

Katie Niland, Chris Jones, Andrea Mraz Esposito, and Pia Caronongan

Competency Frameworks for Infant and Toddler Teachers and Caregivers in Illinois

Illinois developed a competency framework to support early care and education professionals interested in focusing their professional development activities on the care and education of infants and toddlers across setting types. Within this framework, competencies are grouped into seven domains: (1) human growth and development; (2) health, safety, and well-being; (3) observation and assessment; (4) curriculum or program design; (5) interactions, relationships, and environments; (6) family and community relationships; and (7) personal and professional development. These competencies are embedded in the [Gateways Infant Toddler Credential](#); thus, we focus on that credential in this profile.

The Gateways Infant Toddler Credential is meant for early care and education professionals working with children birth to age three. To earn a Gateways Infant Toddler Credential, early care and education professionals must first obtain a [Gateways Early Childhood Education \(ECE\) Credential](#). The Gateways Infant Toddler Credential has six proficiency levels; to progress through these levels, candidates must advance to higher levels of the Gateways ECE Credential, gain additional hours of work experience with infants and toddlers, and complete an increasing number of hours of college or university coursework and training related to the competencies.



Key organizations and their roles

The [Professional Development Advisory Council](#) (PDAC), in partnership with the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS), developed the competency framework and the Gateways Infant Toddler Credential. PDAC consists of higher education faculty, state agency representatives, and early care and education practitioners, including owners and

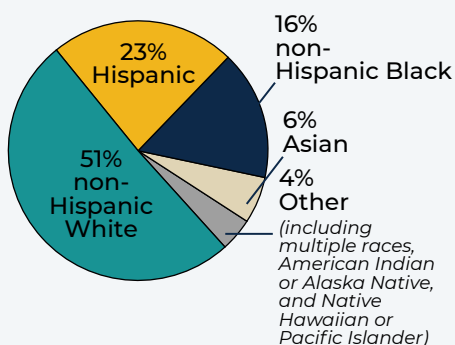
What is the ITTCC Study?

The [Infant and Toddler Teacher and Caregiver Competencies \(ITTCC\) Study](#) included in-depth case studies of five states that have developed and implemented competency frameworks focused on infant and toddler teachers and caregivers. This profile draws from data that the study team gathered and analyzed in fall 2021 through winter 2022, based on documents and telephone interviews with staff from state agencies, organizations, and institutions of higher education, to learn about their experiences designing and implementing the competency frameworks.¹ The five states included in the ITTCC Study each use different terms to refer to teachers and/or caregivers working across early care and education settings in their state (e.g., early educator, early learning professional, practitioners, etc.). Throughout this profile, we generally use Illinois' preferred terminology. The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families funded Mathematica to conduct the ITTCC study.

directors of centers and family child care programs, teachers, and caregivers. The [Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies](#) (INCCRRA), in cooperation with IDHS, administers the Gateways Infant Toddler Credential as part of the [Gateways to Opportunity](#)® Illinois Professional Development System (henceforth referred to as the Gateways PD System). IDHS and the McCormick Foundation fund the Gateways PD System.

About Illinois

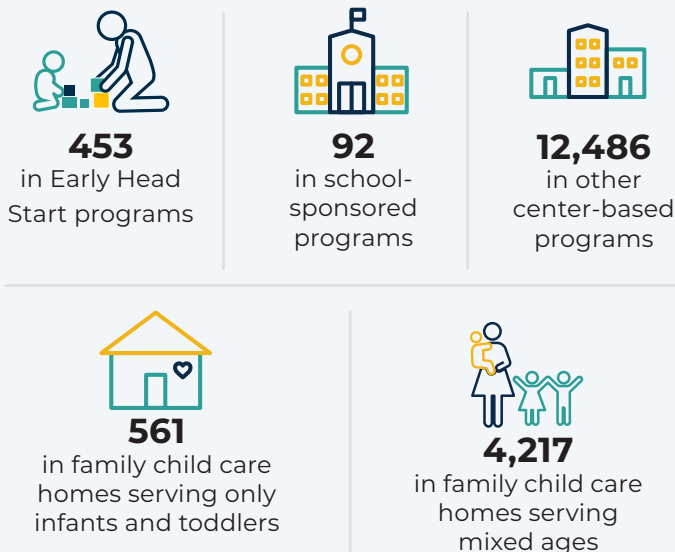
Infant and toddler population²



About 38 percent of the state's infant and toddler population live in households with incomes less than twice the federal poverty line.

Number of infant and toddler lead teachers and caregivers³

In Illinois, there are an estimated 17,809 lead teachers and caregivers of infants and toddlers working in the following settings:



Qualifications of infant and toddler teachers and caregivers

Infant and toddler teachers and caregivers in Illinois must meet requirements for qualifications as laid out in state licensing regulations and/or Head Start Program Performance Standards.

Illinois State Licensing Qualification Requirements

State licensing regulations require that a staff member responsible for a group of infants, toddlers or preschool children must meet *one* of the following requirements (there are no separate requirements for lead teachers):

- / Have 60 semester credit hours from an accredited college or university, including 6 semester credit hours in courses directly related to child care or child development (from birth to age six)
- / Have one year (1560 clock hours) of child development experience in a nursery school, kindergarten, or licensed day care center and 30 semester credit hours from an accredited college or university, including 6 semester credit hours in courses directly related to child care or child development (from birth to age six)

- / Hold a Child Development Associate® (CDA) credential or a Certified Childcare Professional credential.⁴

State licensing regulations require that family child care providers have (1) a high school diploma, equivalent certificate, or a degree from a regionally accredited institution of higher education or vocational institution and (2) proof of completing a basic training course on providing care to children with disabilities of at least six clock hours.⁵

Office of Head Start Qualification Requirements

In accordance with §1302.91 of the [Head Start Program Performance Standards](#), Early Head Start teachers must have at least a CDA credential, or the state equivalent, and training or coursework in early childhood development with a focus on infant and toddler development. Early Head Start family child care providers must have previous early care and education experience and at least be enrolled in a Family Child Care credential or degree program before they are hired, and they must acquire the credential within 18 months of beginning to provide services.⁶

INCCRRA works in partnership with 16 local child care resource and referral agencies throughout the state of Illinois to connect early care and education professionals with trainings on the competencies. The state's institutions of higher education are also key partners. College or university coursework is required to achieve a Level 2 Gateways Infant Toddler Credential or higher.

The competency frameworks for the Gateways ECE and Infant Toddler Credentials are integrated into standards for [ExceleRate Illinois](#), the statewide quality rating and improvement system (QRIS), which is also administered by INCCRRA.



How was the competency framework developed?

In 2008, PDAC members determined that, in addition to the existing ECE content available through the Gateways ECE Credential, infant-toddler practitioners needed specialized content related to infants and toddlers. However, Illinois lacked sufficient college and university coursework related to infants and toddlers. Thus, PDAC proposed the Gateways Infant Toddler Credential to encourage institutions of

higher education to offer more infant and toddler coursework. PDAC developed this new credential with IDHS approval and funding. The Gateways Infant Toddler Credential is modeled on the Gateways ECE Credential; each credential includes distinct sets of age-specific competencies that are grouped into the same seven domains indicated above.

Until 2017, the Gateways ECE and Infant Toddler Credentials were both based on a benchmark and points system. In this system, infant-toddler practitioners earned points toward a credential by completing college or university coursework in core knowledge areas. A course's credit hours determined the number of points earned for that course; those points were then distributed to different core knowledge areas based on the course content. For example, an infant-toddler practitioner would earn 3 points for a 3-credit hour course, and Gateways PD System staff would then determine how to allocate those points across the different core knowledge areas. Infant-toddler practitioners and course faculty all found this points system challenging. For example, it would be difficult for a practitioner who needed one-and-a-half points in the observation and assessment

Key definitions

The ITTCC study defines competency, competency framework, competency domain, and proficiency levels in the following way:

Competency: A piece of knowledge (K), a skill (S), or an attribute (A) essential to the practice of teaching and caring for infants and toddlers

/ **Knowledge** is information that may be applied to practice.

/ **Skills** are strategies or abilities that may be applied to practice.

/ **Attributes** are attitudes, beliefs, or other characteristics that may influence the application of knowledge and skills to practice.

Competency framework: A compilation of competencies intended to convey the range of knowledge, skills, and attributes essential to a particular area of practice, job, or profession.

Competency domain: Competency frameworks often group competencies (that is, KSAs) by domain. That is, individual KSAs focused on a similar topic may be clustered within a framework by competency domain. Examples of a competency domains include "support for language and literacy," "support for social-emotional development," "health and safety," "working with families," or "arts and creativity."

Proficiency levels: Some competency frameworks identify competencies (that is, KSAs) that are essential for practice at various career stages (for example, entry, mid-career, advanced).

core knowledge area to determine which college or university course to take for the necessary points. In addition, faculty from institutions of higher education told Gateways PD System staff that the points system made articulation of coursework challenging because the benchmarks for receiving points were not distinctly measurable.

The current Gateways Infant Toddler Credential framework was established in 2017. The Gateways PD System used grant funding from the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge to revise the previous framework, which contained hundreds of benchmarks and descriptors, into the current framework, which consists of 54 competencies and specifies both skills and knowledge areas. By converting benchmarks to measurable competencies, the new system aims to clarify the pathway to credential attainment for infant-toddler practitioners. The revisions are also intended to help integrate the competencies into coursework and trainings.



What education and training on the competencies is available?

Currently, the most direct route for infant-toddler practitioners to attain higher levels of the Gateways Infant Toddler Credential is through college or university coursework. However, credential-approved trainings are becoming increasingly available as an alternative to some of the college coursework. At all Gateways Infant Toddler Credential levels, some requirements can be met through approved training from professional development organizations.

Training and technical assistance

Infant-toddler practitioners can access trainings on the required competencies for the Gateways Infant Toddler Credential through the Gateways PD System. Throughout the state, child care resource and referral agencies connect infant-toddler practitioners with these trainings. Trainings on competencies are offered both in person and through virtual, self-paced modes. INCCRRA must review and approve trainings for them to count

toward a credential. The Gateways PD System also offers online trainings through its [i-learning website](#), which includes free trainings. Some trainings offered through this site align with the Gateways Infant Toddler Credential competencies and can be used to meet credential requirements.

Higher education

Many Illinois institutions of higher education actively use the competency frameworks for the Gateways ECE and Infant Toddler Credentials to design programs of study for practitioners working with preschool children, infants, and toddlers. Institutions of higher education that align their coursework and programs with these competency frameworks can apply to become entitled institutions, which means their courses have been approved to count toward the credential. The Entitled Review Group, a committee of faculty from entitled institutions, reviews applications to ensure that courses meet Gateways PD System standards. Entitled institutions of higher education may develop their own curricula, assignments, and assessments, but they must use the Gateways credential rubric to assess competency attainment. As of early 2022, nearly all (98 percent) of the state's institutions of higher education—44 two-year and 32 four-year institutions—have aligned their early childhood and child development coursework with the Gateways ECE Credential competencies; the state's remaining institutions of higher education have applied to become entitled. Some of the entitled institutions offering the Gateways ECE Credential have also aligned their coursework with the Gateways Infant Toddler Credential competencies. Coursework related to the infant and toddler competencies is offered at 33 two-year and 10 four-year programs in the state.



How is the competency framework integrated into the state's early childhood system?

Licensing decisions and requirements

Currently, early care and education professionals in Illinois are not required to hold the Gateways ECE or Infant Toddler Credential to become a

licensed child care provider or work in a licensed child care facility. However, INCCRRA is working to incorporate the Gateways ECE and Infant Toddler Credentials frameworks into the state's licensing standards. A Level 1 Gateways Illinois Director Credential can currently be used to meet state licensing requirements for directors.

In addition to the standard training needed for licensing, practitioners who work in programs that serve children who qualify for child care subsidies are required to complete six hours of health and safety training. An early care and education professional with a Gateways ECE or Infant Toddler Credential automatically meets the supplemental training requirements for programs that serve children who qualify for subsidies.

Workforce development initiatives

Credential

The competency framework is embedded in the Gateways Infant Toddler Credential. To earn a Gateways Infant Toddler Credential, infant-toddler practitioners must also earn a Gateways ECE Credential. The Gateways ECE Credential can be attained either before or concurrently with the Gateways Infant Toddler Credential. The Gateways Infant Toddler Credential has six levels; the first level is Level 2, which requires at least a Level 2 Gateways ECE Credential plus the demonstration of specific infant and toddler competencies (through completion of coursework or training and assessments) and documented work experience.⁷ Each level of the Gateways Infant Toddler Credential requires the equivalent level of the Gateways ECE Credential, except for Level 6 which requires a graduate-level degree and a Gateways ECE Credential of Level 5 or higher.⁸ The credential levels map to general employment roles in an infant and toddler setting as outlined below.

- / Level 2 = assistant teacher
- / Level 3 = entry-level teacher
- / Level 4 = teacher
- / Level 5 = lead teacher
- / Level 6 = master teacher

Career lattice

Gateways offers seven credentials for professionals serving children and youth and their families. One credential is designed for professionals working directly with families of children and youth; the other six credentials are for practitioners working directly with children. Two credentials—the Gateways ECE Credential and the School-Age and Youth Credential—serve as foundational credentials for four specialized credentials related to (1) infant and toddler care, (2) family child care, (3) administration, and (4) technical assistance. The levels within each credential serve as a career lattice for early care and education professionals working toward those credentials. In addition, the [Gateways to Opportunity Career Lattice](#) ties together the six credentials for practitioners working directly with children. This lattice defines the pathway educators can take to progress through the core Gateways ECE or School-Age and Youth Credentials levels and branch off to specialty credentials.

QRIS standards and ratings

For a program to receive a higher rating in the Illinois QRIS, [ExceleRate Illinois](#), a certain percentage of their staff must hold certain levels of the Gateways Infant Toddler Credential. For example, for a center or family child care program to achieve the highest rating, at least 40 percent of its teaching staff in infant and toddler classrooms must be at the Gateways Infant Toddler Credential Level 3.⁹



How do programs use the competency framework?

According to study participants, owners and directors at some centers and family child care programs use the Gateways Infant Toddler Credential to inform their hiring, compensation, and promotions practices. Infant-toddler practitioners in these programs may receive promotions or increased compensation after earning the credential. Some job postings advertise a pay differential for an infant-toddler practitioner with a Gateways Infant Toddler Credential at a specific level. For example, a program director may look for an infant-toddler practitioner with a Level 5 Gateways Infant Toddler Credential or,

alternatively, hire an infant-toddler practitioner with a Level 4 credential with the expectation that that individual will advance to Level 5 within one year. However, some owners and directors are hesitant to include or require a credential because of concerns that not enough infant-toddler practitioners will meet the criterion.

As indicated above, to earn a higher QRIS rating, a certain percentage of staff at child care and early education centers (including Head Start programs) must have high levels of the Gateways Infant Toddler Credential. Thus, the requirement that infant-toddler practitioners have a credential or are expected to earn a credential may be driven by centers' interest in achieving a high rating in the state's QRIS.

In some parts of the state, study participants expected a more concerted effort to hire staff with the Gateways Infant Toddler Credential in the near future. For example, the city of Chicago requires all infant-toddler practitioners working in programs with city grant funding to obtain the credential by 2025. To meet that deadline, the city is partnering with higher education institutions, the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development, and INCCRRA to ensure that systems are in place to support this credential attainment.



How are teachers' and caregivers' competencies, as articulated in the framework, assessed?

All higher education coursework and training that infant-toddler practitioners take to fulfill requirements for the Gateways Infant Toddler Credential must include an assessment; this assessment determines whether the practitioners have integrated the knowledge and skills gained through the required coursework and trainings into their daily practice. Entitled institutions and approved trainers can create their own content and assessments. However, to demonstrate the competencies toward the Gateways Infant Toddler Credential, all assessments for relevant courses and

trainings must be based on the assessment rubrics the Gateways PD System developed, which are available in the [Gateways Infant Toddler Credential \(ITC\) Competency Toolbox](#).

The ITC Toolbox also provides a wide range of assessments—including writing assignments, interviews, and observations—that can be used to evaluate each of the competencies. Training entities may submit a training to INCCRRA for consideration; to count toward a credential, these trainings must comprehensively cover a competency and include an assessment component. During the entitled review process for institutions of higher education, the review team examines the assessment tool (generally an assignment) that the institution proposes for assessing a competency or set of competencies. For example, the review team will look at the rigor of the assignments used to assess the competencies and the number of competencies being assessed per course.



How is use of the competency framework monitored?

Every five years, PDAC conducts a survey of early care and education professionals, trainers, and faculty about the competencies and credentials offered in Illinois. The survey sample group includes individuals both with and without any of the Gateways credentials. For credential holders, the survey provides an opportunity to tell PDAC whether they are using the credential and, if so, how they are using it. For those without a credential, the survey allows them to communicate what would help them attain a credential. PDAC reviews the survey findings and uses them to generate recommendations for IDHS. IDHS makes the final decisions on any proposed revisions to the credentialing process. PDAC may initiate the review earlier if new research becomes available.

For its part, INCCRRA collects data through the Gateways PD System registry on the number of early care and education professionals that have achieved a credential; it shares this data with its federal partners and other interested parties in

the state to inform potential policies and supports. For example, INCCRRA shares workforce data with IDHS to help determine which higher education supports and scholarships are needed to help early care and education professionals achieve the next credential level. INCCRRA also uses registry data to identify and contact early care and education professionals who might qualify for a credential.



What are the key lessons learned related to the implementation of competency frameworks?

According to study participants, the following factors motivated teachers and caregivers to use the framework:

- / **Integration of the credentials into the ExceleRate Illinois QRIS.** After the credentials were embedded in the QRIS requirements, the Gateways PD System reported an increase in the percentage of staff that began applying for and earning credentials.
- / **Availability of the ITC Toolbox.** The toolbox includes sample assessments and the required rubrics for assessment, which helps to ensure availability of trainings and higher education coursework by supporting training providers and higher education institutions.
- / **Financial assistance for the credentialing process.** Study participants noted that infant-toddler practitioners need time and money to take college and university courses that would advance their knowledge and skills, and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated financial challenges for many of the state's infant-toddler practitioners. To help offset the cost of college and university coursework, staff from the Gateways PD System direct infant-toddler practitioners to existing scholarships. In addition, since June 2020, Gateways has used Preschool Development Grant B-5 funding to waive the \$65 credential application fee. Credential applications (across all credentials) increased 300 percent in the first few months after instituting this application fee waiver.



What are the state's plans for the competency framework?

In 2020, INCCRRA launched a statewide modularization project with funding from the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development. A faculty consortium is creating virtual, competency-based education curriculum modules for each competency.¹⁰ This project is designed to increase early care and education professionals' access to the college-level education and training they need to obtain a credential. In addition, the modularized approach will promote efficiency and flexibility. For example, instead of taking a semester-long course that might duplicate previously completed trainings, an early care and education professionals can demonstrate a competency by successfully completing one module, or a series of shorter modules, specific to that competency. In 2021, the Gateways PD System piloted the virtual competency-based education modules for the Gateways ECE Credential. In early 2022, all virtual modules for the Gateways ECE Credential were made available to all higher education institutions throughout the state. Development of the Gateways Infant Toddler Credential competency-based education modules is currently underway. The pilot for this credential is planned for 2022, with the rollout of the modularized Gateways Infant Toddler Credential competencies anticipated for 2023.

Study participants hope that the Gateways Infant Toddler Credential competencies will continue to provide a common language for the knowledge, skills, and attributes that infant-toddler practitioners of infants and toddlers need. At the program level, study participants say they would like the competency language to be used as a guide for developing job descriptions and performance appraisals. At the systems level, they would like the Gateways Infant Toddler Credential and its associated competency framework to be incorporated into licensing requirements.

In Illinois, the goal is that all institutions of higher education become entitled institutions, thereby providing early care and education professionals with more flexible access to the education and training they need to obtain a Gateways Infant Toddler Credential.

Endnotes

¹ In Illinois, the study team spoke with the senior director, the senior director of data and research, and the director of learning and development at INCCRRA; the deputy commissioner for Chicago's Children Services Division; the program coordinator for the early childhood department at Heartland Community College (Normal, IL); the manager of infant studies certificate programs at the Erikson Institute (Chicago); the associate dean at National Louis University (Chicago); and the manager of the program development and quality improvement team in the Bureau of Quality Initiatives at the Illinois Department of Human Services.

² ZERO TO THREE. "State of Babies Yearbook 2022." Available at <https://stateofbabies.org/states/>. Accessed June 10, 2022.

³ Authors' calculations. Data come from Child Trends' Early Childhood Workforce Qualifications Calculator (<https://www.childtrends.org/publications/early-childhood-workforce-qualifications-calculator>). Data were collected from (1) the number of teachers serving infant and toddler children in the 2012 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) and (2) state proportional data for numbers of childcare workers, teacher assistants, and preschool teachers in data from the U.S. Department of Labor. These estimates are only for lead teachers. Early Head Start programs may include Migrant and Seasonal Head Start. School-sponsored centers are those that are funded by a public school district and/or are under administrative oversight and are subject to reporting requirements for a public school district.

⁴ Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. "Licensing Standards for Day Care Centers." October 16, 2020. Available at https://www2.illinois.gov/dcfs/aboutus/notices/Documents/rules_407.pdf. Accessed June 21, 2022.

⁵ Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. "Licensing Standards for Day Care Homes." October 25, 2020. Available at https://www2.illinois.gov/dcfs/aboutus/notices/Documents/Rules_406.pdf. Accessed July 6, 2022.

⁶ Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center. "1302.91 Staff Qualifications and Competency Requirements." n.d. Available at <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-91-staff-qualifications-competency-requirements>. Accessed June 10, 2022.

⁷ The Gateways Infant Toddler credential does not have a Level 1. A Level 1 Gateways ECE Credential requires 48 clock hours of training. The Level 2 Gateways ECE Credential requirements cover the same competencies (plus additional competencies) but also require college coursework. An early care and education professional cannot earn a Level 2 credential through trainings alone. An early care and education professional may earn a Level 2 Gateways ECE Credential without having earned a Level 1 credential. At Levels 3 through 6, an early care and education professional must meet all previous level competencies plus additional competencies.

⁸ Unlike the other credential levels, the Level 6 Gateways Infant Toddler Credential does not require the Level 6 Gateways ECE Credential because the Level 6 Gateways ECE Credential does not have its own set of competencies. Instead early care and education professionals must complete a self-study. The Level 6 Gateways Infant Toddler Credential requires completion of college coursework covering the final set of infant toddler competencies.

⁹ ExceleRate Illinois. "ExceleRate Illinois Quality Standards Overview for Child Care Centers." January 2022. Available at: <https://www.exceleRateillinoisproviders.com/docman/resources/13-overview-of-charts/file>. Accessed May 17, 2022.

¹⁰ Gateways to Opportunity. "Infant Toddler Credential Competency Project." 2022. Available at: <https://www2.illinois.gov/sites/OECD/Documents/Gateways%20to%20Opportunity%20Infant%20Toddler%20Credential%20Competency%20Pilot%20%281%29.pdf>. Accessed May 17, 2022.

Submitted to:

Kathleen Dwyer and Jenessa Malin, Project Officers
Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation
Administration for Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Contract Number:

HHSP233201500035I/HHSP23337021T

Submitted by:

Pia Caronongan, Project Director
Mathematica
1100 1st Street, NE, 12th Floor
Washington, DC 20002-4221

Suggested citation: Niland, K., C. Jones, A. Mraz Esposito, and P. Caronongan (2022). Competency Frameworks for Infant and Toddler Teachers and Caregivers in Illinois. OPRE Report #2022-321, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

This report and other reports sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation are available at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre>.

Connect with OPRE

