

Child Care for Child Care Educators

The Challenge

For many Early Childhood Education (ECE) professionals, the cost of child care can be the difference between staying in the field or leaving the field to take care of their own child. Finding and retaining qualified early childhood staff was the #1 challenge for child care centers and homes during the pandemic (INCCRRA, 2022) and today, child care jobs are still the slowest to recover compared to other sectors. From 2019 to 2021, the turnover rate for early childhood center-based teachers in Illinois increased by 7.4%, with wages and benefits being the top reason for departure. Illinois has taken steps to address the chronic low wages by introducing the Smart Start Workforce Compensation Grants, but the field continues to face additional challenges, such as paying for child care. Like all families in Illinois with young children, ECE professionals need child care in order to work. But many do not have the financial resources to pay for the full cost of child care while continuing to work, or are priced out of being eligible for the child care assistance program (CCAP), which subsidizes child care for eligible families.

Our Ask:

Reduce child care costs for early childhood professionals by expanding CCAP income eligibility for early childhood teachers and assistant teachers/aides to 300% of the Federal Poverty Level. Under current DHS rules, by qualifying for CCAP through this expansion, early childhood professionals can qualify for a \$1 copayment.

Advocate for continued funding to support the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE)

The Challenge

The Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) was created to support the working adults in the early childhood workforce in achieving higher credentials and build a robust workforce pipeline. Evidence shows that a well-prepared ECE field yields high-quality programs for young children and their families. ECACE provides scholarships and supports such as navigators and mentors to remove barriers to credential and degree completion. In addition, the consortium helps the incumbent workforce and provides educational pathways to upskill and retain the ECE workforce by increasing access to a variety of affordable coursework, and to ensure high-quality, seamless pathways for students. Nearly 4,000 students representing 95% of Illinois counties have benefited from the scholarship since awards began in March 2022 through December 2023.

This past year, ECACE awarded \$29.8 million in scholarships that were distributed to 3,405 students with an average award amount of \$8,752 per student. Federal funding supporting ECACE is set to expire in June of 2024. Without additional state-level investments, ECACE will not be able to support new students or help keep students currently enrolled through ECACE scholarships to finish their degree programs.

Our Ask:

Appropriate at least \$60 million of state general revenue funds to support ECACE in FY 2025. This will support scholarships and additional support like mentors and coaches located in higher education institutions.

Create a Unified Early Childhood State Agency

The Challenge

For far too long the existing early care and education system has been complicated, cumbersome, and at times inefficient. Families with young children are essentially left to navigate this incoherent system on their own. There is no single source of information about ECEC options, and families must navigate the current disjointed system on their own without full transparency or a cohesive support structure. The lack of unification and accountability mechanisms limits a parent's ability to know where quality options exist, what options are available to help them afford child care, and what level of quality available services provide. This also means that it's difficult for many ECE providers to adequately provide high-quality service because they have to work with multiple state agencies to get their licensing and requirements approved, get funding for child care subsidy, and know the staffing qualifications to properly staff their programs. To better serve young children and their families in Illinois, the state needs to create a single state agency for the early care and education system.

Our Ask:

Pass newly introduced legislation (SB1/HB5451) that would create the Department of Early Childhood and support a multi-year plan that will strategically transition all early childhood programs and funding services to the new department.

Eliminate documentation barriers for new arrival families enrolling in early education programs.

The Challenge

For the past two years, Texas has bused migrants to Chicago at regular intervals. As of November 2023, there were 1,766 children under the age of five living in city shelters where only 33% of these children were connected to an early care and education program. With any crisis, systems in place to coordinate social services are complex and require increased resources and capacity to meet the growing demand. These families come with little to no resources and are often expected to quickly secure permanent housing, stable employment, and access critical health services. There are several areas of need identified to support new arrival families as it relates to access and enrollment of early childhood services, with the main issue being addressing barriers in state licensing and documentation requirements for children to enroll into early childhood programs.

Our Ask:

Create a list of DCFS approved alternative documentations that can be substituted for new arrival families to access and enroll in early childhood programs. In addition, support sufficient state investment to support new arrivals.

Reduce barriers to Illinois Early Childhood Educators Licensure

The Challenge

Student teaching is critical in recruiting highly qualified teachers for all levels of the education system, from early childhood education to high school. However, the lack of pay for many preservice teachers (PST) for their student teaching experiences creates a barrier to entering or advancing in the profession. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) states that student teachers may be paid, yet many programs prevent PSTs from being paid. In addition, many incumbent educators are restricted from completing their student teaching in their place of employment, which means that they will have to choose between earning a salary or forfeiting income to hopefully advance in their field. This on-going issue will only exacerbate the teacher shortage Illinois is facing at all levels of the education system.

Our Ask:

Prohibit programs from preventing student teachers, especially incumbent educators, from getting paid. Create a statewide stipend or grant initiative, through existing systems, that would help make student teaching a paid experience.