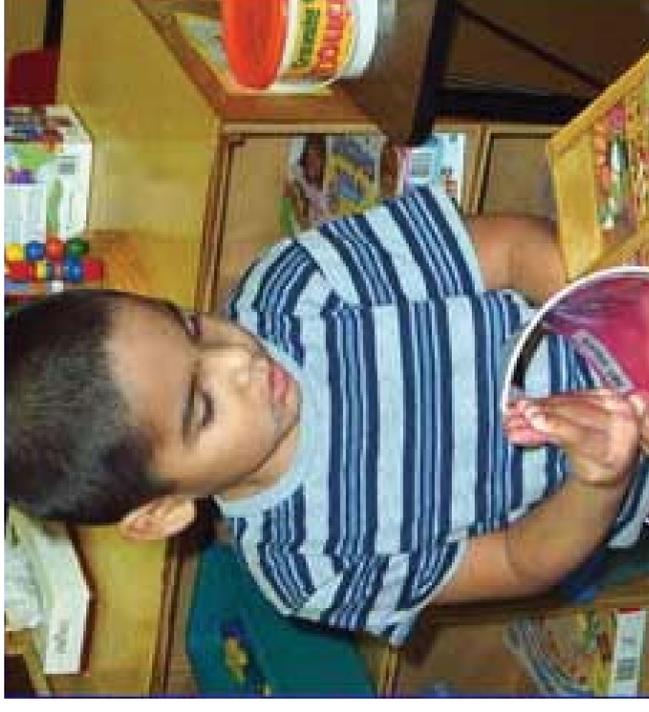


A CRITICAL POLICY IMPERATIVE



Making Preschool Education Work for Latinos In Illinois



The purpose of Latinos United is to improve the quality of life for the Latino community by removing obstacles to opportunities and highlighting the contributions made by Latinos to the region and state.

Latinos United focuses on analyzing the impact that the growth of the Latino population has on communities across the state, and developing policy recommendations to ensure that Latinos have equal access to social, political and economic opportunities.

Latinos United convenes leaders from various sectors to develop policy agendas that reflect the aspirations of the community for a better future. The strength and success of the Latino community are critical to the prosperity of our state and nation. For this reason, it is fundamental to increase the participation of Latinos in policy discussions where decisions that impact their lives are made.

Through a community consultation process carried out last fall, which included meetings with 500 leaders, Latinos United identified the issues that constitute the Latino policy agenda for the region. Early childhood education was identified as the number one issue. After receiving this mandate from the community, Latinos United convened a group of early childhood educators, advocates and service providers to identify the elements of a Latino-focused early childhood education policy agenda. The working group meets monthly to develop and implement strategies to move this agenda forward.

This policy brief embodies the collective wisdom of Latino early childhood education experts and policy advocates. The policy recommendations outlined in this brief are critical to eliminating the barriers that prevent Latino children from enrolling in early childhood education programs. Preschool for All, the state of Illinois' major early childhood education program, will not achieve its goal if it fails to increase participation of Latino children. We sincerely hope that policy makers consider our recommendation to allocate capital funds to build or renovate facilities in communities with large numbers of underserved children in order to address one of the fundamental barriers to enrolling Latino children.

Our goal is to advocate for policies that meet the needs of Latino families to ensure that our children have the opportunities they deserve. *!Nuestros Niños son Nuestro Futuro!*

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CONCLUSION

State policymakers understand that investing early in children is wise. However, we need to ensure that these investments reach all sectors and populations in the state. Measures that take into consideration culturally competent outreach, programming and tools and develop well trained bilingual instructors will be necessary to ensure success for Latino children in school. Latinos United applauds the great efforts of our state childcare champions including, Governor Blagojevich, the Conference of Women Legislators, the Latino Caucus and the Black Caucus who have worked to expand funding for ECE programs in Illinois. However, now is the time to ensure that these investments serve Latino children effectively. Clearly, the state's demographic trends suggest that if Preschool for All does not meet the needs of the Latino community, it will be a tragic failure for our state.

by working together with child care providers to jointly develop a Latino community plan for identifying and serving all children in the community who would benefit from high quality early childhood care and education.

4. Develop effective communication strategies for recruiting Latino families and children for early learning programs

Recommendation: Early childhood programs throughout the state have reported increases in the enrollment of Latino children. As noted above, public opinion polls confirm that Latino parents are very interested in enrolling their children in programs that will help their children become better prepared to succeed in school. Research conducted by the Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Notre Dame found that Latinos are most likely to enroll their children in an early learning program when they are given clear and detailed information about:

- The cost of the program, including supplemental or hidden costs
- Eligibility requirements: (age, family income, citizenship, etc.)
- Ban on inquiring into parent legal status or request for a social security number at the time of enrollment
- Program details: (location, time schedules, and what child will learn)
- Goals of the program

This information, in the parents primary language, is best given to parents through trusted individuals and institutions, including medical clinics, schools (through handouts to older children) and community-based organizations. Programs should seek partnerships with these trusted organizations to share with parents both the importance and availability of high quality early childhood education and care.

5. Link early childhood education programs with home-based child care to meet the needs of families who prefer home-based care or who need flexible care that matches their non-traditional work schedules

Recommendation: Action for Children has developed an innovative model program in which home child care providers are linked to a classroom-based preschool program. Children are transported to the preschool program from the child care home four days per week, and on the fifth day, the Teacher and Assistant Teacher visit the home child care providers to provide educational materials and guidance on enhancing learning experiences for the children. This model has been enthusiastically received by both parents and home child care providers in several communities in Chicago and suburban Cook County, but more work needs to be done to replicate and evaluate the effectiveness of this model for Latino families. In addition, El Valor, a community-based organization in Chicago has developed an innovative approach for increasing the pool of Latino home-based child care providers, including helping these providers get licensed. Moreover, El Valor provides Latino home-based providers with critical training and technical assistance that is culturally and linguistically appropriate and enriches the quality of services they provide to the Latino community.

INTRODUCTION

Latinos are the fastest-growing ethnic group among children in Illinois. According to recent population estimates, the overall number of Latinos grew by 28% from the U.S. Census 2000 to 2006. These demographic trends are strikingly evident among our state's school-age population. Based on the U.S. Census 2000, 33% of school-age children in the state of Illinois were Latino and that number has likely increased. There was a 34% increase in Latino children enrolled in pre-K through 12th grade in Illinois' public schools, accounting for over 388,000 students in the 2005-06 school years.¹

Data suggests that economically, politically and socially, Latino children will play an increasingly important role in our state's future. The U.S. Census 2000 Latino labor participation rate was 63.4%. At that time Latino immigrants made up nearly 12% of the labor force in Illinois, and that proportion is expected to grow considerably over the next 10 years.² Clearly, it is in the interest of state business leaders and taxpayers to ensure that all children, including Latinos develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities to realize their full potential and contribute to our state's economy and viability.

Unfortunately, the outlook for Latino children in Illinois is alarming. Far too many children are failing to receive the preparation they need to excel in school. According to a report from the Manhattan Institute, the 2003 high school graduation rate for Latino students in the state was 53% versus 74% for white students.³ The gaps in Latino student achievement begin early and persist throughout their educational careers. According to a recent national report on early education, Latino children, enter kindergarten significantly behind White children in early literacy skills such as recognizing letters and understanding beginning sounds of words.⁴ By fifth grade, Latino children continue to lag behind White children in important reading comprehension skills.⁵

Research shows that one of the root causes of this early achievement gap for Latinos is low rates of participation in preschool education programs. A majority of Latino children in Illinois qualify for state pre-kindergarten. The Census 2000 data shows only 35.6% of eligible Latino children participate in preschool. This is far below the state average of 52.5% for other children.⁶ Fortunately, Illinois is well positioned to remedy this. The Governor and policymakers have embraced a strategy of providing all children in our state with a high-quality early learning experience. Since 2002, policymakers have increased funding by \$135 million and set a laudable goal of providing a high-quality "Preschool for All" program for all three- and four-year-old children in our state.⁷ The program has great potential to eliminate the school readiness gap for Latino children and set them on a trajectory of school success if it includes Latino community-specific initiatives.

Greater and specified efforts must be made to ensure that Preschool for All is truly accessible to the Latino community and that services are designed to meet the unique needs of Latino families. Latinos United has prepared this policy brief which provides demographic information on the young Latino child population, outlines critical access, quality issues, and provides strategies and recommendations on how to ensure that Latino families fully benefit from Preschool for All in Illinois.

A SNAPSHOT OF ILLINOIS' YOUNG LATINO CHILDREN

As previously noted, young Latino children represent the fastest-growing segment of our state's child population and are a significantly growing presence in our public schools. These children and their families have unique needs that must be understood in order to design effective early childhood education (ECE) policies and programs to serve them. This section of the brief outlines many of these key characteristics that must be taken into account in order to design an effective ECE system that works for all of Illinois.

THEIR FAMILIES:

The majority of young Latino children live in two-parent families (62.7% nationally).⁸ Many live in extended family households, with grandparents or aunts, uncles, and cousins. Almost half of young Latino children live in households with five or more people. These families can be a source of support for their parents as they care for their young children.⁹

THEIR CITIZENSHIP STATUS:

The overwhelming majority (over 90%) of young Latino children in the United States are U.S. citizens.¹⁰ They are eligible for public benefit programs, including ECE programs. However, two-thirds have at least one parent who is an immigrant to this country. Much research has shown that children with immigrant parents are less likely to participate in public benefit programs, including ECE programs. Immigrant parents are less likely to know their children are eligible for services, how to locate these programs in their communities and how to gain access.

Latino children enter kindergarten significantly behind white children in early literacy skills such as recognizing letters...

Recommendations:

1. Build or renovate additional facilities for early childhood care and education in predominantly Latino communities

Recommendation: There has not been a state-funded capital program aimed at developing new early childhood facilities in recent years. Developing appropriately located and new facilities for early childhood education and care is perhaps the most critical strategy for increasing Latino student access to affordable, quality services. The Illinois Early Learning Council has called for substantial capital investment in early childhood facilities, with priority going to those communities currently experiencing a shortage of early childhood programs due to space limitations. Our concern is that much of these funds will likely go to smaller renovation and facility expansion projects. An additional capital set-aside is needed for newly constructed centers to serve those communities with the largest number of underserved young Latino children.

2. Increase the availability of publicly funded preschool programs in predominantly Latino communities

Recommendation: The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and advocacy groups should continue to work with school districts and community-based organizations to develop high quality program proposals that meet both the state's requirements and the community's needs.

One key strategy for ensuring that ECE programs are effective is to provide linguistically and culturally appropriate services and increase the pool of bilingual ECE staff and teachers. Bilingual teachers can help to engage diverse parents in their children's education, and drive instruction that builds on and supports a child's home language. This is a particular challenge in the communities previously noted where the Latino presence is a relatively new phenomenon. For example, in DuPage and Will Counties, schools and community institutions are struggling to learn how to provide linguistically and culturally appropriate services to a rapidly growing number of newly arrived Latino families and their children.

3. Create full-day, full-year programs with multiple funding streams that meet families' needs for child care as well as early education

Recommendation: In the City of Chicago in 2006, there were nearly 9,000 slots of center-based, full-day, full-year early education and care that combine child care funding with Head Start and/or state preschool funding. In the rest of the state, there were nearly 3,500 slots with similar blended funding. The number of these educationally enriched programs continues to grow through new Preschool for All funding and the conversion of additional Head Start slots to full-day programming. However, Latino access to full day programs has not risen satisfactorily.

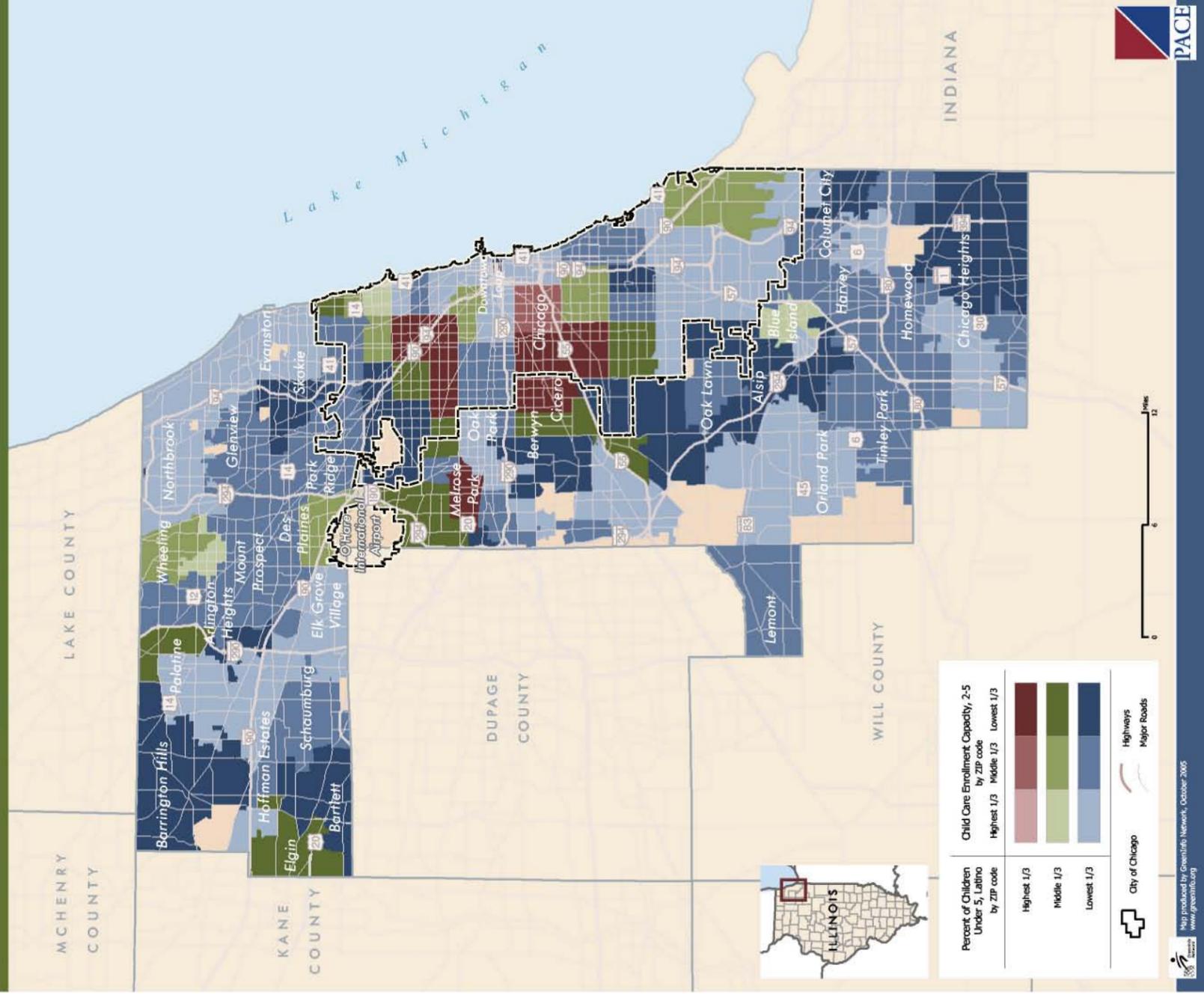
ISBE and the Chicago Public Schools should continue to support the development of collaborative programs that integrate Preschool for All with full-day, full-year child care that is aimed at reaching the Latino population. This can be accomplished by encouraging school districts to partner with local child care providers to ensure that high quality, integrated full-day early childhood care and education programs are available for all parents who need and want them for their children. These partnerships should include supporting Latino child care providers to apply for Preschool for All funding, and/or

Figure 1

Para nuestros niños

The National Task Force on Early Education for Hispanics
www.sealing.com.org

Cook County Child Care Center Enrollment Capacity for Children 2-5 and Percent of Latino Children Under 5, Latino



WHERE THEY LIVE:

Latinos are a significant and rapidly growing population in the U.S. Every county in the state saw an increase in the Latino population in 2000, including the 40 counties where overall population decreased. Moreover, the most recent Illinois population projections for 2006 illustrate an increase in the growth of the Latino population. Latinos are becoming more geographically dispersed nationally and this pattern is mirrored in Illinois. While Cook County has seen the greatest increase among Latinos, this growth did not occur just in the city of Chicago. In fact, 45% of the approximately 200,000 new Cook County Latinos in the U.S. since 2000 live in the suburbs rather than in the city. In addition, the “collar counties” (Lake, DuPage, Will, Kane, and McHenry) have seen a 32% increase in the Latino population since 2000. Taken together, these patterns also suggest that Latinos are an increasing presence in suburban communities. This has important policy and programmatic implications as these new growth communities often lack the infrastructure and expertise to effectively serve Latino communities, including recruiting bilingual staff and conducting appropriate outreach to limited English proficient families.



HOME LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENTS:

The Census Bureau does not collect data on the language ability of individuals under the age of five. However, one approach for estimating the home language environments of young Latino children is to examine the primary language of children enrolled in Head Start in Illinois. In the 2006 program year, approximately a quarter (23%) of all Head Start children in the state spoke Spanish as their first language.¹¹ This suggests that greater efforts to recruit and train bilingual ECE staff and teachers are essential to promoting the school readiness of young Latino children and critical for effective parent engagement.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Quality early childhood care and education has been repeatedly shown to be the most effective strategy for supporting children’s readiness to succeed in school. High quality programs that include meaningful parent education and involvement have been shown to have long-lasting effects on children’s school achievement. Well designed and implemented ECE programs, such as Head Start and Preschool for All, provide children with early learning experiences that support children’s language, cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development. Furthermore, mounting research has demonstrated that children who are exposed to more than one language during the earliest years of life benefit tremendously. For example, dual language instruction helps children acquire improved reading comprehension skills in the elementary school years.¹²

In addition, research shows that Latinos are eager to take advantage of new opportunities to attend quality ECE programs. Although, in the past there was a widely held belief that Latino families had a cultural preference to keep their young children at home and were simply not interested in enrolling children in early learning programs, recent surveys have shown that

this is a myth. Public opinion polls reveal that Latino families are excited about enrolling their children in preschool programs, and they support efforts to make these programs more widely available in their communities.¹³

This is also true for Latinos in Illinois. In a recent study of Latino parents in Chicago, researchers at the University of Notre Dame Institute for Latino Studies found that both native-born and immigrant Latino parents were very interested in enrolling their children in early learning programs. In fact, the desire for preschool was so strong that the researchers reported that many parents attended focus group sessions hoping to immediately enroll their children in a preschool program. The researchers concluded that as Latino parents receive more information about the benefits of early care and education for their child's development and as more affordable programs become available in their communities, demand for these programs will continue to rise.

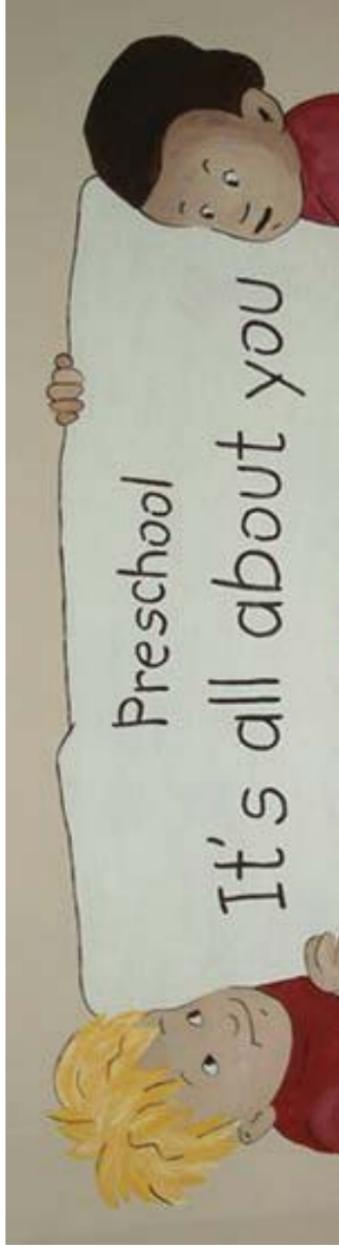
ACCESS BARRIERS FOR LATINOS: THE FACILITIES CRISIS

Despite the strong interest among Latino parents to enroll their children in ECE programs, not all Latino families in the state can take advantage of new opportunities to participate in these programs. Latinos face significant challenges in enrolling their children in ECE programs. For example, in the City of Chicago, over 6,000 eligible Latino preschool-aged children were placed on a waiting list for preschool services in FY 2007.¹⁴ In rapidly growing, predominantly Latino communities around Illinois, there are long waiting lists for these services. While structural barriers such as affordability, lack of access to full-day services, transportation, and a severe shortage of bilingual ECE staff pose significant challenges for Latino families that seek ECE services, a lack of ECE facilities is among the most pressing reasons why Latinos are not fully benefiting from Preschool for All in Illinois.

In recent years, reports by the Illinois Facilities Fund (IFF) have shed light on the fact that a key obstacle to increasing the participation of Latinos in Preschool for All is a lack of ECE facilities in Latino neighborhoods. Of the ten mid-to-large sized municipalities named in a 2003 study by the IFF as most in need of all ECE services, six had very large and growing Latino populations (Cicero, Berwyn, Aurora, Elgin, Waukegan, and Chicago). The schools in these communities tend to be severely overcrowded, and “optional” early childhood programs are often last in line for critically needed classroom space. Moreover, the private sector also faces challenges in responding to the growing demand for ECE facilities. The not-for-profit community-based organizations often have a difficult time raising enough capital to construct or renovate buildings to house early childhood programs, and for-profit providers may be reluctant to invest in developing facilities in lower-income communities when state child care reimbursement levels barely cover program operating costs.

Data collected for the National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics examined the child care enrollment capacity in Cook County by zip code, including neighborhoods with a high proportion of Latino children under the age of five. There findings showed that there were only 2.4 child care centers operating per 1,000 Latino children under the age of five in Cook County.¹⁵ (See Figure 1) Clearly, there is great need for new ECE facilities to expand preschool enrollment for Latino children in Cook County and throughout the state.

A lack of ECE facilities is among the pressing reasons why Latinos are not fully benefiting from Preschool for All in Illinois.



STRATEGIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Latino families have unique needs that must be taken into account in order to create ECE programs that narrow the current school readiness gaps for Latino children and increase their participation. The need for increased opportunities for quality early care and education for children has long been recognized by advocates and policymakers. Some strategies for increasing access and enrollment have been implemented in the past several years, however, these efforts have limited success in targeting services to the Latino population.

Greater resources and increased focus on the needs of the Latino community in implementation of Preschool for All will be needed to achieve the goal of providing quality early care and education for every Latino family who wishes to enroll its child in a quality ECE program. The following (five) key strategies could pave the way toward addressing the access barriers for Latino families seeking to participate in ECE programs. However, the recommendations presented herein are only beginning steps.