

# ACTION TOOLKIT FOR SMART START WORKFORCE GRANTS (SSWG)

Legislative Advocacy  
FY26



## SMART START WORKFORCE GRANTS TESTIMONY

Early childhood advocates are asking the Illinois General Assembly to support a **\$90M increase for Smart Start Workforce Grants budget for FY26**. As proposed by Governor Pritzker in his budget address, this increase will replace expired federal COVID relief funding, maintaining the current operational budget of \$200 million (\$50 million/quarter).

The Smart Start Workforce Grants (SSWG) aim to support recruitment and retention of child care workers, expanding access and improving quality. These grants promote stability and are essential for covering ongoing operational costs and raising wages for child care teachers and assistant teachers. They invest in the workforce and allow providers the flexibility to improve staff wages while continuing to deliver high-quality education and care. Grant recipients are required to use the grants to raise wages for child care teachers and assistant teachers by at least \$2-\$3 per hour, creating a wage floor of \$17-19 per hour depending on position type and geographic region.

In addition, providers receiving SSWG have a higher average enrollment of children receiving support through Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) enhancing access to families who need it most.

Join us in letting legislators know why an investment in this program is crucial for the early childhood workforce and families and children that they serve.

You can share your testimony on the importance of the **Smart Start Workforce Grants** by using talking points and sample testimony on the following pages to help craft your story.

Please share your story by submitting your testimony that will be shared during appropriations hearings via this form:

Go to this [LINK](#) and fill out the Smart Start testimony collection form.

Please be sure to complete the consent section for sharing your story on websites and social media.

On the [Take Action](#) page, find links to [send a letter to your legislator](#) or post to social media and spread the word.

**For Questions, please email: Neoma Nagahawatte at: [neoma.nagahawatte@actforchildren.org](mailto:neoma.nagahawatte@actforchildren.org)**

## SMART START WORKFORCE GRANTS TALKING POINTS

Smart Start Workforce Grants (SSWG) support recruitment and retention of child care workers to expand access to and improve the quality of child care. The Smart Start Workforce Grants are essential in supporting providers with ongoing operation costs and raising wages for child care teachers and assistant teachers.

**Budget Ask:** The We, the Village (WTV) coalition supports the Governor's proposed \$90M increase for the Smart Start Workforce Grants. *This increase will cover expired federal COVID relief funding, bringing the program to its current operational budget of \$200 million (\$50 million/quarter).*

**IDHS is halfway through the program's first year of administration and the program has been successful in achieving the following goals:**

### **Smart Start Workforce Grants Have Increased Wages for Child Care Teachers and Assistant Teachers**

Grant recipients are required to use the grants to raise wages for child care teachers and assistant teachers by at least \$2-\$3 per hour, creating a wage floor of \$17-19 per hour depending on position type and geographic region. This helps child care providers better compete with other industries in the following ways:

- Provides equitable access to high-quality early childhood education and care relies on a well-qualified, well-compensated, and stable workforce.
- Provides wages for child care teachers and assistant teachers hover around minimum wage and are far below their counterparts in elementary and middle school.
- The Illinois' early childhood system continues to face extreme workforce shortages with providers struggling to hire and retain educators.
- Smart Start Workforce Grants support wage enhancements for this critical population.

### **Stabilize the Early Childhood Education and Care Industry**

- Funding must be as stable and predictable as possible, available to all child care providers who are determined eligible.
- Grants should reach a majority of the market to impact market dynamics.
- The state's current funding mechanisms do not allow for sustainability and stability which creates an environment of uncertainty. The Child Care Assistance voucher does not encourage investment in compensation or continuous quality improvement.
- The Smart Start Workforce Grants promote stability. The grant is a non-competitive grant, meaning all eligible programs will receive money, provided sufficient funds are invested to ensure all programs who apply can be awarded. This is why full funding is critical.

- The Smart Start Workforce Grants invest in the workforce and allow providers the flexibility to improve staff wages while continuing to deliver high-quality education and care

### **Expand the Availability of Child Care, Especially for Children Enrolled in the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)**

- Prioritize funding for providers that participate in (CCAP).
- Children and families receiving CCAP are a part of the state's identified priority populations, therefore the Smart Start Workforce Grants should prioritize providers who serve these children and families. Providers receiving Smart Start Workforce Grants have a higher average enrollment of children receiving CCAP.

### **SSWG Program Success in Round 1 and Round 2**

- **In Round 1 of SSWG, 3,604 programs were authorized for Smart Start Workforce Grants funding, with a total of \$44.37 million.**
  - Nearly 14,000 ECE educators are now earning \$17-\$19/hr or more.
  - Over 105,000 children have teachers earning \$17-\$19/hr or more.
- **In Round 2 of SSWG, the number of program recipients has grown to 3,880 programs with a total of \$47.74 million.**
  - Over 18,000 ECE educators are now earning \$17-\$19/hr or more.
  - Over 110,000 children have teachers receiving support for higher wages.
- **The majority of eligible programs have been authorized for Smart Start Workforce Grants in Round 2 of SSWG:**
  - 92% of eligible centers were authorized for funding.
  - 77% of eligible homes and eligible group homes were authorized for funding.

## SAMPLE TESTIMONY

*Sample Testimony Example:* [Click here for sample story.](#)

1. **Opening** - Introduce yourself, your community, and write why you are providing testimony on SSWG. State your clear recommendation of prioritize an increase in funding by \$90 million for FY26
2. **Body Copy** - Make your case for why you are recommending legislators prioritize an increase in funding of \$90 million for SSWG in its FY26 budget. This area can be broken into two parts:
  - **Your Story.** Share your story. Include how this decision impacts providers, teachers and family community.
  - **Additional Facts and Data.** We have [provided suggested talking points](#) in the previous section that you can use to craft your testimony.
3. **Closing** - Conclude your testimony with a call to action.
  - **Example:** I appreciate the opportunity to share my story and urge you to support \$90 million in Smart Start Workforce Grant funding for FY26.

## TAKE ACTION

### Send a Letter

[Click here for a letter to send to your legislators](#). In three easy steps, send a letter to your lawmakers urging them to support the proposed increase of \$90M for Smart Start Workforce Grants.

### Social Media

[Click here for posts](#) you can share on your personal or organizational social media channels. We also have a folder with [social media graphics here](#) to go along with your posts

**Visit:** <https://www.righttocareil.com/>

**Follow us:** @wethevillageil on X (formally twitter), Facebook and Instagram to stay up-to-date.

❖ **Tag the following legislators in your social media posts. Legislator contact information can be found [HERE](#)**

- The following names may not be found on all three platforms—X, Facebook, or Instagram—but may appear on a mix of them or not at all.

❖ Illinois House

- Rep. Kam Buckner - Speaker, Pro-Tempore and Co-Budgeteer
- Rep. Will Guzzardi - Assistant Majority Leader and Co-Budgeteer
- Rep. Eva-Dina Delgado - Assistant Majority Leader and Co-Budgeteer

❖ Illinois Senate

- Sen. Mattie Hunter - Assistant Majority Leader
- Sen. David Koehler - Assistant Majority Leader
- Sen. Linda Holmes - Assistant Majority Leader
- Sen. Laura M. Murphy - Assistant Majority Leader
- Sen. Napoleon Harris III - Assistant Majority Leader
- Sen. Omar Aquino, Majority Caucus Chair, Assistant Majority Leader
- Sen. Elgie R. Sims Jr., Majority Caucus Appropriations Leader, Assistant Majority Leader

### Share

Share our toolkit with other parents, educators, providers, and community members. We are stronger in numbers, and funding for the Smart Start Workforce Grants is critical to maintaining these wage increases and stabilizing the child care sector.