Preparing for the Future:
Indiana's Preschool Development Grant

Gaps in Research and Data with Regard to Availability and Participation in ECE Programming for the General Population

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As noted in interim deliverable #1, the Purdue team chose to use data from the Early Learning Indiana (ELI) data repository to capture the availability and participation of ECE programming for the general population of children ages 0-5 in the state. We chose this data set because it included data on availability and participation in ECE programming for the general population (i.e., not just children/families receiving vouchers) across types of care (e.g., licensed child care center, licensed child care home, registered ministry, preschool program, Head Start, as well as a portion of exempt providers) and enrollment broken down by age, which other data sources did not offer. However, as the Purdue team was working with this data set, several notable gaps in the data emerged that are described below that could be addressed in the state strategic plan.

- There are no available data on the availability of or participation in _all_ of the exempt/unregulated ECE providers across the state. The ELI dataset does include some information on these providers, but this was likely an under-representation of what is currently available.

- There is no way to know from the data whether the final enrollment counts represent the _unduplicated_ number of children being served in existing programs. It is possible that children are receiving services from multiple providers who are including them in their enrollment counts, in which case, these children could be duplicated.

- There are no reliable data on total available ECE slots broken down by age in Indiana. Although the ELI dataset does provide age breakdowns, as noted previously, there are inconsistencies in the way providers report availability (licensed capacity, desired capacity), which prevented the Purdue team from being able to include these data in our report.

- There are no data available on the number of children in the general population awaiting ECE services.

- The age breakdowns in the ELI data set were as follows: infants (0-12 months), toddlers (13-36 months), and preschoolers (37-60 months). Of interest to the state was a breakdown of the preschool age range to include an understanding of the availability of and participation in ECE programming for children who were prekindergarten eligible (i.e., 4- and 5- year-olds); however, the Purdue team was unable to respond to this request for this particular component of the needs assessment.

- For some providers in some counties, there are no recent data (i.e., within the two years) on availability or participation in ECE programming.

- Finally, there is a gap in data regarding accurate counts for the frequency of services children are receiving (e.g., participating in a full time ECE program, participating in a half-day program three days per week).

Using data from the Center for American Progress, ELI, and the Indiana Business Research Center, the Purdue team included information in the needs assessment on child care deserts across the state. These data suggest that over half of Indiana families with young children may not have easy access to child care because they live in what is considered a child care desert. However, the Purdue team noted several important gaps in these data that could be addressed in the state strategic plan, which include:

- The data used to assess the issue of child care deserts only included licensed child care centers, licensed family child care homes, and registered ministries. It is reasonable to assume that some families may have access to unlicensed or exempt child care providers in census tracts/counties considered to be child care deserts; however, there are no available data on unregulated care options.

- The data also are only broken down by census tract, not by county specifically. In some cases, census tracts cover one county in full so inferences can be made about particular counties and plans could be put in place to address barriers to child care in those counties. In other cases, there is more than one census tract that covers a particular county and the child care capacity category is not the same across the tracts, making the development of a plan forward for addressing potential capacity issues by county challenging.

When the Purdue team was exploring existing data sources, several inconsistencies were noted across these sources in terms of variables collected and variables used when calculating availability and/or participation, making comparisons across data sets difficult. For example, some agencies collect and report on information regarding licensed capacity and use this to calculate available slots, and others report on desired capacity and use this to report on desired slots. Or, in some cases, data sources have information only at the provider-level, whereas in other cases, they have data at the child-level. Also, it was brought to the attention of the Purdue team that some of the Department of Education (DOE) data may not reliably reflect actual availability of ECE programming in that the counts do not always represent consistent care providers (e.g., providers are included who may only offer a small amount of services during one week of the year and do not represent consistent care options for families). Moreover, the DOE data may also not accurately reflect actual participation in ECE programming (e.g., a child who attends a program for one day may be included in program counts). Finally, data dictionaries were rarely available when the Purdue team requested them from program staff across agencies.

Recommendation: There is a need for a more consistent, systematic, and comprehensive reporting system for all providers, regardless of regulation status with data broken down by age, including breakdown of prekindergarten eligible children, and by county (or other localized areas). Further, there is a need for a data system that is consistent across agencies/systems that includes data dictionaries. Finally, there is a need for children to be assigned unique identifiers when entering the ECE system so that the unduplicated number of children being served in existing programs could be accurately captured in enrollment counts.

To the knowledge of the Purdue team, there are no data across the state with regard to parental choice in terms of selecting to utilize ECE programming, potential reasons parents choose particular types of care, or potential reasons parents may choose to utilize ECE programming during certain developmental stages and not others. Parental choice may play a significant role in the level of participation in ECE programming in some counties. For instance, in some counties where there are few infants enrolled in ECE programs, it may be that parents are *choosing* to stay home with their infants, and thus, any identified problems with infant capacity or enrollment may be overestimated. Further, in other counties with few child care centers for example, it may be that parents are choosing family child care homes or other arrangements, and thus, there is not a market or need for center-based care. Again, this may be identified as a problem that may not actually require attention.

Further, to knowledge of the Purdue team, there are no easily accessible or consistently collected data on parent engagement or involvement in ECE programming. Although some programs (e.g., On My Way Pre-K) require a family engagement component, there are no data collected from all programs reflecting existing strategies or initiatives for engaging or involving families.

Recommendation: There is a need for data and research on parental choice and engagement with ECE programming broken down by age and by county.