

## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS ADVOCATE FOR EDUCATOR VOICE IN REGIONAL SYSTEMS

Teacher's voice is essential for effective and realistic decision-making in all educational settings including early childhood education (ECE). Early childhood educators are the experts when it comes to our students; we understand the children, their abilities, needs, and preferences. When teacher voice is encouraged, student achievement increases, more educators feel safe voicing their opinions, and the teacher turnover rate decreases, which creates a positive and stable environment for everyone in the system.<sup>1</sup>

Birth to Five Illinois is an initiative through the State of Illinois and the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies to help create a statewide regional infrastructure with input from communities.<sup>2</sup> Birth to Five is forming 39 statewide Birth to Five Action Councils to address early childhood needs within each of the communities. Although parent and provider input has been sought in decision making, educator voice is often left out. The Birth to Five Action Councils bring new opportunities for teachers to be part of the decision-making process. The Birth to Five Action Councils will include parents and families, service providers, educators and advocates who will be tasked with identifying services needs in each region. In this collection of essays, Illinois early childhood educators and Teach Plus Illinois Early Childhood Educator Policy Fellows share stories of the importance of teacher voice when it comes to decision making and the progress of their students.

*"Miss Susan, where's my dollhouse?" Aliyah exclaimed, on the verge of tears. Aliyah has cerebral palsy which makes playing with some toys very challenging and so her dollhouse was open, easily accessible, and lightweight, with easy to move and place furniture. We were using this dollhouse, a safe space for her to share her emotions, in play therapy to work through Aliyah's trauma from physical abuse. Over the weekend, a well meaning administrator at my school had surprised us by spending funds on a nice dollhouse for every classroom. The new dollhouse was huge, heavy, and unwieldy. "Aliyah, I am trying to find it. This new dollhouse might be fun. Would you like to try it?", I asked. "Miss Susan, please find my doll house!" Aliyah tearfully pleaded. We never did find the dollhouse that Aliyah loved and could play with so well. Heartbreakingly, it set her learning and her therapy progress back."* **Susan, early childhood special education teacher, large suburban school district**

*Molly, a 2 year old in my preschool classroom, had a morning just like any other. However, as we sang the song "Jump up and down" to transition to centers, Molly began to jump up and down on another student's turn. We reminded Molly that it was not her turn and she immediately ran across the classroom. Despite teacher intervention, she picked up a chair and tossed it over the shelf, striking a classmate. I followed the company protocols by checking on the student, evaluating the impact area, and informing the director to notify the family of the*

*incident. I followed up with the center director, and asked to document this incident in Molly's file as well. I waited for an official form, but there was no follow up. Later that week I was informed that the director had spoken with Molly's parents and decided that going forward, if Molly had any incidents, she would be picked up for the day. Each day for the next 7 days, we followed the plan and Molly went home early. Each time, our class was disrupted, and Molly missed out on learning opportunities.*

*This plan was not beneficial for anyone and unfortunately at the end of the week, Molly was disenrolled from the program. We missed the opportunity to truly do the work of an early childhood educator providing support and resources for the families we serve. If I had been in the meeting with our center director and Molly's parents, I would have provided vital information about what happens before and after Molly throws, hits, or scratches in the classroom. Together, we would have been able to create a care plan with realistic and feasible accommodations for the classroom resulting in improved behavior from her. Utilizing my voice in this decision would have created a classroom where all students were safe and where Molly would have experienced more learning opportunities.* **LaDoris, former 2 year old teacher, corporate childcare facility, urban**

*Due to staffing shortages and decline in enrollment, my school closed in January 2022. Prior to the closure, the school administrative team met and decided to combine students varying in ages and developmental abilities from two classrooms into one classroom, despite objections from myself and other teachers. Combining the classrooms was one solution to the problem, however, it came with setbacks for the students. I set up the new classroom and made sure it was welcoming for all the students with family photographs in each of the cubby areas. After winter break, as the students arrived at school, emotions were mixed as some students were excited to be back, while others were confused, asking about their former teachers and classmates. My co-teacher and I did the best we could to create a learning environment to meet the needs of all the students. Still, it became challenging to provide well designed activities for toddler and preschool age students. When it comes to cognitive as well as social and emotional development, the needs and expectations of the students are vastly different from one age group to another. Children thrive on consistency and the combination of the classroom became problematic for both the students and teachers. Vocalizing our concerns did not seem relevant to the director for what the students needed to thrive in this type of classroom setting.* **Mona, former Assistant Director/Early Childhood Teacher, private early childhood school, suburban**

*Gracie, a four-year-old preschooler, was struggling in my classroom. I met frequently with my school's therapists and special education staff to see how we could work together to make sure Gracie was successful in preschool. A year later, she was still running out of my room and throwing things when she was overwhelmed. She refused to join our large and small group*

*activities and preferred to do something else in the classroom. My principal said to me, “Tell me your gut feeling, what do you think is going on with her?” He had seen and appreciated how I had advocated for Gracie. I told him that I thought she needed more adult support to help her learn and use calming techniques before she became overwhelmed. This wasn’t the first time my principal had asked my opinion about my classroom, my students, and the early childhood field. And it has made me feel valued and respected as a professional.*

*Gracie is still in my preschool class. She now has a behavior plan and a one-on-one aide who helps her use calming techniques instead of running out of the classroom, throwing toys, and refusing activities. Gracie regularly joins in large and small group activities, and she has made and maintained friendships with her peers. While she still has the need for continued adult support, she is now having many successful preschool experiences in my classroom. All because an administrator listened, really listened, to a teacher.*

*Teachers feel validated and appreciated when administrators encourage us to share our opinion about the issues in our school and in our field. When my principal asks for my opinion, it reminds me how much I have yet to contribute and gives me the motivation I need to continue to give my best at the job that I love. This confidence has given me the boost I needed to become a union representative and the social committee treasurer for my building and a member of a scholarship committee for my district for graduating seniors.* **Stacie, Preschool for All teacher, medium sized rural school district**

### **One way you can make your voice heard as an educator:**

The State of Illinois has partnered with the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) to launch 39 Birth to Five Action Councils across the state. These Councils will help to ensure that all children from birth to five receive a high-quality, equitable education. This is the perfect time to ensure teachers’ voices are part of the decision-making process by filling out your interest form today!

## **ENDNOTES**

1. National Network of State Teachers of the Year, “Engaged: Educators and the Policy Process.” 2015. Retrieved January 6, 2021 from <http://www.nnstoy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Engaged-FINAL.pdf>
2. About. Birth to Five Illinois. (n.d.). Retrieved July 13, 2022, from <https://www.birthtofiveil.com/about>



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