



Smart Start Child Care

Ad Hoc Advisory Committee Meeting #22

June 6, 2025

GOALS

- Share updates for Smart Start Quality Support in FY 26 and gather feedback about the insights coming out of the Family Child Care Quality Support Co-Design process.
- Provide an overview of Smart Start Apprenticeship
- Provide updates on Smart Start Workforce Grants awards for Round 1 of FY26 and gather feedback on SSWG evaluation processes and timelines
- Hear perspectives on the purpose and role of this advisory committee for FY 26.

AGENDA

- Welcome and introductions
- Smart Start Quality Support
 - Family Child Care Co-Design Update
 - FY 26 SSQS Implementation
- Smart Start Apprenticeship Overview
- Smart Start Workforce Grants
 - FY 26 Round 1 Award Highlights
 - Discussion
- Direction of the Ad hoc
 - Discussion
- Public comment

Public Comment Instructions

- We set aside dedicated time for public comment at the end of the meeting.
- If you would like to provide public comment, please send a private chat to Rosie Dorsey. We will take comments in the order Rosie receives the names.

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Build **understanding and alignment** on strategic intent and goals



Provide **input and feedback** throughout the design process



Review and pressure-test relevant cost analyses, potential policy options, and administrative options



Surface any **potential risks and opportunities**



Support overall plan development and to **champion it among stakeholder groups**



Common Themes

- If applicants exceed the available budget in future Smart Start Workforce Grant rounds, participants advised prioritizing current Smart Start Workforce Grantees to preserve trust and stability.
- Participants appreciate the efforts of INCCRRA and CCR&Rs to support providers to successfully access Smart Start Workforce Grants.
- Participants suggested new ways to communicate with providers and share resources, including:
 - Sharing snippets of timely information
 - Leveraging peer networks, trusted organizations, and social media

Questions and Concerns

- Participants asked for more information about the Smart Start Apprenticeship Program and clarifications on Smart Start Quality Support grantee budgets.
- Participants warned that any reduction in Smart Start Workforce Grants amounts could lead to layoffs and would erode trust.
- The group cautioned that a long-term freeze on new applicants could lead to resource inequities for those who are not yet receiving SSWG.
- Some concerns were raised about FCCs facing challenges with accounting systems, and tailored supports are needed for these groups, even if it is a small group.

The final FY 26 budget includes \$200 million in State General Revenue Funds for Smart Start Workforce Grants!



- Maintains the same total funding for SSWG from FY 25
- Represents a **\$90 million increase** coming from the State General Fund
- The budget also includes
 - **\$10 million** total for Smart Start Quality Support
 - **\$2 million** total for Smart Start Apprenticeships

Smart Start Quality Support



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The Smart Start Quality Support (SSQS) program was launched to help child care programs embed Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) systems into their organizational practices.

Through a combination of funding and strategic support, SSQS aims to build sustainable quality structures, leadership processes, and professional development opportunities for both administrators and teaching staff.

Key program components

- Paying staff members **increased wages** that **honor their credentials**
- Funding **additional staff to improve group sizes** and teacher: child ratios
- Offering activities to **support continuous quality improvement**, such as:
 - **Coaching and communities of practice** for directors
 - **Planning and reflection meetings** with classroom staff
 - **Professional development** opportunities for directors
- Funding **additional staff to free up directors' time** to participate in the activities above

FY 26 will be a year of continued engagement to strengthen and learn from the Smart Start Quality Support Program.

The funding for FY 26 (\$10 million) will not be enough to expand the program but does give IDHS an opportunity to:

- Spend more time **collaborating with family child care providers** to co-design a pilot SSQS for FCCs and FGCCs, and
- to **strengthen the existing program design for participating centers** by clarifying grantee expectations and statewide goals for continuous quality improvement (CQI).

These activities are responsive to feedback gathered over the last two years as IDHS planned for potential expansion of SSQS. This includes feedback from:

- Directors/administrators of the current SSQS participating programs,
- Staff working in the current participating SSQS programs,
- Various stakeholder groups who participated in focus groups in Summer 2024, and
- The Smart Start Child Care Ad Hoc Advisory Committee.

The Family Child Care Co-Design team is working to develop a prototype Quality Support program to pilot with FCC providers.

- 15 participants
 - 10 family child care
 - 2 family group child care
 - 3 non-provider representatives
- 2 Spanish-speaking participants
- Representation from SDA regions 1, 6, 7, 10, 13, 15, 16

Date	Who	Topic
May 5	Design Group	Our Vision of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Framing the design challenge
May 19	Design Group	“How Might We Improve Quality for FCCs?” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideation Brainstorm • Bundle Ideas • Prioritize
June 2	Design Group	Concept Design <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose 2-3 ideas to build out
June 6	Ad hoc	Update to Ad hoc Committee
June 9-20	Focus Groups	Prototyping the pilot ideas
June 30	Design Group	Concept Refinement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop our Theory of Change
July 14	Design Group	<i>Potential meeting</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Concept Refinement</i> • <i>Develop our Theory of Change</i>
July 28	Design Group	Revisions to recommendations based on focus group input

What we've accomplished so far

- Defined our vision of quality
- Brainstormed and bundled solutions
 - How might we...
- Prioritized potential solutions:
 - Which two ideas would have the biggest impact?
 - Which two ideas are the most feasible to implement?
 - Which two ideas are you most excited about?



Top 3 Provider-Prioritized Solutions to Explore Further

Community of practice

- Establish and support communities of practice for home-based providers to discuss specific topics and share resources with one another

Mentorship and coaching

- Establish a coaching or mentorship program to connect home-based providers with a trusted resource who can provide tailored support on topics of interest

Share templates and best practices

- Develop, share, and distribute templates, policies, forms, and other best practices specific to the operation of home-based care



Questions and reactions

1. What questions do you have?
2. What stands out to you about the ideas coming out of the Family Child Care Quality Support Co-design group?

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Starting in July, current Smart Start Quality Support grantees will have more defined opportunities and targets for quality improvement.

This fiscal year, we will focus on strengthening the existing program design for participating centers by:

- clarifying grantee expectations
- setting clear statewide goals for continuous quality improvement (CQI)

What we heard:

- Encourage programs to participate in validated classroom-level assessments
- Support programs to screen children for developmental needs and access supports
- Any additional/available program funds should be used to support programs; additional (CQI) staff support children and allow for training and collaboration for teachers

SSQS participants will continue to meet performance expectations

Expectations include:

- Participate in monthly coaching meetings with the SSQS coach
- Participate in monthly Community of Practice meetings, facilitated by the SSQS coach
- Participate in required trainings
- Hold at least 11 Plan-Do-Review meetings with classroom staff
- Gather input from staff through the Early Childhood Work Environment Survey (ECWES) and Administrator Role Perception Survey (ARPS)
- Develop a leadership development plan that includes data-driven goals

In FY26, programs will receive additional funding for efforts to improve their quality

Programs will receive an additional **\$5,000 per classroom** to meet the following expectations:

- Participate in Environmental Rating Scale (ERS) assessments for at least two classrooms
- Administer Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) assessments for children in their programs

Effort to administer the ASQ

- Training hours
 - prepare teachers/staff to administer the ASQ
 - prepare teachers/staff to understand referral process and procedures
- General planning/coordination time
- Per child time to:
 - administer the ASQ
 - score the ASQ, communicate with families, and make referrals to appropriate agencies

Effort to administer ERS

- Includes training, preparation for assessments and debriefs
- Includes biweekly observations by director and coaching meetings between director and teacher to address growth areas (can be used for substitute coverage and/or additional hours for teaching/admin staff)
- Assumes participation by both teachers and teaching assistants

Questions and Reactions – SSQS

1. What questions do you have?
2. What reactions or feedback do you have about the FY 26 SSQS updates or approach?

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Smart Start Apprenticeship



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Smart Start Apprenticeship evolved from the Illinois Early Childhood Apprenticeship Project (IECAP) Pilot.

- The Illinois Early Childhood Apprenticeship Project (IECAP) Pilot **began in 2023**
- **Partnership with University of Illinois Chicago**, College of Education
- Designed to **address a cycle of early care and education workforce** challenges:
 - Overall labor market shortage
 - Shortage of well-qualified individuals
 - Inadequate compensation
- **Builds on investments** in ECEC scholarships and innovative compensation approaches including:
 - ECACE, Gateways Scholarship Program, Chicago Early Learning Scholarships
 - Strengthen and Grow Child Care (SGCC) grants, Smart Start Quality Support salary scale
- Funded through state General Fund Revenue: **\$2 million in FY 26**

Smart Start Apprenticeship incorporate the five key components of registered apprenticeships.



Classroom-based instruction



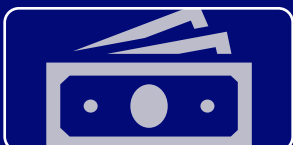
Employer involvement



Structured on-the-job learning



Industry recognized credentials, degrees and licenses



Financial rewards for credentials and degrees

Smart Start Child Care apprenticeships are a partnership between higher education, University of Illinois Chicago (the intermediary) and the child care programs.

IHE Partners

- City Colleges of Chicago
- Blackhawk College
- Heartland College
- National Louis University
- Western Illinois University
- University of Illinois Chicago

Intermediary

- University of Illinois Chicago

Child Care Programs

- Carole Robertson Center for Learning, Chicago
- Heartland Child Development Lab, Bloomington
- It Takes a Village, Chicago
- SAL Family Services, Milan, Moline, Rock Island

Institutions of Higher Education

- Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) provide coursework leading to Gateways to Opportunity Early Childhood Credentials and degrees

Apprenticeship Intermediary

- Workforce intermediary supports partnerships between IHEs and child care programs and provides support to site-based mentors, convenes advisory council, and serves as liaison to DOL

Child Care Programs

- IDHS/INCCRRA provides beneficiary agreements to participating child care programs to fund wage scale tied to credentials and degrees and conditions that support professional learning in the workplace

Child care program participants receive funding to implement a credential-based wage scale for all staff, support apprentice mentorship and encourage professional learning across the program.

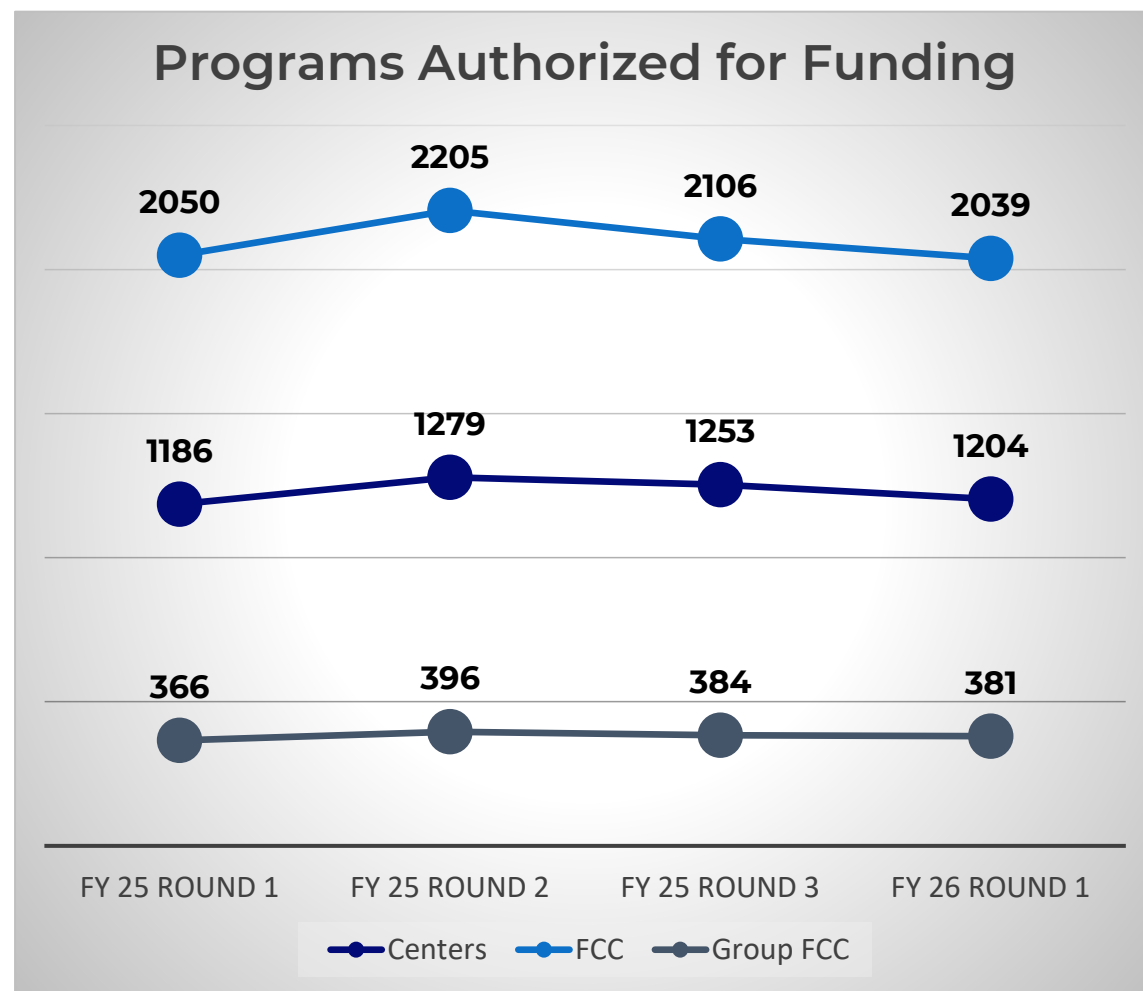
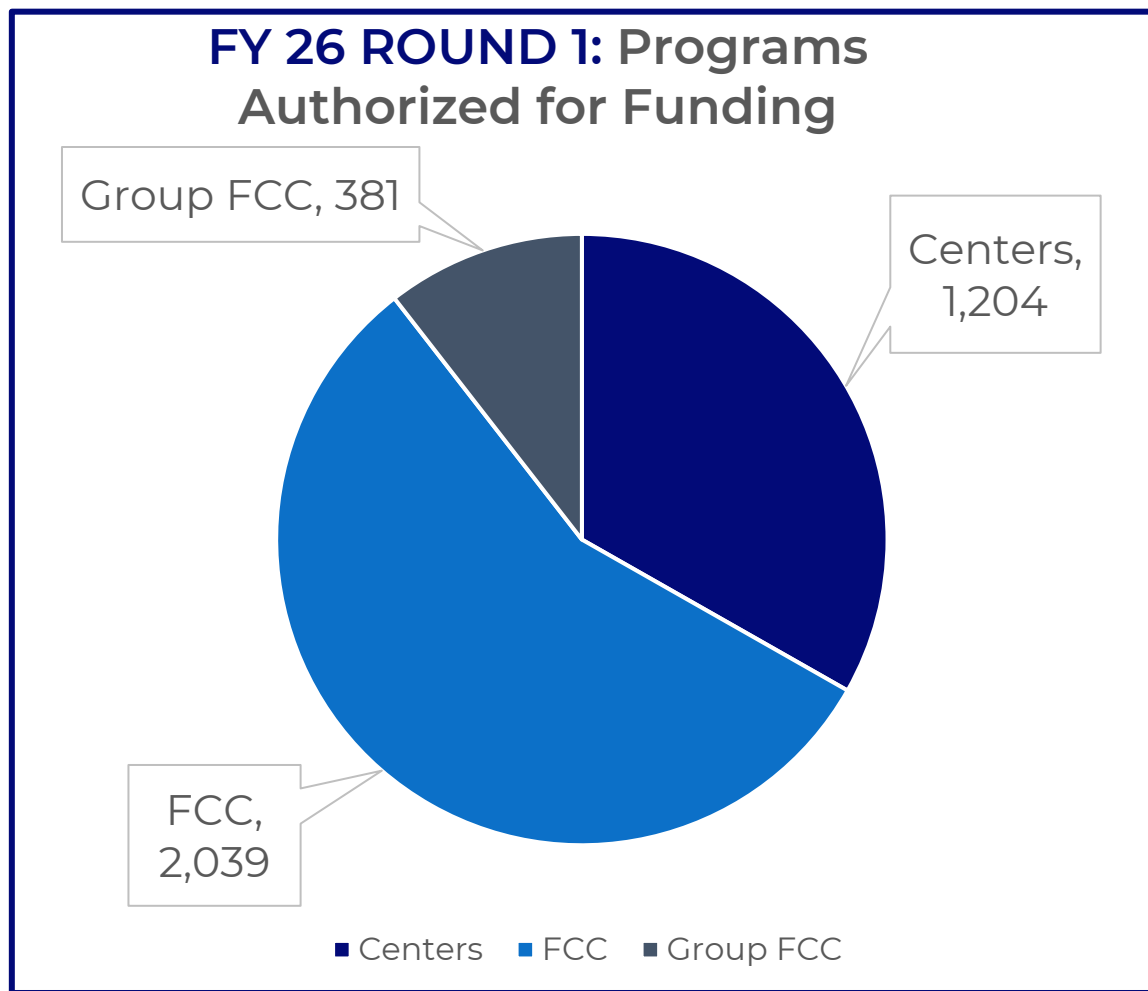
Child Care program requirements	Funds can be used for
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Promote workplace conditions that support professional learning• Sponsor at least two Apprentices• Sign on to customizable “Standards of Apprenticeship”• Identify mentor(s) to provide regular 1-on-1 mentoring to Apprentice, and support them to receive training• Support weekly mentor/Apprentice meetings• Implement wage growth steps aligned with worker competency development and the ECE Career Pathway for all program staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Enable implementation of wage scale based on credential and degree for ALL staff (not just apprentices)• Add/identify staff to serve as floater/substitutes• Supplies and supports for apprentices and mentors• Additional compensation for mentors

Smart Start Workforce Grants



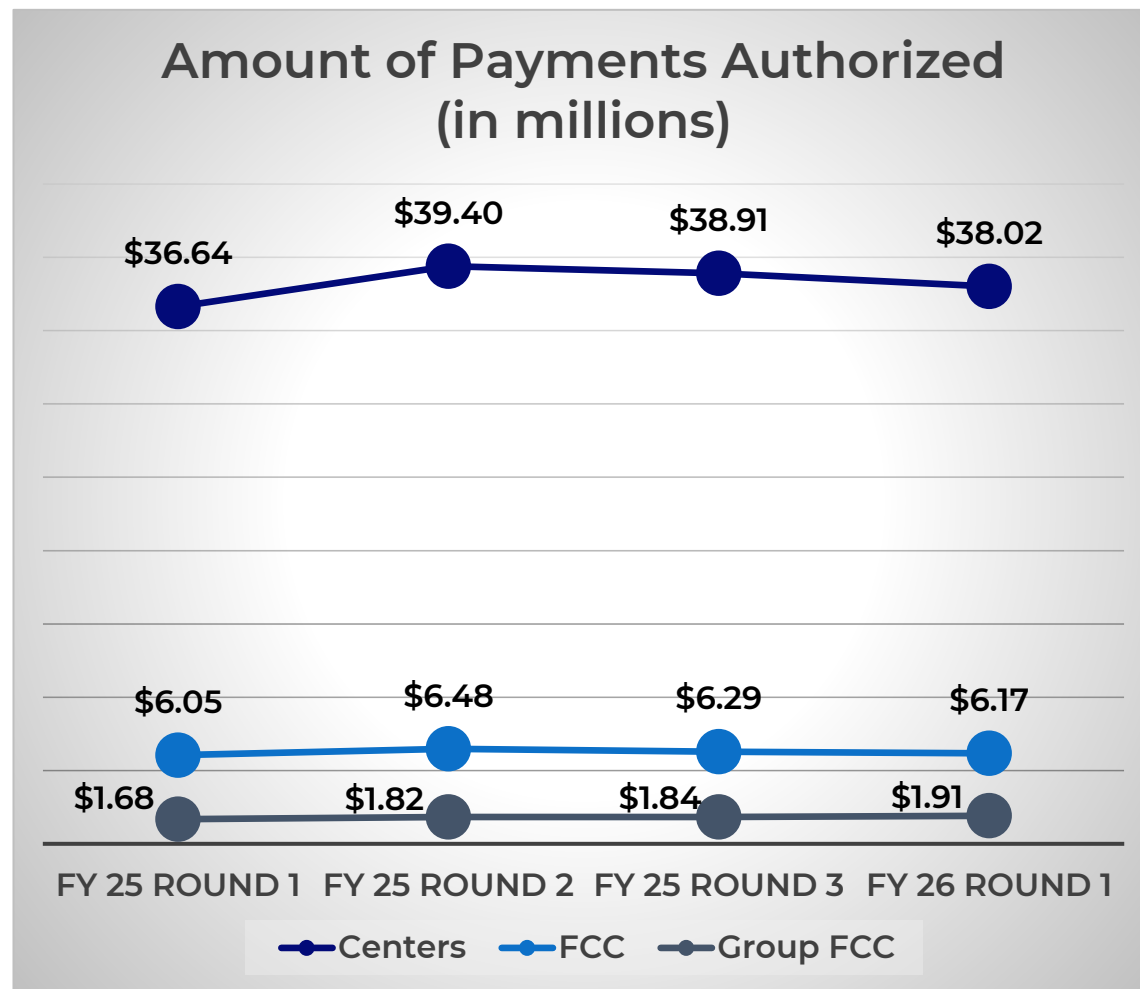
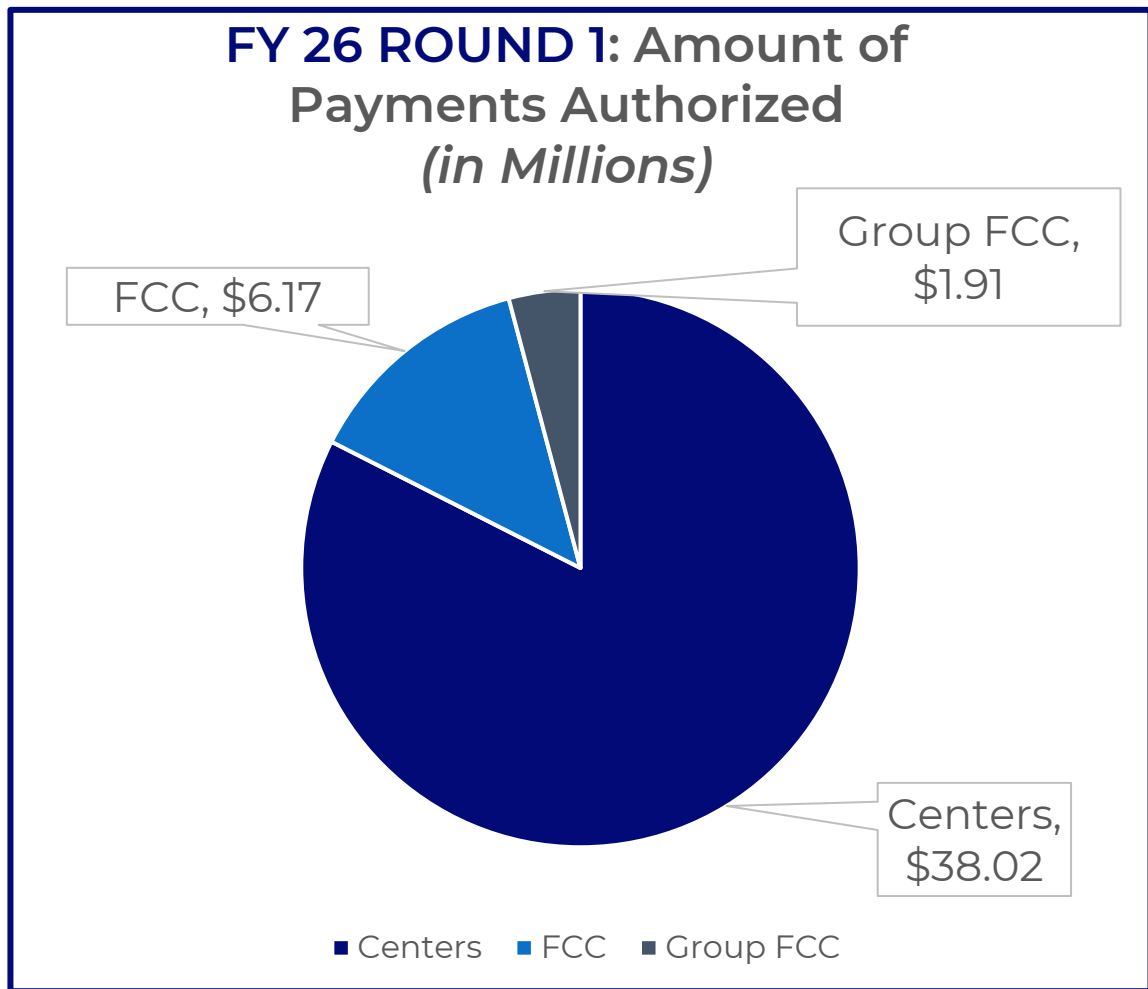
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3,624 programs have been awarded Smart Start Workforce Grants for FY 26 Round 1.



**Some appeals still pending as of May 30, 2025*

Spending for Smart Start Workforce Grants continues to be on target with budget projections, with \$46.1 million awarded* in FY 26 Round 1.



*Some appeals still pending as of May 30, 2025

The Smart Start Workforce Grants program has been able to maintain funding for existing grantees while also funding all eligible new applicants.

- Smart Start Workforce Grant applications from eligible providers have been on target, with **funding awards coming in just under the \$48 million expected quarterly award payment** total.
- To date, **all eligible programs -- including new applicants -- have been awarded funding** within the allocated budget
- In April, the Ad hoc advised **prioritizing renewals to ensure level funding for current grantees.**
- To honor this recommendation and remain within the allocated budget, **all applicants that are eligible receive notice that they are on a waitlist**, pending available funds.
- Once all applications are received, **programs are moved from the waitlist status to eligible** as funding allows, beginning with renewal applications.

Grantees received notice of funding awards for FY 26 Round 1 at the end of May with two notable updates for this Round.

Two check process - Round 1 only:

State Fiscal Year 2026 funds will not become available to disburse to INCCRRA until the new fiscal year begins in July 2026. To ensure programs receive funding quickly at the start of the fiscal year, grantees will receive two grant payments for Round 1 only:

- The first payment, covering about two weeks of funding, will be sent in June.
- The second payment, covering the rest of Round 1 funding, will be sent as soon as INCCRRA receives funding for the new fiscal year.

Direct deposit option

Starting in FY 26, grantees will have the option to receive funds via AHC/direct deposit, paper check, or virtual credit card.

As more data becomes available with each Smart Start Workforce Grants reporting period, we will begin to better understand the impact of these investments.

Anticipated timeline

- September 2025
 - Round 2 reporting analysis
- December 2025
 - FY 25 Round 3//Year 1 reporting analysis
- March 2026
 - FY 26 Round 1 reporting analysis
- FY 27 (exact timing TBD)
 - Mid-term impact analysis (i.e. broader wages and child care market impact)

“This money has **allowed our center to hire and maintain qualified staff**. Since we were able to offer them a higher entry level pay, we have had more applicants for vacant positions and current teachers have chosen to stay. **We were also able to add a part time position** which was very much needed.

Teachers have shared that this additional money has **allowed them to pay their living expenses** and has **allowed them to stay in a career that that they love** and compensates them.”

- Center in East Peoria

Full group discussion

1. Do you have any reflections or questions about the FY 26 Round 1 funding and award updates?
2. When it comes to the Smart Start Workforce Grants reflections and learning, what aspects of implementation and impact are you most interested in learning about and discussing with the Ad hoc?

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Smart Start Child Care Ad Hoc Advisory Committee Direction



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The Smart Start Child Care Ad Hoc Advisory Committee purpose is to provide input and feedback on implementation and planning for Smart Start Child Care programs.

Committee Purpose

Provide input and feedback throughout IDHS's implementation of Smart Start Workforce Grants and planning for Quality Supports Contracts.

- ✓ Build understanding and alignment on strategic intent and goals
- ✓ Provide input and feedback throughout implementation of SSWG, including applications, reporting, and training and technical assistance
- ✓ Provide input and feedback throughout the Quality Supports design process including: reviewing and pressure-testing relevant cost analyses, potential policy options, and administrative options
- ✓ Surface risks and opportunities
- ✓ Support overall plan development and champion it among stakeholder groups.

In FY 25, the Ad Hoc discussed and advised on the implementation of Smart Start Workforce Grants and the design of Smart Start Quality Support program.

Smart Start Workforce Grant Topics

- Round-by-round application, funding award, and participation info
- Mid-year implementation pulse check covering program reach, serving priority populations, and raising wages
- Training and technical assistance overview
- FY 26 Budget prioritization discussion

Smart Start Quality Support Topics

- Analysis of SSQS focus group findings
- Discussion of parameters and accountability for potential future expansion
- Goals and guiding principles
- Weighing tradeoffs
- FY 26 SSQS implementation updates and additional engagement

Smart Start Child Care Ad Hoc Committee By the Numbers

- 6 meetings in FY 25
- 122 Padlet comments
- 25 Survey responses
- Avg. of 33 participants (17 members and 16 general public) per meeting

Ad hoc members provided input and feedback throughout the implementation of SSWG that informed evaluation approach, communication mechanics, and budget prioritization.

FY 23-24: IDHS sought input from the Ad Hoc to develop SSWG guiding principles

FY 24: IDHS Sought input from the Ad Hoc on priorities for eligibility to ensure broad access within the allocated budget

FY 25: Grant awards near full capacity based on allocated funding

FY 25: Ad hoc participants advise that if applicants exceed available funds, current grantees should be prioritized

FY 26: If needed, IDHS will prioritize current grantees for funding in future rounds

Other examples include:

- Training and technical assistance planning, implementation and refinement
- Learning year approach and questions to consider for learning and evaluation

Meeting the Ad hoc purpose: Smart Start Quality Support

Ad hoc members provided input and feedback throughout the Quality Support design process, leading to updates for FY 26 and informing the need for additional engagement.

IDHS sought input from the Ad Hoc on goals and guiding principles for Smart Start Quality Support

Participants would like to make decisions grounded in data and equity

Participants wonder if child care providers are ready to engage in a quality support program



IDHS conducts focus groups with providers and brings findings to the Ad Hoc to make meaning.

Participants recommend strengthening measures of success for SSQS, including strategies to evaluate the child care environment, leadership and culture, family engagement and child growth.

Participants recommend additional engagement with Family Child Care providers to understand unique context.



IDHS incorporates recommendations into implementation and planning for FY 26.

Addition of the Quality Growth Incentive for current grantees for FY 26.

Family Child Care Quality Support Co-Design Team and focus groups launched in May 2025.

There is an ongoing role for the Ad Hoc to play in providing input and feedback on implementation and design of Smart Start Child Care programs.

Potential FY 26 Meeting Topics

- Smart Start Workforce Grants:
 - Year 1 reflection and learning
- Smart Start Quality Support:
 - FCC Pilot Design Workgroup
 - Program enhancements
- Smart Start Child Care
 - Priorities for future investment

Membership and participation

- Members can continue to “opt-in” or step back
- General public participation in meetings -- including discussions -- will continue

Proposed FY 26 Meeting dates

- Friday, Sept. 5, 2025, 11 AM – 1 PM
- Tuesday, Dec. 2, 2025, 6 PM – 8 PM
- Friday, March 6, 2026, 11 AM – 1 PM
- Tuesday, May 5, 2026, 6 PM – 8 PM

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Small group discussion

1. How have you felt about your own role as part of the ad hoc and supporting engagement with those who aren't at this table?
2. Which aspects of the ad hoc purpose do you think the ad hoc has met?
3. What additional discussions would be important to have in the coming year?
4. What feedback do you have about meeting times, frequency, and format?

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Public Comment

Next Smart Start Child Care Ad Hoc Advisory Committee Meeting

Friday, Sept. 5, 2025

11 AM – 1 PM

Open Survey for Feedback:

<https://forms.gle/3DPPyPUcPQiTgbwX9>



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Thank you!