

SMART START WORKFORCE GRANTS



WHAT ARE SMART START WORKFORCE GRANTS?

In February 2023, Governor JB Pritzker announced his plans for Smart Start Illinois, a multi-year plan to provide every child with access to preschool, to increase funding for child care providers to raise wages and classroom quality, and to reach more vulnerable families with early support. Smart Start Illinois is a big next step in making Illinois the best place to raise children with a clear and ongoing commitment to children, families, teachers, and child care providers.

Through Smart Start Illinois, the state is poised to invest in Smart Start Workforce Grants that will help programs raise wages for personnel. The proposed Smart Start Workforce Grants program was informed by robust engagement of those working in and utilizing the system. View the [Community Engagement Report \(Spanish\)](#) to learn more about the community engagement effort.

Smart Start Workforce Grants, are available for programs:

- licensed as a child care center, family child care, or family group child care.
- licensed and caring for children by the first of the month prior to the opening of applications. For example, if the application opens on April 1, 2026, programs must be licensed, open, and caring for children by March 1, 2026.
- that operate as a full-day, full-year program offering eight consecutive hours of care per day, five days per week, 47 weeks per year.
- For centers - at least 15% of the program's current licensed capacity (at time of application) enrolled and funded by CCAP in any month in the year prior to submitting an application (e.g., any one month between January 2025 –date of application).
- For Family Child Care - care for at least 1 child and for Family Group Child Care 2 children enrolled and funded by CCAP in any month in the year prior to submitting an application (e.g., any one month between January 2025 – the date of application).
- other eligibility requirements may apply

Eligible programs are required to:

- spend grant funds on staff wages only.
- pay teachers and assistants in grant funded classrooms at least the required wage floor.
- complete and upload quarterly payroll and wage documentation with reporting to show proof that the wage floor was met for teaching staff in grant funded classrooms.
- other requirements may apply.

HOW TO APPLY:

Eligibility decisions for any new program applying for a Smart Start Workforce Grant were determined based on funding availability. Use the checklist below to ensure you have all the required documentation ready to go.

All applicants will need to sign a Smart Start Workforce Grant Attestation confirming the information they provide is true and accurate, that they meet all required eligibility requirements, and they agree to meet the terms and conditions of the grant agreement. A submitted funding request is required to be eligible for grant funds each round as well.

As part of our commitment to ensuring all applicants are fully prepared, we will continue to require an orientation for the FY27 grant cycle. The orientation will have two versions, one for centers and one for family child care, both available in English and Spanish, and can be taken in two ways:

- In-person or Virtual (Live): Through your CCR&R (Child Care Resource & Referral) local expert, available starting in March 2025. Contact your [Local Expert \(1.04 MB\)](#) for scheduled dates.
- Virtually (Self-paced Online): Through i-learning
Licensed Center (English and Spanish) Licensed and Family Child Care & Family Group Child Care (English and Spanish)

The individual who logs into the Director Portal to complete the application must be the same person who completes the orientation. You must complete the orientation specific to your program type (Center or Family Child Care).

New this year: You will not be able to access the application until your orientation is complete.

- If completing the online version, please allow up to 24 hours after completion before accessing the application.

Smart Start Workforce Grants FY27 are subject to state appropriation by the Illinois General Assembly.

The following items are required to complete a new Smart Start Workforce Grant application:

- [Access to the Gateways Registry Director Portal](#)
- [Unique Entity ID](#)
- [Completed W9](#)
- For centers, corporations, partnerships, and Limited Liability Companies (LLCs) – a current and valid Illinois Secretary of State [Certificate of Good Standing](#)
- For centers only – a site map, noting what rooms are used as classrooms
- Classroom rosters for all grant eligible classrooms – must include first initial, last initial, and age of child
- [Staff Listing - \(Spanish\)](#) must be up to date – verify all staff are listed and current
- Classrooms need to be entered to request funding for grant eligible classrooms for both [Centers \(Spanish\)](#) and [Family Child Care programs \(Spanish\)](#)
- [Smart Start Workforce Grant Round 2 Attestation - \(Spanish\)](#)
- Make sure all reporting for any previous grants is complete and accepted. This will include Child Care Restoration Grants, Child Care Workforce Bonus, Strengthen and Grow Child Care Grants, and Smart Start Transition Grants, and Smart Start Workforce Grants reporting.

Fiscal Year 2027 July 1, 2026 – June 30, 2027

Application Round	Application Period	Documentation Deadline/ Funding Request	Funding Released:	Funding Use Period:	Quarterly Reporting Deadline:
Round 1	April 1, 2026 - April 30, 2026	May 14, 2026	Two Payments June 2026 & July 2026	July 2026 - September 2026	October 31, 2026
Round 2	July 1, 2026 – July 31, 2026 NO NEW APPLICATIONS/RENEWALS ONLY	August 14, 2026	September 2026	October 2026 - December 2026	January 31, 2027
Round 3	October 1, 2026 – October 30, 2026	November 13, 2026	December 2026	January 2027 – March 2027	April 30, 2027
Round 4	January 4, 2027 – January 29, 2027	February 12, 2027	March 2027	April 2027 – June 2027	July 31, 2027

GRANT AWARD AMOUNT

Smart Start Workforce Grants will support center-based programs to increase wages for assistant teachers, teachers, and other program staff. Eligible programs will receive a grant award amount quarterly.

Center-based programs will be eligible for the following grant awards for each classroom:

Classroom type	Quarterly Award
Smart Start Workforce Grants Infant/Toddler	\$6,750
Smart Start Workforce Grants Ages 2-5	\$6,000

Smart Start Workforce Grants will support family child care providers to increase their wages and their assistants' wages. Family child care and family group child care will be eligible for a base award of \$2,250 quarterly and additional funding if they have an assistant, based on the number of hours assistant(s) work.

	Assistant Weekly Hours	Quarterly Grant Award
Smart Start Workforce Grants: Family Child Care and Family Group Child Care	0-20 hours/week 	\$2,250
	20-60 hours/week 	\$4,000
	60+ hours/week (only available for Family Group Child Care) 	\$5,750

CLASSROOM ELIGIBILITY

Smart Start Workforce Grants are designed to support staffing in centers and family child care. Award amounts support staffing assumptions that meet or exceed licensing regulations. For Smart Start Workforce Grants, a classroom must contain a minimum number of children, determined by the age of children. These minimums are not a ratio like those in child care licensing regulations, nor are they required to maintain an Illinois Child Care License. Rather, these are conditions of the Smart Start Workforce Grant program.

	Age Group	Classroom Enrollment Minimum
Center-Based Programs	Infants/toddler classrooms	4 children
	Two-year-old classrooms (and transitional 2-3 year old classrooms)	8 children
	3-5 year-old classrooms	12 children

	Age Group	Program Enrollment Minimum
Family Child Care/ Family Group Child Care	Mixed Age Group	4 children

Beginning in FY27, programs should plan to operate without limited waivers, which will help us better sustain an equitable Smart Start Workforce Grant Program. In FY27 Round 1 funding limited waivers were not approved. In FY27 Round 2, limited waivers will not be offered.

Some programs may not be able to meet the classroom minimums due to their structure or a temporary drop in enrollment. To provide flexibility in these cases, Smart Start Workforce Grants will offer waivers from the minimum enrollment.

Programs may apply for a limited waiver or an annual waiver for classrooms that do not meet enrollment minimums.

Limited waivers: Programs requesting a waiver from the classroom enrollment minimum requirement due to low enrollment, lack of staff, or other reasons may request a waiver.

- Center programs: Programs may be granted **one waiver** for the grant year.
- Family Child Care/ Family Group Child Care programs: Programs may be granted **one waiver** in a grant year.
- Programs granted a limited waiver will receive the same grant award amount per classroom.

Beginning in FY27, programs should plan to operate **without limited waivers** which will help us better sustain an equitable Smart Start Workforce Grant Program.

Annual waivers: Programs requesting a waiver from the classroom enrollment minimum requirement due to limited space and capacity may request an annual waiver. Requesting programs must provide their Illinois Child Care Licensing letter to demonstrate the licensed capacity for any classrooms requesting the annual waiver. If the Illinois Child Care Licensing letter is not available, a statement from Illinois Child Care Licensing confirming the licensed capacity for the relevant classroom(s) will suffice.

- Center classrooms with annual waivers will receive a reduced award amount. For FY27, the reduced amount is \$3,250 quarterly.
- Family Child Care/ Family Group Child Care programs with annual waivers are not eligible for assistant funding.
- The annual waiver option will be reviewed each fiscal year and programs will update the required documentation.

WAGE FLOOR - CENTER-BASED PROGRAM

Programs that participate in Smart Start Workforce Grants will be required to pay teachers and assistant teachers in grant-funded classrooms a wage floor. A wage floor is a minimum required wage but is different from the legally required minimum wage. For Smart Start Workforce Grants, the wage floor is a requirement that programs agree to when they accept the grant. The wage floor varies by region, type of program, and role.

Role	Region		
	Group 1A	Group 1B	Group 2
Wage floor for teachers	\$19.25 per hour	\$18.50 per hour	\$18.25 per hour
Wage floor for assistant teacher	\$18.00 per hour	\$17.25 per hour	\$17.00 per hour

Group 1A: Cook, DeKalb, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, and McHenry counties.

Group 1B: Boone, Champaign, Kankakee, Madison, McLean, Monroe, Ogle, Peoria, Rock Island, Sangamon, St. Clair, Tazewell, Whiteside, Will, Winnebago, and Woodford counties.

Group 2: All counties not listed in Group 1A or 1B

WAGE FLOOR - FAMILY CHILD CARE AND FAMILY GROUP CHILD CARE ASSISTANTS

For Family and Family Group Child Care, the provider/owner will have discretion in the use of funds. However, if the provider employs an assistant, they must meet the required wage floor and recommend dedicating at least a percentage of funds to the provider/owner's compensation.

Role	Region		
	Group 1A	Group 1B	Group 2
Wage floor for Family Child Care and Family Group Child Care Assistants	\$18.00 per hour	\$17.25 per hour*	\$17.00 per hour

Group 1A: Cook, DeKalb, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, and McHenry counties.

Group 1B: Boone, Champaign, Kankakee, Madison, McLean, Monroe, Ogle, Peoria, Rock Island, Sangamon, St. Clair, Tazewell, Whiteside, Will, Winnebago, and Woodford counties.

Group 2: All counties not listed in Group 1A or 1B

HAVE QUESTIONS?

The Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) will administer the Smart Start Workforce Grants. INCCRRA will provide technical assistance answering technical questions and helping with the application process through its website and via email. Refer to the Smart Start Workforce Grants FAQs for both [Centers](#) and [Family Child Care](#), to help answer your questions about Smart Start Workforce Grants. You can also email grants@inccrra.org with questions.

New to Smart Start Workforce Grants is local technical assistance through the local Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) System. This will provide local grant experts to provide technical assistance, and answer questions.

- [Smart Start Workforce Grants - Licensed Child Care Centers FAQ FY27](#)
- [Smart Start Workforce Grants - Licensed Family Child Care and Family Group Child Care FAQ FY27](#)

Smart Start Workforce Grants also offer local technical assistance through the Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) System. Local grant experts will provide technical assistance, and answer questions.

- [Smart Start Workforce Grants Local Expert Contact Map](#)

Tip sheets and additional resources can be found on the [Smart Start Workforce Grants website](#).