



# Creating a Higher Education System in Illinois that Meets the Needs of the Early Childhood Workforce

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# CREATING A HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN ILLINOIS THAT MEETS THE NEEDS OF THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE

To identify opportunities to better serve Illinois' students, the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) undertook an impressive strategic planning process, beginning in 2020, and culminated in the release of *A Thriving Illinois: Higher Education Paths to Equity, Sustainability, and Growth*<sup>1</sup> in the summer of 2021. IBHE identified six core principles to guide this work:

- Students are our priority
- Equity drives our system
- Higher education is a public good that enriches life
- Our diverse institutions work in concert
- We reinforce the P-20 education continuum
- Talent, research, and innovation drive our economy

Looking at these principles—prioritizing equity, the full educational continuum, students and student access—it is clear that early childhood is a necessary, intentional focus of IBHE and its strategic plan. Equity starts with our youngest learners and those who care for and educate them in our communities.

The IBHE strategic plan includes promising strategies to support Illinois' early childhood workforce—and states that responding to the early childhood educator shortage is an immediate first step in the plan's implementation. The plan's section on "Growth" focuses on addressing educator shortages and building an effective, diverse educator workforce across all ages and education levels. Broad strategies,

such as *enhancing transfer structures and expanding accessible, responsive program models and formats for educator preparation*, will undoubtedly benefit many working in the early childhood field. The plan goes further to include an early childhood-specific initiative—*establish a consortium of community colleges and universities to better serve the incumbent early childhood workforce*—under which numerous strategies and policy changes will be implemented.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD ACCESS CONSORTIUM FOR EQUITY

The Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) was developed over robust discussions in both the Illinois Board of Higher Education strategic planning process and in the Illinois General Assembly.<sup>2</sup> Illinois early childhood advocates pushed to allow community colleges to grant baccalaureate degrees in early childhood education as a tested, effective strategy done in many other states; community colleges supported this tactic. While the advocacy effort to allow community colleges to grant baccalaureate degrees did not succeed, the Consortium emerged as an alternative endeavor to improve accessibility of degree completion pathways for the early childhood incumbent workforce as outlined in [P.A. 102-0174](#).

The ECACE was codified into law in July 2021 when Governor J.B. Pritzker signed HB 2878. The bill was passed out of the Illinois General Assembly with support from 2-year, 4-year public and private institutions. All public institutions—as well as any private institutions that choose to participate—

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<sup>1</sup> Illinois Board of Higher Education. (2021) *A Thriving Illinois: Higher Education Paths to Equity, Sustainability, and Growth*. Retrieved from: <https://ibhestrategicplan.ibhe.org/IBHE-Strategic-Plan-2021.html>

<sup>2</sup> For more information about the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity visit: [https://www.ecace.org/ECACE\\_FAQ.html](https://www.ecace.org/ECACE_FAQ.html)

must cooperate to improve access to associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees and certificates, credentials, and other licensure endorsements. The legislation mandated the institutions set a goal for serving incumbent workers by 2024 or require them to serve 20 percent of the incumbent workforce. The law states that public universities may not require transferring students repeat courses taken and completed successfully at a community college. All courses completed successfully in the Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degree program must count towards a baccalaureate degree. Students entering with an AAS degree are not required to take a total of credits greater than those students first starting in a baccalaureate degree program. This includes any courses in which credit for prior learning was used to determine course equivalency and credit was awarded by the evaluating institution.

Consortium efforts will prioritize the incumbent early childhood workforce, which includes working adults who need programs that offer flexibility in the location, format, and availability of course offerings. The consortium will support student degree completion by:

- Allowing both community college and university students to take coursework at another member institutions through their home institution
- Transferring an Associate of Applied Science (AAS) in Early Childhood to a participating four-year school
- Hiring and training navigators to provide students with personalized assistance for application and financial aid processes

- Making program coaches available at member institutions who will provide academic advising support
- Developing and agreeing upon common and standard methods to provide credit for prior learning
- Providing funding to institutions to put towards students' financial holds

A component of this initiative is the ECACE Scholarship, which is administered by Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC) and is designed to support the incumbent workforce to pursue credentials and degrees in early childhood.<sup>5</sup> The scholarship will cover the applicant's total cost of attendance for an academic year (including summer) after other financial aid is received. In addition, the Student Debt Assistance Act (SB3032) was passed during the 102nd General Assembly. This law will prevent any higher education institution 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 2022–2023 academic year.

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<sup>5</sup> For more information about the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) Scholarship Program, visit the Illinois Student Assistance Commission website: <https://www.isac.org/students/during-college/types-of-financial-aid/scholarships/ecace.html#ProgramDescription>.

# HIGHER EDUCATION STRATEGIES TO HELP STUDENTS COMPLETE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION DEGREES











Illinois Action for Children (IACF) developed the table below to summarize the current higher education initiatives in Illinois and to understand the work and goals of the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity and the Illinois Board of Higher Education Strategic plan, *A Thriving Illinois: Higher Education Paths to Equity, Sustainability, and Growth*.<sup>3</sup> In addition to highlighting higher education initiatives, we also identified gap areas that future policy work can address to increase access to higher education to the early childhood workforce. The work of the Consortium is ongoing and in an early phase – therefore, the work may expand to include more of the strategies

listed below. IBHE submitted their final strategic plan in June of 2021, and the board adopted the plan. Both ICCB and ISAC endorsed the plan in the fall of 2021. Most of the strategies listed below were part of IBHE's February 2021 draft strategic plan and, therefore, included in IACF's survey of the incumbent early childhood workforce to understand their potential impact on students. The majority of the incumbent workers that were surveyed said these strategies could benefit them (refer to the second column in the table below).<sup>4</sup> Information on the survey and its results are available in IACF's report, *Strengthening the Early Childhood Workforce in Illinois: A Policy Guide*.





















<sup>3</sup> Illinois Board of Higher Education. (2021) *A Thriving Illinois: Higher Education Paths to Equity, Sustainability, and Growth*. Retrieved from: <https://ibhestrategicplan.ibhe.org/IBHE-Strategic-Plan-2021.html>

<sup>4</sup> Illinois Action for Children surveyed 455 current or aspiring early childhood educators in February and March 2021 about their experiences in higher education and challenges completing college degrees. The results presented in the table come from those survey responses. For more information on the survey and results, read the full report: *Strengthening the Early Childhood Workforce in Illinois: A Policy Guide*.

**LEGEND:**  Yes  Yes, but temporarily  Partially  No

| STRATEGIES THAT STUDENTS SAID CAN HELP THEM COMPLETE THEIR ECE DEGREES  | PERCENT OF STUDENTS | DOES THE EARLY CHILDHOOD ACCESS CONSORTIUM FOR EQUITY SOLVE FOR THIS SYSTEMICALLY?  | HOW DOES THE EARLY CHILDHOOD ACCESS CONSORTIUM FOR EQUITY (ECACE) ADDRESS THE STRATEGY?  | IS THE STRATEGY ADDRESSED IN THE IBHE STRATEGIC PLAN?                                 |
|---|---------------------|---|--|---|
| 1. Knowing exactly what degrees, credentials, and courses are needed to qualify for various early childhood positions | 89%                 |  | Knowledge of educational requirements needed for early childhood positions could improve but it is not guaranteed. Navigators working at the 16 Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (CCR&R) in Illinois will help students find college programs to meet their needs and assist with the initial enrollment process. Program coaches at higher education institutions will support students by helping them navigate the Consortium and provide academic advising. |  |
| 2. Free online access to course materials and textbooks   | 84%                 |  | The Consortium may facilitate the creation of an open education resource library.  |  |
| 3. College classes that are directly relevant to the skills needed in the early childhood workplace                   | 81%                 |  | The Consortium might support this because child care providers will be appointed to the Advisory Committee. However, it is not guaranteed.   |  |
| 4. Free tuition and fees for low-income students  | 77%                 |  | Scholarships for incumbent workers for the total cost of attendance are available through June 2024 through the American Rescue Plan Act and Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act.  |  |
| 5. A program that ensures transfer between a community college and a 4-year university/college                        | 76%                 |  | Students with an Associate of Applied Science degree, a Gateways Level 4 and a GPA of 2.0 or higher can transfer to a bachelor's program and will be granted junior-level status in an early childhood program. 2-year colleges are open enrollment, but 4-year institutions are typically not.  |  |



| STRATEGIES THAT STUDENTS SAID CAN HELP THEM COMPLETE THEIR ECE DEGREES  | PERCENT OF STUDENTS | DOES THE EARLY CHILDHOOD ACCESS CONSORTIUM FOR EQUITY SOLVE FOR THIS SYSTEMICALLY?  | HOW DOES THE EARLY CHILDHOOD ACCESS CONSORTIUM FOR EQUITY (ECACE) ADDRESS THE STRATEGY?   | IS THE STRATEGY ADDRESSED IN THE IBHE STRATEGIC PLAN?                                 |
|---|---------------------|---|---|---|
| 6. Being able to complete college courses in your own community in the desired format (online, in person, etc.) | 75%                 |    | The Consortium will allow students to take courses online, hybrid, or in person from another member institution if not available at their home institution. "Not available" may mean the course is not offered during a term, at a time, or in a format that works best for the student. This is future work that has not been implemented.   |    |
| 7. Colleges or universities offer course credit for non-higher education awarded early childhood credentials    | 74%                 |    | ECACE is charged with the "development of standardized methods for awarding credit for prior learning. The Consortium will all decide how to assign college credit for the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. The ECACE legislation requires articulation of credit awarded for prior learning within the AAS degree. It does not guarantee credit will be awarded for all early childhood credentials.  |    |
| 8. Competency based education   | 73%                 |    | The Consortium will work to establish standard methods for awarding credit for prior learning. It could support the development of a statewide professional development registry that tracks student competencies. The work to give credit for prior learning and CDA could align to a competency framework.  |    |
| 9. Improved student support practices   | 73%                 |  | Funding was appropriated for community colleges and universities to improve supports such as college program coaches and funds to help students pay for financial holds. Other work of the consortium includes hiring navigators to work at CCR&R's to help students apply and enroll in college, and scholarships for the incumbent workforce. At this time, student supports, including scholarships, navigators, and coaches, are short-term resources (through September 2024), supported by federal child care stimulus funding. |  |
| 10. More credits transfer between 2-year colleges and 4-year colleges/ universities                             | 72%                 |  | ECACE legislation ensures that students admitted to an early childhood bachelor's program will have their AAS credits transferred. Transferring students will not have to repeat courses applied toward the AAS and will not have to take more credits than students who started at a 4-year institution.   |  |
| 11. Being able to obtain your bachelor's degree at your local community college                                 | 71%                 |  |   |  |
| 12. Improving internet access   | 69%                 |  |   |  |
| 13. Forgiveness of past college debt  | 69%                 |  | Funds are available to institutions to help students pay off financial holds on their accounts. Student loans are not addressed with ECACE-related funding.   |  |
| 14. Trainings for faculty, students, and staff on racial bias and inequity                                      | 56%                 |  |   |  |
| 15. Increasing the number of faculty of color   | 48%                 |  | The Consortium will be offering 50 scholarships for students pursuing master's degrees to increase the pipeline for faculty.  |  |



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