY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

This section compiles the recommendations from the FEW, which were gathered within NORC feedback sessions and COFI trainings.

The FEW noted that, in order to achieve the outcome of equitable access to early childhood services, the state must implement an ongoing process of family engagement rooted in equity.

They believe that, together, these recommendations support that process of equitable engagement. While some of these recommendations overlap with the FAC's [General Recommendations for Engaging Parents in Early Childhood Systems at the State Level](#) and with the final NORC report, this report seeks to put recommendations in the context of the new Illinois Department of Early Childhood, specifically.

Note: These recommendations were compiled by IAFC across all FEW meetings. All of the recommendations below were reviewed, added to, voted on, and universally supported by members of the Family Engagement Workgroup.

Structure



TIERED ENGAGEMENT INCLUDING FAMILY-LED TABLES WORKING ALONGSIDE DECISION-MAKING

TABLES: FEW members recognize the importance of offering tiers of engagement, recognizing that families have different and changing circumstances, needs and interests. One type of engagement strategy does not fit all families, and the FEW suggested a wide variety of engagement tools and modalities (surveys, focus groups, regular in-person community meetings, social media) to meet families where they are.

FEW MEMBERS were clear that these engagement opportunities should include a family-only table with representation that reflects the geographic and demographic diversity of the state. Their preference was rooted in the flexibility, support, and training those tables provide, as well as the fact that it felt safer to share with other families.

SOME FEW members who have served as a family representative on a table that includes one or two families alongside many others working in early childhood shared that they are more hesitant to speak up in those spaces, while others shared that they don't feel confident that they can truly serve as a voice for all families. While FEW members acknowledged that it may make sense to have some families serving within a diverse decision-making body, FEW members felt that those family representatives should also serve on a family-only table. To ensure family voice is fully elevated among decision-makers, the family- and decision-maker tables should regularly connect, so decision-makers could hear directly from families as a collective. When coupled with a commitment to follow-through and showing how family voice made an impact on policies, funding, and programs, families felt that this structure would offer them the most power.

◇ "[The FAC] had, you know, stakeholders come in and out, and whatnot, but there was a dedicated space for parents as a group, as like a cohort. Same thing with the Birth to Five Family Council. It really made it like a safe space for parents to be parents and like not feel the power dynamic when you're talking about, like, parents and decision makers. And then, when you are in those shared spaces with decision-makers and parents, like, you're doing it as a group of parents." –FEW Parent

Structure

DECISION-MAKING POWER AND INTENTIONAL FOLLOW UP: FEW members felt strongly that part of equitable engagement is demonstrating the value of their time and expertise by giving them the same power as other decision-makers. Equitable engagement, they felt, is not just about how recruitment happens and how meetings are run, but about how feedback is used and the value their voices hold in the system. Whether a family is completing a one-time survey or participating in standing family engagement table, IDEC should be contacting families to share how their feedback is being used.

FAMILY VOICE EMBEDDED IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESS FROM THE BEGINNING:

Family feedback should be built into how the agency operates, so that it isn't something "extra" that some tables do, but a standard part of decision-making. FEW members noted that it was of particular importance that families who are currently utilizing programs be involved in decision-making about those programs and that outreach to impacted families should be built into decision-making and continuous quality improvement. FEW members also wanted to see how the decisions that are made across the system reflect recommendations that come from family tables. They cited an example of a school board that must make funding decisions based on the district's strategic plan, noting family input should be built into the process of decision-making.



Structure

ROBUST FAMILY ENGAGEMENT STAFFING WITH LOCAL FOOTPRINT:

FEW members noted that family engagement staff are needed to support recruitment, meeting facilitation, communication in between meetings, follow up on how feedback is being used, and to support alignment across family tables throughout the early childhood system.

STAFF that engage families should ideally be culturally diverse, trained to use person-centered language, build relationships with families, and, when appropriate, be stationed locally/regionally so they can make regular, in-person contact with families. FEW members noted that they'd be more likely to participate in engagement if the people offering opportunities make them feel invited and welcome. Contact should come from people who are known to the families (teachers, helpers, other families who look like them) and in places where families already go, such as schools; doctor's offices; and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) offices.

FOR ANY multi-session engagement, points of contact should be assigned to support the engagement. Families may need reminders, specific participation supports (technology, transportation), answers to questions, and other communication from their points of contact to help ensure ongoing participation.



One pathway to leadership suggested by FEW members was that some engagement roles could be filled by family leaders working as contractors a few hours a week, designed as a leadership opportunity for families who have experience serving across multiple tables. For example, a parent working as a contractor might support recruitment to family tables, or a parent serving across multiple tables could be responsible for monitoring alignment between tables.

“This work requires so many moving parts. When I think about when I’ve seen it done cohesively, I think of my Head Start. It was well-managed, not perfect, but they did have a good system. It was only six sites, but it was something. It started with good upper management. The founder really set the foundation and expectations, and it trickled from site directors all the way down. Everyone played a role in making it successful, and it was the parent committee there that set me on this journey of advocacy.” – FEW Parent

Supports for Families

TRAINING: FEW members noted that any table that includes families should include training around the Illinois early childhood system, including a broad overview of the system as a whole and more in-depth discussion of any specific areas of the system in which the table will focus. Those convening the table should consider other relevant issues in which family participation might be enhanced by providing training (e.g., supports and resources for children with disabilities, the legislative process).

HYBRID OPTIONS: FEW members shared that they enjoy connecting with other families in person but like the flexibility of virtual meetings. Multiple options meet the needs of different families. They noted that in-person options might include family-friendly events (e.g. picnics, parties with activities for children).

MULTIPLE MEETING OPTIONS: Whenever possible, offering multiple times to discuss the same content allows families to pick the time that works best for their schedules, increasing overall participation in engagement opportunities.

TRANSLATION & INTERPRETATION: Translated materials help to support understanding of the content and interpretation supports engagement and conversations. FEW members also noted that, when they place a phone call to the agency, they should be able to get someone who can communicate with them in their native language.

CHILD CARE: FEW members noted that child care should meet the needs of ALL families, including parents of children with disabilities. When meetings that are not child-friendly are in person, child care that meets the needs of all families should be provided.



TRANSPORTATION: For in-person gatherings, transportation support should be provided to ensure all families have access to engagement spaces. FEW members emphasized that transportation support should be tailored to meet the needs of participating families (e.g., train/bus tickets, carpool, mileage reimbursement). When groups fail to provide transportation, we leave important voices out of the conversation.

Compensation should align with the level of engagement, and when a support can be immediately given (e.g., a pack of diapers for a survey), it would be an added benefit for families who have not been previously engaged.

FORMAL RECOGNITION OF FAMILY CONTRIBUTION: FEW members shared that the agency should make a point to publish their names and acknowledge their contributions publicly whenever possible. This recognition supports families in future volunteer opportunities, academic pursuits, and job applications.

Promoting Equitable Engagement

INTENTIONAL OUTREACH TO AFFINITY GROUPS: FEW members noted that, when tables say they are looking for “diverse” participants, they are not always clear on whether their identity or perspective is what conveners are looking for. When specific groups are named and when recruitment is designed to identify those groups (e.g., Spanish-speaking family engagement workers working to recruit Spanish-speaking families; dads recruiting dads), families feel more confident in applying or signing up. Special care must be taken to protect families’ privacy and build trust when the affinity groups the state is trying to reach are particularly sensitive.

CLARITY IN MEETING NORMS: FEW members shared that clearly articulated meeting norms made them feel safer to speak up. Some suggested meeting norms included:

- “We will not tolerate judgement against someone based on their [name specific identities].” FEW members shared it was important to see themselves on the list, so the list might be co-developed with families and occasionally revisited.
- Reframing space as a “brave space” or courageous space, recognizing that families may not feel totally safe bringing up these sensitive issues for a number of reasons.
- “What’s said here stays here, what’s learned here leaves here.” FEW members stressed the need for confidentiality, as they feared consequences for any issues or criticisms regarding a program or person. Clarifying how the information will be used and how families’ identities will be protected was an important component of receiving thorough, honest feedback.
- “Be respectful of others’ opinions.” FEW members cited times they heard people being disrespectful and making fun of people who think differently. Even when they shared the opinion of the person speaking, it made them feel unsafe in the space. Mutual respect should be a clearly articulated norm.

“When I see a norm that says, ‘We will not tolerate judgment against x, y, z groups,’ and I see myself as one of those groups, I feel safer speaking up.”

–FEW Parent

HONORING DIFFERENT CULTURAL NORMS, STANDARDS, AND PRACTICES:

OFFERING DIFFERENT WAYS TO GIVE FEEDBACK:

“The conversations that happen in these spaces are about the most important people to us as parents. We're talking about our kids. So I'm going to say what I think is best for my kids, and I'm going to make sure that you hear it. And right, you might not agree, or it might be something that you haven't done yet or haven't implemented. But we're talking about the most important thing in my life, so that's something to keep in mind as these conversations happen with this new agency.” –FEW Parent

Communication

FEW members want to see the Department of Early Childhood use a wide range of communication tools to meet families where they are, such as:

- **SOCIAL MEDIA:** FEW members shared that social media posts were helpful but shouldn't be the only place information is available.
- **NEWSLETTERS:** FEW members like newsletters but want them to be delivered predictably, such as on Fridays or the last day of the month, so that they know they can expect it and can plan accordingly.
- **TEXT MESSAGES:** FEW members like having the option for text updates.
- **DIRECT INFORMATION FROM PROGRAMS:** FEW members suggested that the agency should be communicating directly with the early childhood programs and providing family-friendly information that programs can share directly with the families they serve.
- **RECORDING MEETINGS/WEBINARS:** FEW members felt that minutes can sometimes (intentionally or unintentionally) misrepresent conversations. FEW members want to be able to point to direct quotes to ensure that their asks were heard directly.
- **ENGAGEMENT IN THE SPACES FAMILIES ARE ALREADY IN:** FEW members want to see regular communication between the new agency and the other spaces they're a part of – such as their children's early childhood programs and Birth to Five Family Councils. The agency should create direct lines of communication between existing programs and tables, so families don't have to go somewhere new to get information.
- **COMMUNITY FORUMS:** FEW members want representatives from the agency to come to the places they live and engage with them on local and state issues. They felt it was important that the agency hear directly from families in their communities, as it would help provide a context for their needs and asks. Forums should have all supports for in-person events.

Communication



TRANSPARENCY: FEW members shared that it was important that IDEC acknowledge and publicly respond to recommendations, even if the recommendations could not be implemented. FEW members also shared that they wished to see specific reasons (i.e., budget) for why recommendations would not be implemented, as well as clearly articulated plans for what IDEC plans to do instead (whether it is work toward the family recommendations over time or implement something else which they believe will accomplish the same goals). Some suggested that meeting recordings, recommendations, and action plans could be made available online within a family portal.

CLARITY IN HOW FEEDBACK WILL BE USED / CLEAR BENEFITS TO FAMILIES: FEW members shared that they were more inclined to participate, even during the toughest periods of their lives, if they felt that their participation would directly benefit their family. Knowing the purpose of the work and its potential impact (alongside all the supports listed above) would help them find time to participate.

FEEDBACK LOOPS AND ONGOING CONTACT: Whenever possible, FEW members recommended that decision makers share a timeline (even estimated) of when the things they're providing feedback about will happen. If a timeline cannot be provided, they would like a follow-up (even months or years later) about how their feedback was used and how it contributed to the system.

“I don't want to go anywhere [for information]. I want to make sure that whatever program I'm a part of that program is somehow notifying me or letting me know... If the agency does what I envision they could do right, which is tap into all 0 to 5 offerings that exist, period, that information should come to me as a parent from a couple of different sources. So maybe I'm getting a link in my email from [my child's] PreK, with a briefing, a video recording, or whatever. And I'm also getting some of those things, or maybe they're different, from the home daycare that my 6-month-old is in.” –FEW Parent

CONCLUSION

Families' Hopes and Dreams for the New Department of Early Childhood

Across several FEW meetings, IAFC asked families to envision their ideal future with the new Department of Early Childhood. These are some of their responses:

"Families are at the table and driving the solutions — and are compensated for their time and effort."

"Change would look like MONEY would not dictate what families have access to service."

"Child care costs capped at 7% of household income."

"Safe quality wraparound care in centralized location with transportation opportunities."

"Families choosing what is right for them — being primary caregiver or using a quality child care program — without being economically disadvantaged."

"Children with disabilities are not left behind."

"If there were a system in place that would educate, certify, and train the people that already live here, and then continue to pay them well enough that they want to stay."

"RESULTS! There has been a lot of collecting data over the past 2-3 years and results are just starting to emerge. These things take time of course but there are so many hands in the pot that I would imagine there would and should be more collaboration between us (state and families) to produce results on a more efficient timeline."

IAFC and COFI believe that the work that has been done between POWER-PAC IL's initial advocacy for family engagement in the ELC, the first cohort of FAC members, NORC's work, and this work by the FEW, together, send a clear and resounding message about how to structure family engagement in ways that authentically include family voice.

We have a unique opportunity to use these learnings to help Illinois become the national leader in family engagement in early childhood decision making. We look forward to partnering with the state, community-based organizations, and funding partners to make these families' vision for early childhood family engagement, and for the early childhood system at large, a reality.

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