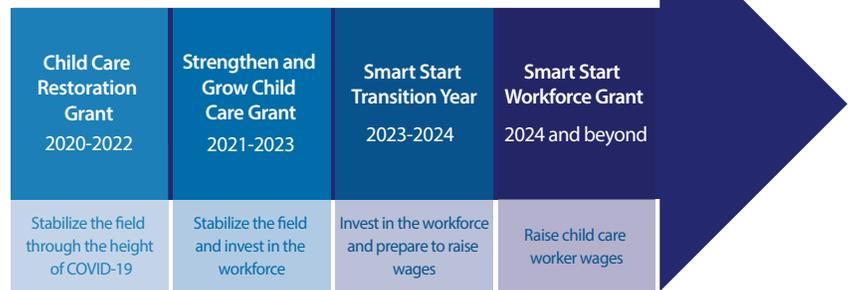# SMART START
WORKFORCE GRANTS

WHAT ARE SMART START WORKFORCE GRANTS?

Smart Start Workforce Grants offer child care programs stable, ongoing funds that they need to cover costs and invest in quality staff without burdening families by raising tuition or Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) co-pays. Eligible programs receive consistent funding in advance, and funds will cover the cost of higher wages and operating a classroom. Programs receiving these grants will be required to pay classroom staff a wage floor. These competitive wages will help to attract more staff and meet parents' needs at a rate that they can afford.

Smart Start Workforce Grants build on previous investments in the child care field in Illinois, including the Child Care Restoration Grants, Strengthen and Grow Child Care Grants, and Smart Start Transition Grants. Over the past three years, Illinois has transitioned from programs designed to stabilize the field during a pandemic to programs designed to support investments in the child care workforce. The next step -- Smart Start Workforce Grants – will directly raise provider wages across the field.

Federal relief funding investments have led Illinois to raising wages through Smart Start Workforce Grants

Child Care Restoration Grant 2020-2022	Strengthen and Grow Child Care Grant 2021-2023	Smart Start Transition Year 2023-2024	Smart Start Workforce Grant 2024 and beyond
Stabilize the field through the height of COVID-19	Stabilize the field and invest in the workforce	Invest in the workforce and prepare to raise wages	Raise child care worker wages

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, 2025, programs must be licensed, open, and caring for children by March 1, 2025.
- 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 2024 –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 2024 – 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 are introducing a required orientation for the FY26 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, available starting March 17, 2025.

As part of your grant application, you will list one grant contact for your program. The grant contact that you list is the individual that must take the required orientation.

Please ensure that you complete the orientation before applying for a Smart Start Workforce Grant. Orientation completion by the grant contact included on your application will be required and confirmed before processing your application. This will help ensure that all applicants are well-informed and ready to make the most of the opportunities available.

Smart Start Workforce Grants FY26 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 1 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 Round 1 reporting.

Smart Start Workforce Grants Spanish Flyer
Smart Start Workforce Grants Application Tip Sheet - (Spanish)

Fiscal Year 2026 July 1, 2025 – June 30, 2026

Application Round	Application Period	Documentation Deadline/ Funding Request	Funding Released:	Funding Use Period:	Quarterly Reporting Deadline:
Round 1	April 1, 2025 - April 29, 2025	May 14, 2025	Two Payments June 2025 & July 2025	July 2025 - September 2025	October 31, 2025
Round 2	July 1, 2025 – July 31, 2025	August 14, 2025	September 2025	October 2025 - December 2025	January 30, 2026
Round 3	October 1, 2025 – October 31, 2025	November 14, 2025	December 2025	January 2026 – March 2026	April 30, 2026
Round 4	January 2, 2026 – January 30, 2026	February 13, 2026	March 2026	April 2026 – June 2026	July 31, 2026

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 licensing with DCFS. 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

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: One waiver covers one classroom. Programs may be granted one waiver per classroom, with a maximum of three waivers in the first 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.

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 DCFS licensing letter to demonstrate the licensed capacity for any classrooms requesting the annual waiver. If the DCFS licensing letter is not available, a statement from DCFS confirming the licensed capacity for the relevant classroom(s) will suffice.

- Center classrooms with annual waivers will receive a reduced award amount. For FY25, 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 - (Spanish)
- Smart Start Workforce Grants - Licensed Family Child Care and Family Group Child Care FAQ - (Spanish)

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.

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