Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity

Frequently Asked Questions

The Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) and the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) have received many questions about the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) and the work of this initiative. This document is designed to address those questions. This should be considered a working document, which will be revised as the initiative progresses. This is not intended as a policy manual or general overview of the work.

Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity

1. **What is the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity and how was it created?**
   The Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity was created through IL Public Act 102-0174, which charges the IBHE and the ICCB with creating and establishing the ECACE. Per the law, the purpose of the Consortium is "…to serve the needs of the incumbent early childhood workforce and the employers of early childhood educators and to advance racial equity while meeting the needs of employers by streamlining, coordinating, and improving the accessibility of degree completion pathways for upskilling and the sustained expansion of educational pipelines at Illinois institutions of higher education."

   The Consortium was initially proposed through the IBHE strategic planning process. It is an agreement between all public universities and community colleges, as well as any private institutions that choose to participate, to cooperatively improve access to associate's, bachelor's, master's degrees, Illinois Gateways to Opportunity® (Gateways) credentials, and other licensure endorsements. Consortium efforts prioritize those working in early childhood congregate care settings such as child care, preschool, Head Start, family child care, and other such settings. The work of the consortium includes efforts to upskill the early childhood workforce through scholarships and other supports, work to remove barriers to credential and degree completion, efforts to align and smooth pathways across and among institutions, and work to recognize the prior learning, skills, and abilities of the current workforce to increase enrollment, persistence, and completion of higher education programs.

2. **How is the incumbent early childhood workforce defined?**
   The Act defines the incumbent early childhood workforce as "an individual or a group of individuals working or having worked in the early childhood industry, including family child care and center-based care settings, Preschool for All school-based settings, and Head Start, that serves children from birth to age 5 and includes teachers, assistant teachers, directors, family child care providers, and assistants. Individuals who have previously worked in these settings are included, as long as they return to employment in one of these settings."

Updated as of Wednesday, July 5, 2023

3. **Which institutions are members of the Consortium?**
   According to the law, "Membership in the Consortium shall include all public universities and community colleges in this State that offer early childhood programs. Membership by private, not-for-profit universities is optional and conditional on the acceptance of the terms adopted by the public members, the related administrative rules, and the provisions of this Act. For-profit institutions of higher education are not eligible for membership in the Consortium. Participating institutions must be accredited by the Higher Learning Commission and entitled to offer Gateways Credentials." Current members can be found on the ECACE website.

4. **How is "Prior Learning" being defined in this initiative?**
   The Public Act defines this in the following way: "Credit for prior learning" means the evaluation and assessment of a student's life learning through employment, training, and experiences outside an academic environment from which skills that comprise terminal objectives are mastered to an acceptable degree of proficiency for college credit, certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training.

Consortium Goals

1. **What are the statewide goals for upskilling the early childhood workforce, and are there goals for each of the following – enrollment, persistence, and completion?**
   The goal is to have an additional 4933 students enroll and persist and/or complete a credential or degree by September 2024. There are not separate goals for enrollment and completion.

2. **Can students who are in our Elementary Education program who earn an ECE endorsement (and are members of the incumbent workforce) "count" toward our goals?**
   If the students are pursuing early childhood as their major and are earning the endorsement in elementary education as a secondary endorsement, this may count towards your goals. However, at this time, post-BA credentials and additional endorsements achieved later do not count.

3. **Why do the Consortium goals focus on Credentials instead of Community College Certificates?**
   Gateways to Opportunity® Credentials serve a common set of courses and competencies across institutions. Gateways Credentials are included in both administrative rule and are required by ISBE for licensure. This means Gateways Credentials can be recognized and utilized by other state agencies, entities, and employers to understand the shared competencies of those with the credential. The alignment and commonality of the Gateways Credentials is what has allowed them to be placed in state licensing regulations and used as educational requirements for programs to meet ExceleRate Illinois® Quality Ratings and Standards, and they provide a foundation of equity for students in the state. Many community colleges have worked to ensure that Gateways credentials are embedded in certificate and degree programs.

Consortium Work

1. **What does the work of the Consortium include?**
   Much of the work of the consortium is mapped out in legislation. Among other things, the Consortium work includes determining how to offer coursework across the Consortium, developing and agreeing upon common and standard methods to provide credit for prior learning, and ensuring the full transferability of the AAS degree into the university consistent with the requirements of the law. Other work may include but is not limited to developing a bank of open educational resources, supporting the work of the navigators and coaches, and supporting a state registry to track competencies.

2. **Do individual institutions have the autonomy and the support to develop their own Prior Learning Assessments (PLA)?**
   The Public Act establishing the consortium requires the creation of standard methods to provide credit for prior learning. While institutions may have additional pathways for defining and awarding PLA credit, using a common set of approaches will be instrumental in establishing standard practice in the field.

3. **Where can we see the alignment of competencies with national standards?**
   The Gateways competencies, behaviors and skills are intentionally aligned with Illinois Professional Teaching Standards, the InTASC standards, the former NAEYC standards and now the current/new NAEYC competencies. This alignment allows institutions using Gateways assessments to provide program evaluation data to accreditation and oversite agencies such as ISBE and NAEYC as required without duplicative work. The most recent crosswalk of Gateways and NAEYC competencies can be found here.

   The Gateways Competencies will be cross walked with the *DRAFT* Professional Educator Competencies, which are almost finalized. When formally recognized as complete by ISBE, that crosswalk will be finalized and released.

4. **Is there any effort to align Illinois' equity work with the extensive NAEYC work on equity? If not, why?**
   Illinois faculty, institutions, and state agencies support student/workforce diversity and equitable learning opportunities in alignment with the NAEYC Recommendations for those Facilitating Educator Preparation and Professional Development (advancingequitypositionstatement.pdf (naeyc.org).

   We can see this throughout the work that's been happening in the state for many years; additionally, the focus on equity is the foundation for the Consortium.

ECACE Advisory Committee

1. **Who are the members of the ECACE Advisory Committee? What is the selection process for membership?**
   IL Public Act 102-0174 outlines the membership of the ECACE Advisory Committee and who appoints each of the members. Members are appointed by a combination of state agencies, the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development (GOECD), and the General Assembly. Members include state agency representatives, legislators, providers and employers, schools and districts, and non-government organizations, among others. Members of the ECACE Advisory Committee can be viewed here.

2. **Are providers included on the Advisory?**
   Yes. The legislation refers to providers as employers. These members are appointed to the ECACE Advisory Committee by GOECD.

Cross-Institutional Access to Coursework

1. **What is a home institution?**
   Home institution is defined in legislation as the community college or university at which the student has been admitted.

2. **Why is giving students access to courses from other institutions such an important part of the Consortium?**
   Many students across our state lack access to the courses they want at a time and place, and in a format that meets their needs. At some institutions, courses are only offered once a year or every two years, or courses may be cancelled due to small numbers of students. Courses may only be taught during the day/week or only in person. These may not be convenient and accessible to the incumbent workforce. Allowing students to access courses taught at another institution (through their home institution) can allow students to stay on track and complete their credential or degree.

3. **Can students be concurrently enrolled in more than one 2- and/or 4- year institution?**
   Specific details of the Consortium infrastructure are still being determined. As the ECACE is currently envisioned, students will be admitted to and enrolled in their "home" institution (only) but will be able to access courses at another "teaching" institution without having to be admitted to that institution.

4. **How is it determined whether the student can take a class/and our program of study outside of the "home" institution?**
   Students at community colleges should work with their academic advisors and/or mentors or coaches to determine when this may be appropriate.

5. **Can both community college and university students access coursework at other institutions and how will this be determined?**
Community colleges students may be able to access courses through ILCCO if courses are available and recommended by their academic advisor or mentor.

   For university students, a goal of the Consortium is to determine a way to provide course sharing across institutions, under the guidance of their academic advisor or coach.

Institutional Resources

1. **What types of resources are available to colleges and universities?**
Institutions are provided with funding to hire coaches, to put towards participating students' financial holds, and to support the work of the consortium. Funding is provided to engage in activities such as program redesign and/or curriculum development, the provision of student supports, creating collaborations and partnerships, etc. Some of the funding is for specific purposes, and some funding can be used to meet the needs and plans of individual institutions.

2. **How long is funding available for institutional resources?**
Grants and funding to institutions are supported through one-time federal stimulus funding that is anticipated to end as of June 30, 2024. IDHS is working to see whether an extension may be possible.

3. **Can the funding be extended?**
June 30, 2024 is the date by which these federal stimulus funds must be obligated. We do not get funds directly from the federal government, but through the Illinois Department of Human Services. These are Child Care Development Block Grant funds appropriated to stabilize child care and support the child care workforce. Unless the federal government decides to extend timelines around federal stimulus dollars (generally), this cannot be extended.

ECACE Scholarship and Student Supports

1. **Where can I find information about applying for the scholarship?**
The most up-to-date information about the scholarship is posted on the ISAC website. The site will continue to be updated to provide more information about eligibility, applications, and to respond to frequently asked questions. Additionally, ISAC provides updates to institutional Financial Aid Administrators, and they are a great on-campus source of information.

2. **For which programs, credentials, and degrees may students use the ECACE Scholarship?**
To be eligible for the scholarship, a person must be working or have worked in certain positions in an early childhood congregate care setting, such as a child care center, family childcare, preschool, Head Start, public school preschool, etc.

Eligible positions may include teachers, teacher assistants, teacher aides, directors, preschool classroom-based paraprofessionals, and others. Eligible position codes are listed on the ISAC website.

Students must attend eligible programs at Consortium institutions that are Gateways Entitled, if applicable. Eligible applicants may receive scholarships to work towards Gateways Credentials (ECE, Infant Toddler, and/or Director), an early childhood certificate, an associate degree in early childhood, a bachelor's degree in early childhood, with an optional Professional Educator License and endorsement, a master's degree in early childhood for those seeking licensure, and additional endorsements for a Professional Educator License.

3. **How many scholarships are available?**
   We know from prior research that the early childhood workforce has a range of credits and may or may not have a degree. With so many variables, it's difficult to say at this point the number of scholarships available. However, up to 5400 scholarships may be available.

4. **Do students need to apply for FAFSA?**
   Yes. The ECACE Scholarship is considered a "last dollar" scholarship and pays for cost of attendance after other grants and scholarships, such as the Pell and MAP grants, are applied. Students must apply for the FAFSA first to be eligible.

5. **Are students who are currently enrolled in higher education programs eligible for financial supports?**
   Yes, those currently enrolled and those interested in enrolling in approved programs are eligible for the scholarship, as long as they are part of the incumbent early childhood workforce as defined above.

6. **How long must someone have worked in an early childhood program to be eligible?**
   There is no defined length of time a person must have worked in an early childhood program to be eligible for the scholarship. A person will be eligible for the scholarship when they begin their employment. They will remain eligible for the scholarship as long as they remain enrolled in the approved college.

7. **What is the duration of the scholarship?**
   Scholarships are awarded on an annual basis, and students must reapply each year.

   However, please note that – at present – this scholarship is funded only through June 2024. At this time, we do not anticipate additional funding beyond that time, as scholarships are currently supported through one-time, non-renewable federal stimulus funding. We urge institutions to work with students on academic plans that lead to a degree or credential, if at all possible, by this time.

8. **Are part-time staff eligible for the scholarship?**
   Yes. Part-time staff are eligible. There is no requirement that students work full-time in order to be eligible.

9. **When will a marketing campaign be launched to let the workforce know about the scholarships?**
Information is currently on the ISAC website and is being disseminated through various listservs. The state will be developing a broader marketing campaign. This work has not yet begun.

   A marketing campaign is still part of the plan; the timing is to be determined, with updates shared as they are available.

10. **Are eligible students guaranteed scholarships?**
Unfortunately, there is limited funding for scholarships. While we anticipate eligible students will receive funding, this cannot be guaranteed year to year. Scholarships are awarded on an annual basis, and students must reapply each year. We anticipate those maintaining adequate academic progress will be awarded the following year.

11. **Can students receive scholarships for any higher education institution that offers an early childhood program?**
No. Students may only receive scholarships for those institutions that are members of the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity, accredited by the Higher Learning Commission, and maintain Gateways entitlement. See above for more information about Consortium membership. Members of the ECACE Consortium and their representatives can be found [here](#).

12. **Is this scholarship related to the Gateways to Opportunity© Scholarship? Can students receive both scholarships?**
This is a separate and distinct scholarship from the Gateways to Opportunity© Scholarship. The financial aid office at individual institutions will determine how to distribute funds if a student applies and is eligible for both ECACE and the Gateways scholarship.

13. **Are the Student Supports (e.g., scholarships, navigators, and mentors) under the consortium "short-term"? How are these funded?**
At this time, the students supports, including scholarships, navigators, and mentors, are "short-term" resources through June 2024 supported by federal child care stimulus funding.

14. **Is there a work commitment upon completion of the degree or credential?**
Recipients of the scholarship are expected to continue or return to teaching or otherwise working with children birth to five in early childhood congregate care settings in Illinois after they complete their program of study.

15. **What costs will be covered for students?**
Scholarships will provide funding for up to the full 'cost of attendance', as defined by the federal Higher Education Act and used to determine allocations for some federal grants, such as Pell. Each institution determines the Cost of Attendance (COA) for their students, according to federal guidelines. COA may include things like tuition, fees, books, transportation, room and board, etc.

   Here are some helpful links on Cost of Attendance:

Updated as of Wednesday, July 5, 2023

https://studentaid.gov/help-center/answers/article/what-does-cost-of-attendance-mean

https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/fsa-handbook

**Note:* Funding will be capped at the cost of attendance for the most expensive early childhood undergraduate program at a public university. Institutions may supplement this funding with institutional grants and scholarships if they so choose.*

16. **What agency/organization distributes scholarship funds? Where are they distributed?**
The Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC) determines eligibility and distributes scholarship funding to individual institutions.

17. **Are individuals who already have a bachelor's degree eligible for a scholarship?**
Yes, individuals who have a bachelor's degree in early childhood or in another field may be eligible for the scholarship to pursue certain early childhood credentials, if they meet other eligibility criteria.

18. **How is funding made available to students to address financial holds on their accounts?**
Funding is provided to each institution to support students with financial holds on their accounts.

19. **Are kindergarten teacher assistants and aides eligible for the scholarship?**
Yes. As long as they meet all the other eligibility criteria. They should list Assistant Teacher as their eligibility code.

20. **Are Early Interventionists who work teaching and supporting young children in home settings and have a Gateways code "23" eligible for the scholarship? If not, can this decision be reconsidered?**
We recognize that there are many people and roles providing services to young children and families. Unfortunately, those in early intervention and home visiting roles are not eligible, due to both the intention of the legislation and the source of the federal funding.

21. **Please provide a list of eligible position codes for the scholarship.**
These are located on the ISAC website.

22. **Can students use scholarships at both a community college and a 4-year institution if they are dually enrolled?**
Yes, they may. Institutions will need to work on arrangements that outline which institution will receive funding and disperse to the other institution. (Financial aid administrators on your institutional teams will be familiar with this process.) Students attending multiple institutions should be made aware of any institutional process to inform the college that they will be attending more than one institution. Colleges should maintain all financial aid policy/agreements and be prepared to submit copies to IBHE of said agreements as needed.

23. **When will institutions be notified about students who have applied for the scholarship?**
After the priority date, ISAC begins working on prequalification of students. Prequalified

Updated as of Wednesday, July 5, 2023

students are notified via email, and ISAC provides a list of pre-qualified students to the institutions through the GAP system. After that, the institution determines if students are enrolled in eligible programs, with satisfactory academic progress.

24. **How many graduate level scholarships are offered through this initiative, and how will these be distributed?**
There are two graduate scholarships associated with ECACE. One is the ECACE Scholarship, which covers students pursuing early childhood undergraduate and graduate programs for those who have worked and intend to continue to work in early childhood congregate care settings.

The other graduate level opportunity is the Early Childhood Faculty Preparation program, which is offered at four institutions and is designed for individuals who intend to become faculty in early childhood programs at higher education institutions. More information is on the ECACE website.

25. **Can other scholarships be applied when a student is also receiving the ECACE scholarship?**
Students may have other scholarships applied as part of their financial aid package. The ECACE Scholarship is awarded after all other aid has been applied, including Pell and MAP. The scholarship is not need-based and does not have to be specifically designated for tuition and fees. Scholarship recipients may receive up to the amount by which their cost of attendance exceeds the amount of other financial aid they are receiving, including need and non-need based aid, and it can be used for any cost of attendance component.

Institutions may determine the best way to award other financial aid that is also considered to be last payer assistance and in a manner that maximizes the amount of benefits that students can receive. Because the ECACE Scholarship does not have administrative rules that define how it must be combined with other programs, any applicable guidelines of the other programs may be a factor in determining how to maximize student benefits and minimize the need for self-help aid such as student loans.

26. **What is the application process for students who are currently receiving the scholarship and wish to apply for next year?**
Because the ECACE Scholarship is annual, students reapply each year for the scholarship. The application is the same for all students.

27. **Can students who are pursuing or who already have a Professional Educator License with an Early Childhood Endorsement receive the scholarship to pursue an additional endorsement?**
If the student intends to continue to work with children birth to five in congregate care settings, they may be eligible to purse a letter of approval or endorsement in Early Childhood Special Education, Special Education, Bilingual, or ESL.

28. **How are ECACE scholarships distributed to students?**
Scholarships are disbursed to the institutions where the student is enrolled. Any remaining funds after tuition and fees are paid may be disbursed from the institution to the student.

Updated as of Wednesday, July 5, 2023

29. Why are scholarship disbursements delayed for some students?

The timing for the disbursement of the scholarship is dependent upon a number of factors, including when the student applies, when the application is complete, when the college or university requests payment, and the time to process payment at the state level. Students are encouraged to apply as soon as possible, and institutions are encouraged to request funds for qualified students in a timely manner.

30. Will financial aid be terminated if a student's grade point average (GPA) drops below a certain level?

Students must maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress, which is defined by each institution and often includes a GPA requirement. Students and institutions are encouraged to work together to address academic needs so that students remain eligible. Additionally, students may appeal decisions related to Satisfactory Academic Progress. Students (with the support of mentors and coaches) may work with financial aid offices to complete the appeal process.

31. When will the ECACE scholarship end?

The current funding source for the ECACE Scholarship ends June 30, 2024. After FY2024, there is no guarantee of funding. However, we are excited and encouraged by recent funding of the Governor's Smart Start Initiative for FY24. Future Smart Start efforts, if funded, include investments in state scholarship for the early childhood workforce.

Navigators and Mentors/Coaches

1. Are students required to work through the navigators or can students work directly with their desired college or university?

There is no requirement that students work with a navigator. Navigators are connectors and a way to help students easily find programs to meet their needs and assist with the initial enrollment process. Institutions are encouraged to also recruit students and provide supports needed to enroll.

2. Where are navigators located?

Navigators are located at the 16 regionally based Child Care Resource and Referral agencies (CCRRs) across the state. You may request the support of the navigator here.

3. Is there guidance on the roles of or example job descriptions for the institutionally based mentors/coaches?

Yes. The mentors/coaches are envisioned as a "guide on the side" once students get to the door of the institution and as an internal person to help them navigate the system, find the courses and supports they need to be successful and to ensure students stay on track, persist, and complete. The job may look somewhat different by institution. State agencies have created a description and shared this with Consortium representatives.

4. How can students get in contact with a navigator?

Students can fill out this survey to be connected to a navigator.

1. **Are universities required to transfer in the full AAS degree in early childhood? Can universities require additional coursework?**
Public Act 102-0174 requires universities to grant junior level status in an early childhood education program to any student who graduated from an Illinois community college with an Associate of Applied Science degree in early childhood education if the student meets the requirements of the AAS degree program, is transferring from a program entitled to offer the Gateways ECE Credential Level 4 and earns a minimum grade point average of a 2.0 on a 4.0 scale.

   A public university may not require students who meet these requirements to repeat courses taken and completed successfully at the community college and applied toward the associate degree, and all courses completed successfully in the AAS degree program must count toward baccalaureate degree completion. Students entering with an AAS may not be required to take a total number credits greater than those students first starting in a baccalaureate degree program.

   Additional coursework may be required if a student is seeking to add one or more endorsements to the student's Illinois Professional Educator License.

2. **May universities require students who transfer with an AAS in early childhood to take additional general education courses?**
Universities may not require a *total number of credit hours* greater than that which a student who began their studies at the institution would have to complete. However, students may still be required to complete certain general education and early childhood courses.

   The intention of this is that students with the AAS and Gateways Level 4 credential will have met some of the competencies and requirements needed to fulfill the bachelor's degree pursued by students who began their work in the program, and that these courses and/or content need not be repeated. Students should be taking coursework that provides content still needed to reach the bachelor's degree in early childhood and Gateways Level 5.

3. **How are advisors at 2- and 4- years institutions made aware of requirements to transfer the AAS degree in early childhood?**
Institutions must agree to this as members of the consortium, and consortium representatives are charged with ensuring their institution is aware of the requirements. Additionally, this is included as part of the training of both the navigators and coaches who are working on behalf of the consortium.

4. **Is the rule requiring the full transfer of the AAS in early childhood "permanent" or does it expire in three years, with the federal funding?**
The transfer of the AAS in early childhood is now in Illinois State Law, and there is no expiration date or sunset listed in the law. So, unless the law is repealed by the Illinois General Assembly, the law is in effect.

5. **Are institutions required to accept coursework in which students earn a "D"?**
A grade of a "D" may be accepted toward graduation requirements. However, if the course in which the student received the "D" is specifically required for licensure or for Gateways Credentials, the student would need to retake the course.

6. **Do courses beyond those required for the AAS degree count towards the maximum number of credit hours requirement?**
Only coursework required for the AAS degree must count towards the maximum number of credit hours. However, if the coursework will fulfill additional university requirements, they should be considered for transfer.

7. **Are dual credit courses taken in high school and accepted at community colleges required to be part of the coursework accepted by 4-year institutions?**
If coursework is accepted at the community college towards the AAS degree, then it must be accepted by 4-year institutions as part of the AAS degree transfer.

Professional Educator License Questions

1. **Do cooperating teachers and/or student teaching supervisors need to have a degree or credential?**
ISBE recently made rule changes to [23 Illinois Administrative Code, Part 25.620 (d)](link) which allows cooperating teachers in community-based programs to hold a Gateways Level 5 credential, which requires a bachelor's degree and demonstrated early childhood competencies, in lieu of a Professional Educator License (PEL).

2. **Are students able to complete their student teaching in their place of employment?**
Yes. If the cooperating teacher meets ISBE and the site meets college or university requirements, a member of the incumbent workforce may be able to complete student teaching in their place of employment. To receive an Early Childhood Education endorsement, individuals must student teach in a setting with children in the range of birth through grade 2.

   However, it is also important for candidates to have an array of field experiences in multiple settings to learn about child development and learning across the age spectrum. Therefore, over the course of the program, students must have opportunities to complete field work in *at least* two of the three early childhood age groupings of birth through age 3, age 3 through 5 years, and age 5 through 8 years per Illinois Administrative Code Section 25.96 (c). Please note that multiple student teaching experiences are not required, just one student teaching experience and less intensive field experiences with at least one other early childhood age group.

3. **May student teachers be compensated for their work?**
Yes. Per Illinois Administrative Code, Section 25.620 (f), student teachers may be compensated for their services.

4. **What work is happening regarding the early childhood content test?**
ISBE communicated concerns regarding early childhood education content test pass rates

(overall and significant disparities among racial/ethnic groups) with its testing vendor, Pearson. Pearson is currently compiling options, which could include the convening of a standard setting panel made up of Illinois educators with a PEL endorsed in ECE and higher education faculty for cut score recommendations using the current test blueprint and/or test redesign. ISBE will keep stakeholders in the loop as the work moves forward.