

POLICY PRIORITY: HIGH-QUALITY EARLY LEARNING

Accessible Family- and Center-based Care & Learning



Budget

- **Increase state funding by \$115M in FY 2026 for the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) to expand Smart Start Child Care**, including the Smart Start Workforce Compensation Grants (\$110M) and the Early Childhood Apprenticeship Program (\$5M)
- **Increase state funding by \$75M in FY 2026 for the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to expand the Early Childhood Block Grant**, with at least 25% of new funding set aside for Prevention Initiative, including center-based early care and learning programs
- **Increase state funding by \$55M in FY 2026 for IDHS to accommodate the growing subsidy caseloads of the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)**, as well as raise rates by 6% for home-based providers and 3% for center-based programs



Legislation

- Collect data on **early childhood workforce benefits use** with the long-term goal of expanding CCAP eligibility to improve educator recruitment and retention
- Improve state agency efficiencies, communication, enrollment procedures and **other child care licensing functions**



Administration and Implementation

- Ensure the **Smart Start Workforce Grants, Smart Start Quality Support Program and other resources are responsive to provider concerns from both home- and center-based programs** and prioritize expanding the supply and quality of infant-toddler care and learning
- Continue incorporating provider recommendations into the **FY 2026 Early Childhood Block Grant Request for Proposals**, such as a process for converting lost preschool slots into infant-toddler slots, planning grants and ramp-up supports for new grantees and subgrantees, including Family Child Care providers
- Award more **Early Childhood Construction Grants** to community-based organizations and provide flexibility for programs to use funds to make quality improvements, not just expand capacity



Public Awareness, Engagement and Mobilization

- Educate state lawmakers and the public on the **need for more qualified infant-toddler educators in communities statewide** to increase the supply and quality of infant-toddler care and learning

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Optimized Early Intervention Services



Budget

- **Increase state funding by \$60M in FY 2026 for the Illinois Department of Human Services' Early Intervention (EI) program** to substantially raise rates for providers and more effectively serve families



Administration and Implementation

- Identify and establish **funding and payment structures that better support the full cost of providing EI services** by leveraging findings from the recently completed cost model
- Increase the **number of children and families accessing EI services**, with a focus on children under age one and children who meet automatic eligibility criteria, by:
 - Implementing statewide improvements for the **timely connection of neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) families** to EI services
 - Continuing implementation of **automatic EI eligibility for children with substantiated cases of abuse and neglect**, as authorized by HB 4242 (Pub. Act 102-926)
 - Strengthening the **knowledge and understanding of automatic eligibility criteria among primary referral sources** by supporting professionals and systems that refer children who automatically qualify for services, including in-home nurses
- Reduce service delays by **modifying and expanding models of service delivery**, with a focus on addressing disparities in race and geography, as well as for families with complex needs



Public Awareness, Engagement and Mobilization

- Mobilize families, providers and other stakeholders to advocate for **increased state investment in EI** through lawmaker outreach, petitions, media coverage and other activities
- Improve **public awareness of families' procedural rights** regarding EI services and support parents in **filing state complaints** after a violation of EI timelines

