



# Smart Start Child Care

Ad Hoc Advisory Committee Meeting #24

**January 27, 2026**

## GOALS

- Connect and build community with one another
- Gather your feedback and reflections through discussions

## AGENDA

- Welcome and introductions
- Illinois Department of Early Childhood Updates
- Smart Start Workforce Grants Updates
  - FY 26 round 3 award updates and discussion
  - Learning and evaluation: wage data
  - Discussion
- Smart Start Quality Supports Updates
  - Quality growth incentives
  - 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 Zach Allen. We will take comments in the order Zach 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

- Participants appreciated engaging family child care providers in a conversation about quality support needs.
- Participants suggested leveraging informal networks to connect family child care providers to state or other formal support systems.
- The impact of Smart Start Workforce Grants on wages in the field has been positive and participants would like to have more conversation and see disaggregated data on wage impact.
- Participants suggested additional opportunities to track impact on grantees and those not receiving Smart Start Workforce Grants.

## Questions and Concerns

- Participants would like to know more about providers who received Smart Start Transition Grants but have not transitioned to Workforce Grants.
- Participants asked for information about the impact of Workforce Grants, including whether CCAP participation has increased and if SSWG are a factor.
- Participants elevated a few areas of concern:
  - Need for CCAP rate increases to respond to inflation
  - Need for future increases for SSWG to keep up with the cost of living
  - Impacts to wages for teachers in classrooms (including school age) that are not funded for SSWG.



# IDEC Redesign Update

January 2026



# Early Education & Care Services will Move, Broader Family & School Support Will Remain at Home Agencies

## IL Dept. of Human Services

- Child Care
- Migrant & Seasonal Head Start
- Head Start Collaboration Office
- Early Intervention
- Home Visiting
  - State Home Visiting
  - MIECHV
  - Maternal Child Home Visiting

- Better Birth Outcomes
- Family Case Mgmt.
- High Risk Infant Follow Up
- Refugee & Immigrant
- Services
- SNAP
- WIC
- TANF

## IL State Board of Education

- Early Childhood Block Grant
- Preschool for All (PFA)
- Preschool for All Expansion
  - Prevention Initiative (PI)

- K-12 Evidence Based Funding
- Special Ed.
- Nutrition
- Title I CACFP / School Lunch
- KIDS Assessment

- Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)\*

## IL Dept. of Child & Family Services

- Child Care Licensing

- Child Protective Services
- Adoption & Guardianship
- Institution and Group Home Services
- Investigative Services

## GOECD

- Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH)

Program Moving

Program Staying

Key

\*Program not included in the initial legislative package. Additional discussions with USDOE and state stakeholders are needed to identify the best approach to support children and families moving forward.



# Overview | Early Childhood Services can be less burdensome, more efficient and equitable



Children and families experience difficulties with inputting the same info repeatedly, deciphering eligibility requirements, and accessing resources



Providers spend too much time on administration and experience challenges with sustaining multiple state funding streams



State cannot track funding for providers across multiple streams, deliver services equitably and efficiently, and view services a single child accesses or does not access

## North Star

Illinois is on a path to be the best state in the country to raise a family with young children

## Short-term goal

Ensure seamless transition of services for parents & providers

## Agency redesign priorities

- 1 Align programs and program standards toward kindergarten readiness
- 2 Bring data transparency to deliver equity and efficiency
- 3 Design 0-3 services to support families in the most critical years
- 4 Licensing & regulatory processes support the rich diversity of families and providers that serve them
- 5 Align funding streams at the state level, relieving complexity from local and shifting to the state

## Successful transition will involve three elements...

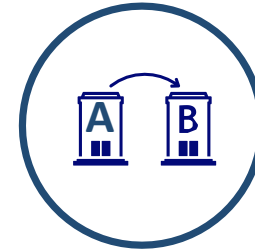
- > People
- > Process
- > Technology

## ...and each element is bucketed into one of three transition categories



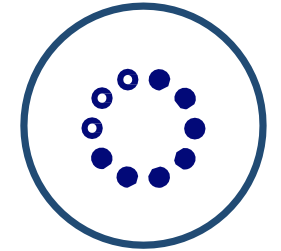
### Redesign, reform, and modernize

*Enhance outdated processes or systems to align to future needs, introducing new solutions where necessary for best-in-class results*



### Lift, shift, & integrate

*Seamlessly move existing processes, systems, & people into new environment to align with its vision & minimize disruption*



### Temporarily retain with transferring agencies

*Delay transition for selected functions, keeping them with the current agency until resources or dependencies are satisfied*



# Over 8,000 Touchpoints

**Bi-monthly  
Listening  
Sessions**

**CHIBYDESIGN  
Design Sessions**

**Transition Advisory  
Committee**

**Full Early  
Learning Council**

**Early Learning  
Council Committees**

**Child Care  
Advisory Council**

**Illinois Interagency  
Council on Early  
Intervention**

**ECACE Consortium  
Advisory Council**

**Workgroups**

**Other Regional or  
Program Specific  
Advisories**

**Listening Survey on  
IL ECE Governance  
Transition**

**Regional Listening  
Sessions**

**More to  
come!**

**We have been engaging in many ways, and there  
continue to be opportunities to engage.**

# Welcome New IDEC Staff!

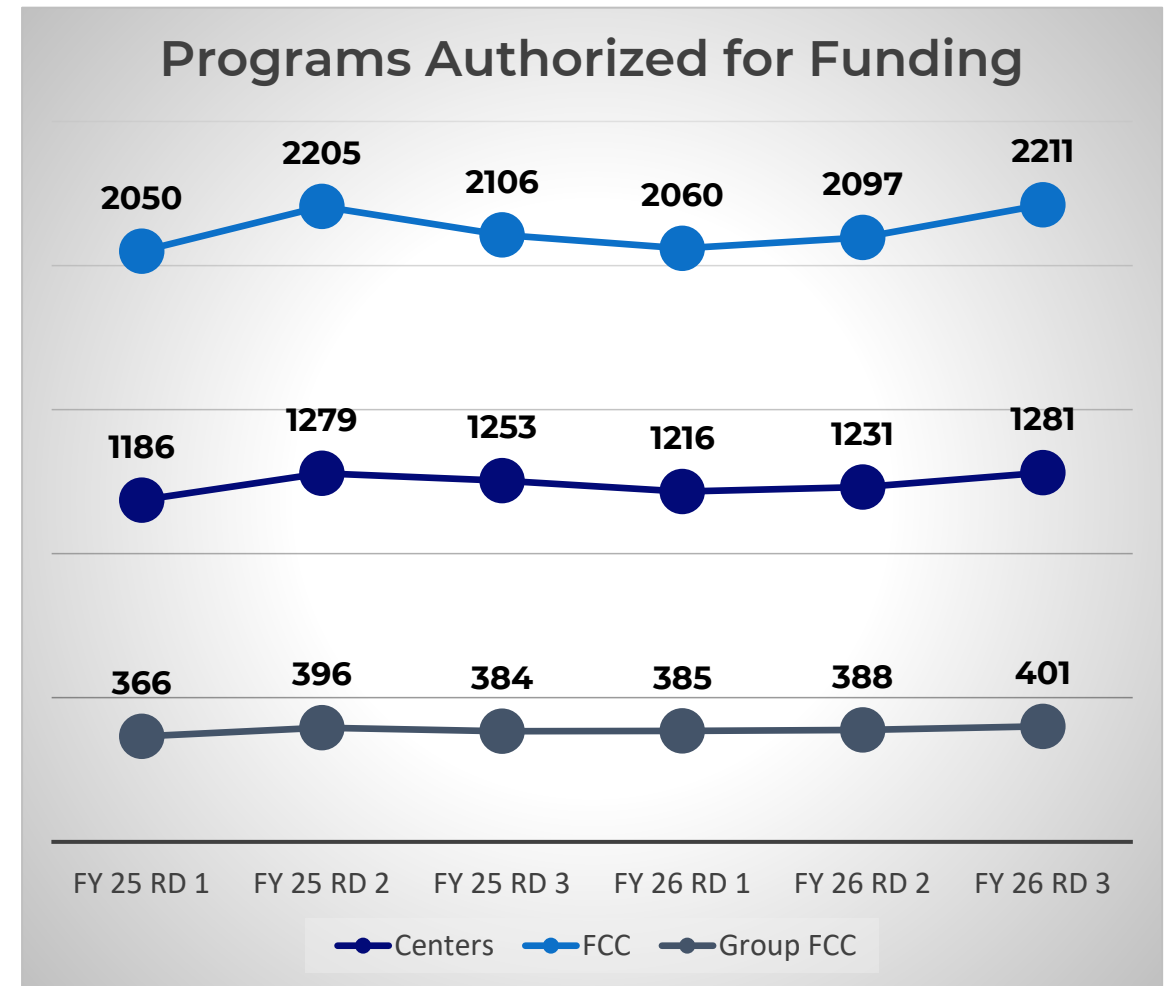
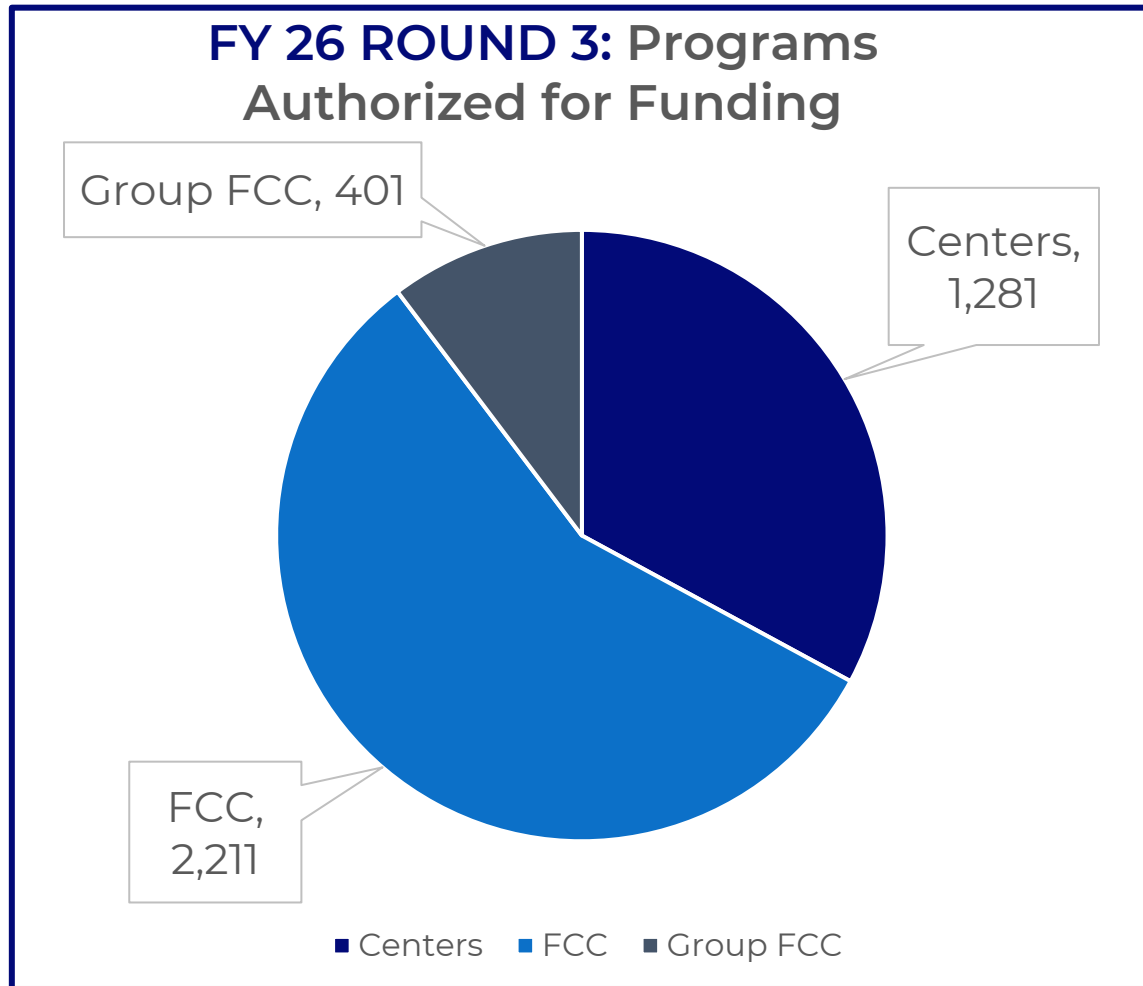
- Dr. Teresa Ramos, Secretary
- Chelsey Ament, Private Secretary
- Thomas Bazan, Chief Fiscal Officer
- Aaron Beswick, Director of Special Projects
- Shontee Blankenship, Chief Quality and Safety Officer
- Joslyne Carson, Private Secretary
- Christi Chadwick, Project Director – Workforce
- Jennifer Cohen-Deihl, General Counsel
- **Katerina Dawson, Hiring Specialist**
- Mackenzie Eisen, Project Director
- Sydney Ellison, Chief Operating Officer
- **James Fox, Director of Business Services**
- Julie Gilling, Director of Policy
- Paige Greenwood, Director of Family Engagement
- Arlene Herron, Human Resources Director
- Kelsie Kliner, Project Director
- Christina Krasov, Chief Data Officer
- Matthew Lehman, Agency Procurement Officer
- **Melissa Long, Hiring Specialist**
- Jessica Morris, Chief Information Officer (DoIT)
- **John R. Nuss, Hiring & Classifications Manager**
- Maya Portillo, Project Director – Funding Design
- Gerson Ramirez, Director of Legislative Affairs
- Patricia Rooney, Chief Family and Community Systems Officer
- KC Stralka, Assistant Secretary of Project Management & Operational Excellence
- **Ravinder Sahota, Deputy General Counsel for Leg/Policy**
- **Ethan States, Payroll Specialist**
- Shannon Tesio, Director of Fiscal Services
- Marilyn Vazquez, Director of Communication
- Erin Von Holten, Budget Director
- Ann Whalen, Assistant Secretary of Education & Care Services
- Brandon Woudenberg, Deputy General Counsel

# Smart Start Workforce Grants



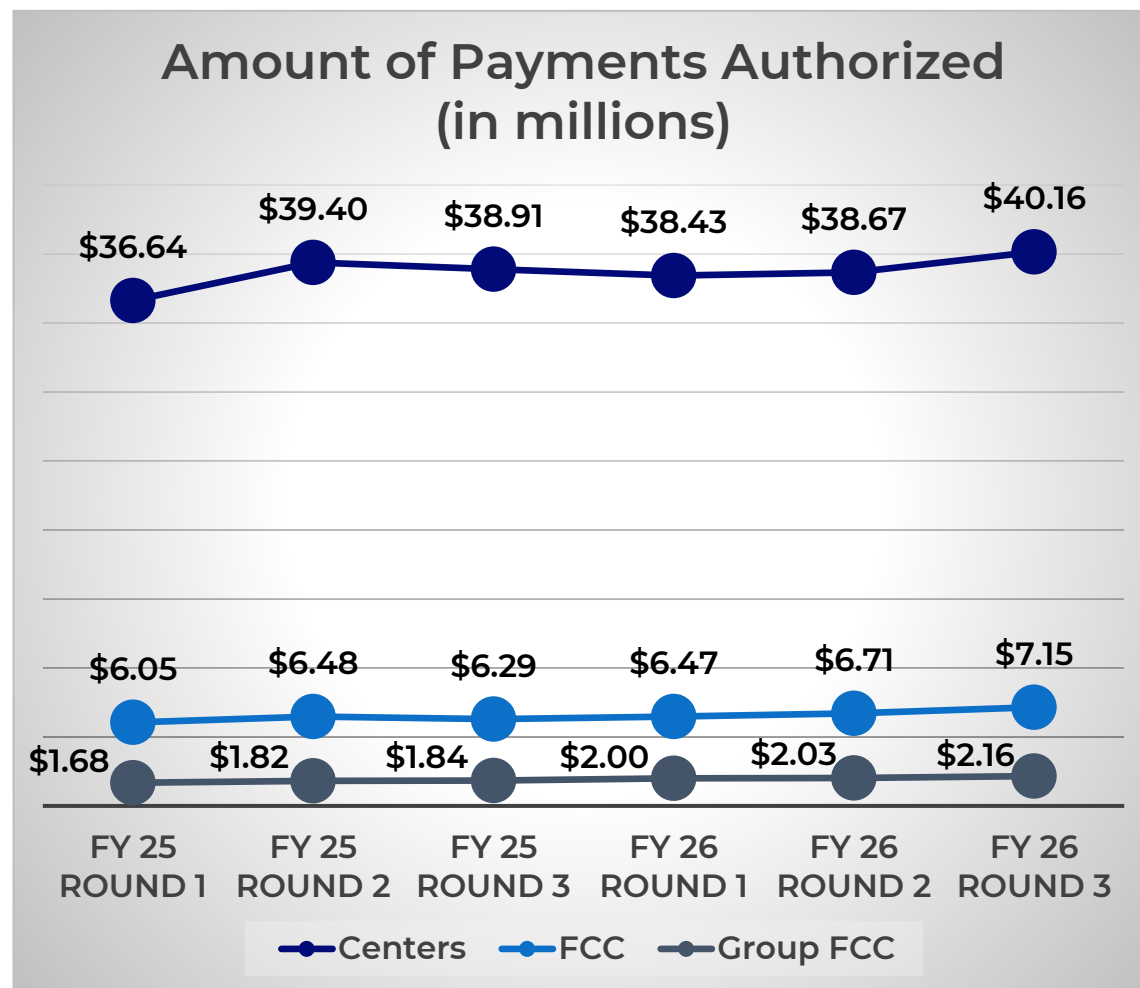
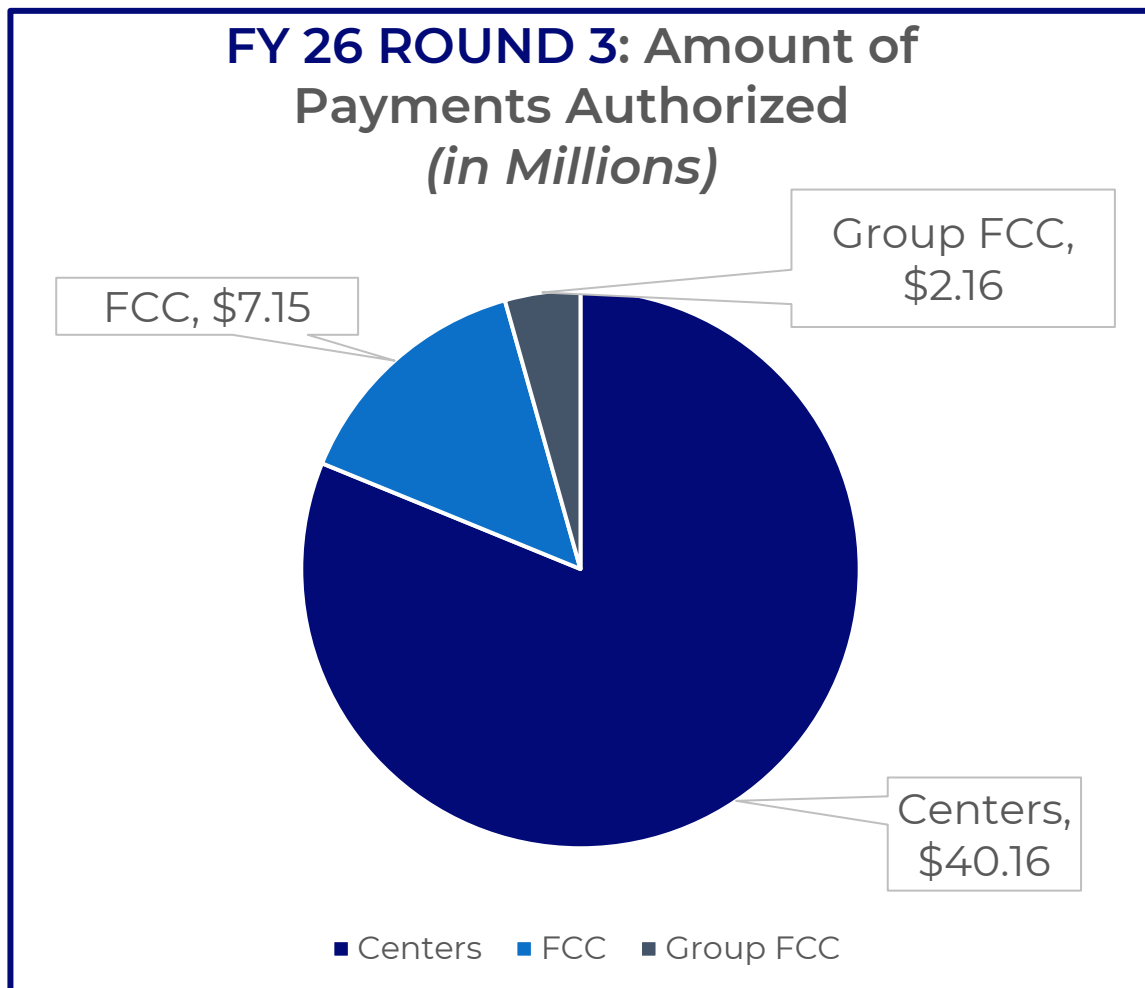
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3,893 programs have been awarded Smart Start Workforce Grants for FY 26 Round 3.



*\*Totals reflected here are subject to change based on final analysis*

Spending for Smart Start Workforce Grants is above budget of \$48 million, with \$49.47 million awarded in FY 26 Round 3.



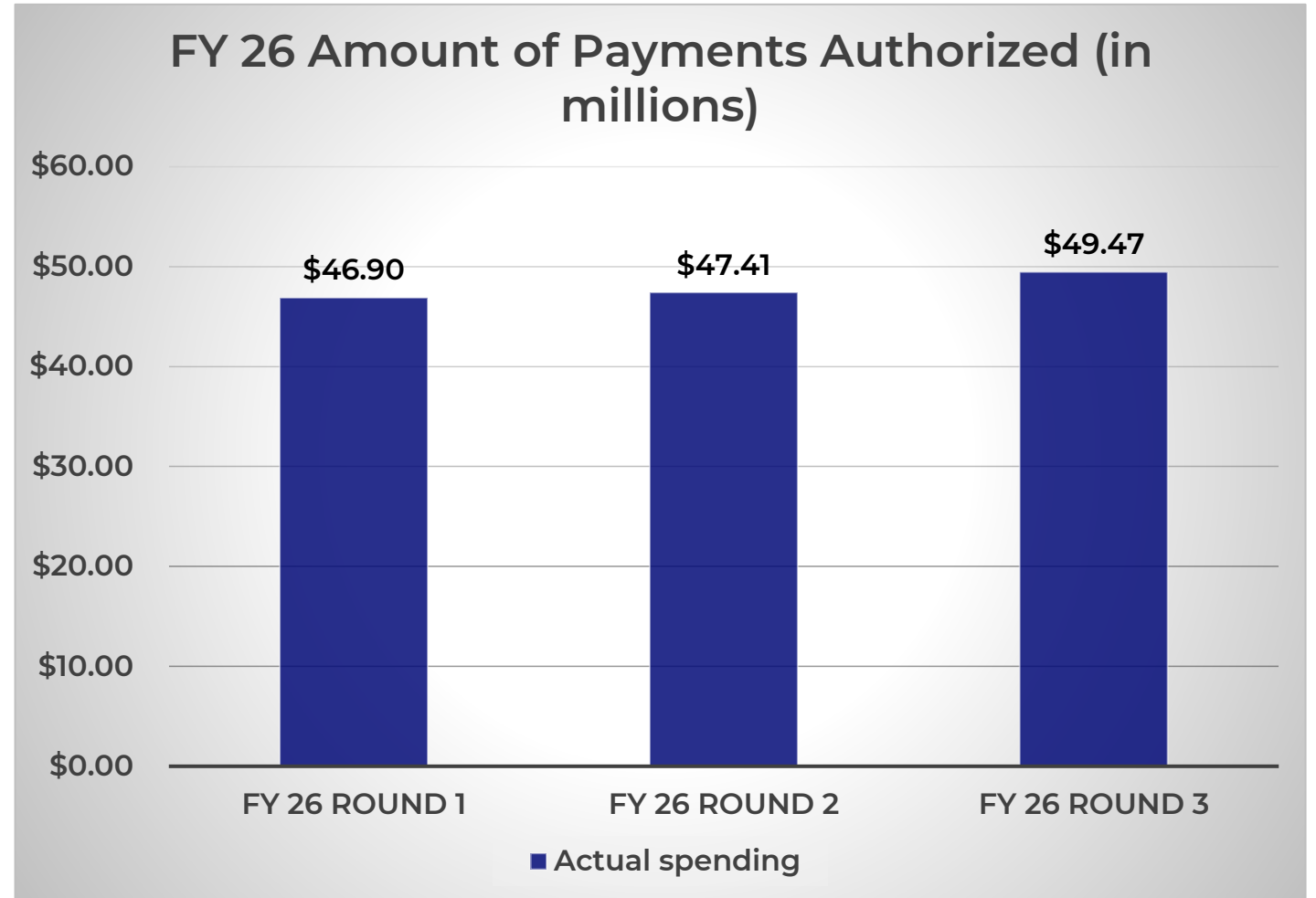
\*Totals reflected here are subject to change based on final analysis

In the first 3 Rounds of FY 26, Smart Start Workforce Grants have been awarded to 4,163 unique child care programs at a total cost of \$143.78 million to date.

Unduplicated count of programs awarded funds in FY 26 through Round 3:

- 1,355 centers
- 2,377 family child care homes
- 431 family child care group homes
- **4,163 total programs**

*\*Totals reflected here are subject to change based on final analysis*



\*The budgeted amount for grant awards is \$48 million round.

**With Round 3 awards *greater than the available budget*, the state will need to determine a plan should insufficient funding be available in the future.**

In the past, ad hoc members have emphasized the importance of *consistency and stability for current grantees as a priority.*

Scenario 1: Eligible applications total less than budget (~\$48 m)



No change

Scenario 2: Applications are near or equal to available budget



Make adjustments to remain within the allocated budget

Scenario 3: Applications are greater than available budget



### Ad hoc feedback (April 2025)

If applicants exceed the available budget in future Smart Start Workforce Grant rounds, Ad hoc participants:

- Advised **prioritizing current Smart Start Workforce Grantees** to preserve trust and stability.
- Warned that any **reduction in** Smart Start Workforce Grants **amounts could lead to layoffs** and would **erode trust**.
- Cautioned that a **long-term freeze on new applicants could lead to resource inequities** for those who are not yet receiving SSWG.

## Some requirements of Smart Start Workforce Grants are set in the administrative rule, which cannot be changed before the start of FY27

Outlined in administrative rule

### Wage floors

- Set by program type and CCAP Region

### Eligibility parameters

- Licensed child care center, family child care or family group child care
- Operating full-day, full-year
- CCAP threshold of 15% enrollment (centers), 1 child (FCC), 2 children (FGCC)
- Classroom enrollment minimums (centers), enrollment minimums (FGSS and FCC)
- Not receiving Early Childhood Block Grant, Head Start, or Early Head Start funds (at a classroom level for centers; program-level for FCC and FGCC)
- Maintain a current Gateways to Opportunity Registry Director Portal

## Multiple factors will be considered when evaluating the available options to stay within budget

### Potential criteria:

- Allowed by statute and administrative rule
- Aligned to guiding principles and equity considerations
- Anticipated cost savings
- Possible to implement with current technology and systems

### *Options may include:*

- No longer offer limited waivers (*for programs not meeting classroom enrollment minimums due to low enrollment, lack of staff or other reasons*)
- Modified process and policies around eligibility determinations
- Adjustments to award amounts
- Other?

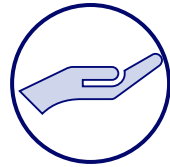
## Small Group Discussion

1. Does the summary of input around budget considerations from April 2025 still resonate? Has anything changed?
2. If applicants exceed the available budget in future rounds...
  - a) What options might the state consider?
  - b) Who might be impacted by these options?
  - c) How might the principles and equity considerations guide decision making within constraints of the rule?

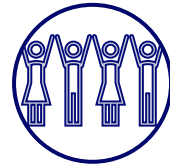


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## Guiding principles have informed Smart Start Workforce Grants decisions



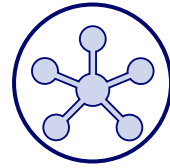
Decisions must be grounded in equity, prioritizing programs with limited access to funding



Decisions must be informed by child care providers and educators who stand to be most impacted by them



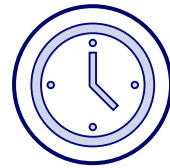
The program must stay within the allocated budget and meet the Governor's stated goals



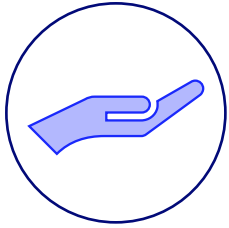
Grants should maximize program reach while also setting a wage scale that creates competitive wages for the field



Grants must provide eligible programs with enough funding to cover the costs associated with requirements



We recognize that we need to make decisions on a timeline with the best information we have



## Equity considerations informed Smart Start Workforce Grants decisions

- Center children and families, especially the [ELC priority populations](#), focusing on racial equity
- Focus on the needs and priorities of historically disenfranchised children and families, providers, workforce, and communities
- Consider how our decisions may benefit or harm historically disenfranchised children and families, providers, workforce, and communities
- Seek the expertise and input from stakeholders already engaged with our historically disenfranchised children and families, providers, workforce, and communities
- Where possible, consider data that provides insight into the relative impact on historically disenfranchised children and families, providers, workforce, and communities

# Program Reach



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**Smart Start Workforce Grants are reaching the majority of eligible providers, but home-based providers have lower uptake rates than centers.**

Program Type	Number of Licensed Programs (as of April 2025)	Estimated Number of Eligible Programs*	Number of Programs Authorized for Funding in FY 26 Round 3	Percent of Eligible Programs Authorized for Funding in FY 26 Round 3
Centers	2,555	1,477	1,281	86%
Homes	4,819	3,302	2,211	67%
Group Homes	721	521	401	77%

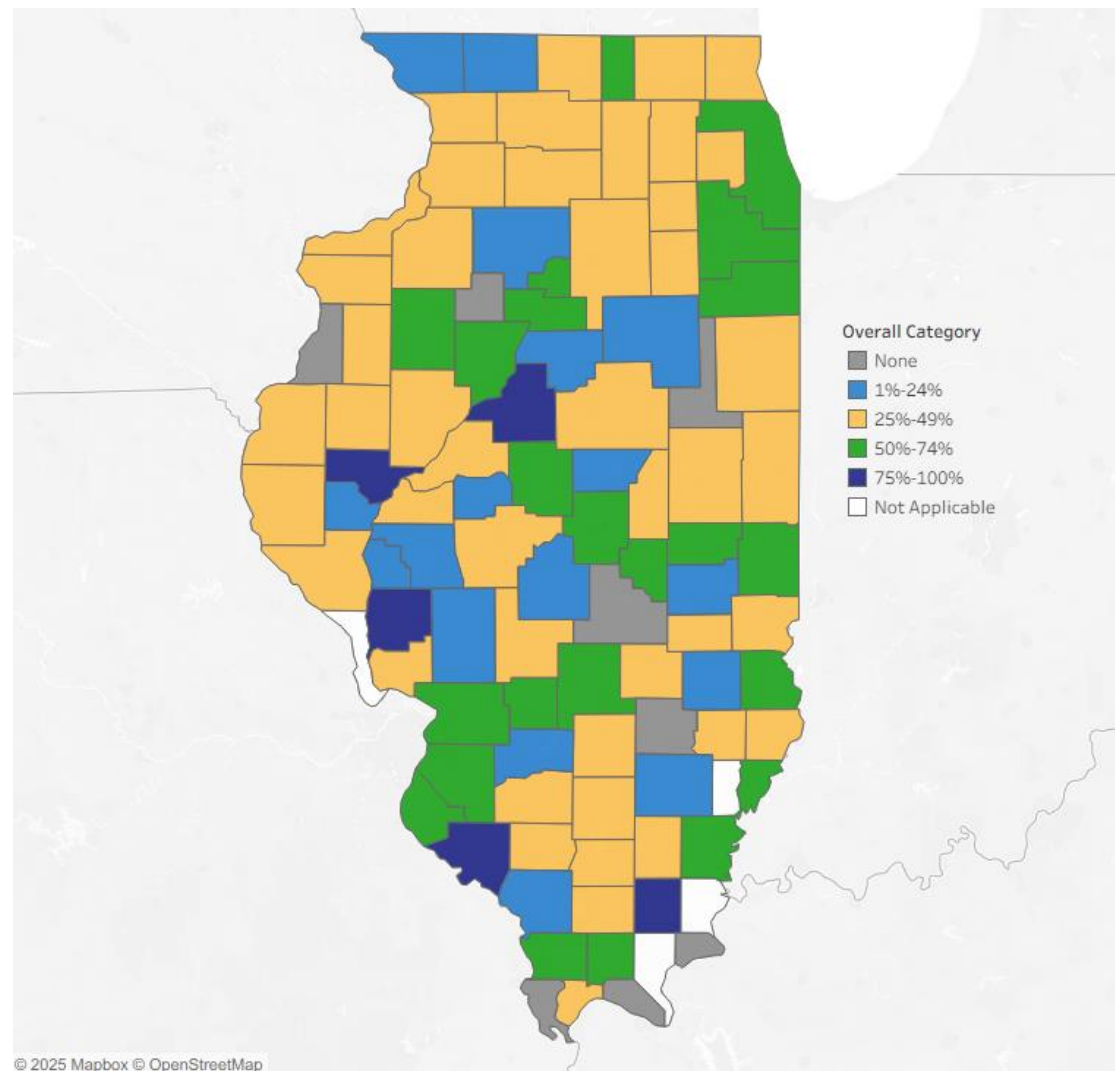
\*Percent eligible based on estimate of programs meeting the CCAP enrollment requirement. Does not consider other eligibility criteria including funding source or classroom enrollment minimums (data not available).

## Smart Start Workforce Grants serve nearly every community in Illinois, reaching 45% of all licensed programs in FY 26 Round 2.

### Data notes:

- All licensed programs means the number of licensed providers on CCR&R database as of 4/1/25. Excludes providers if they were marked as any of the following:
  - Before/After School Only;
  - Head Start/Early Head Start Only;
  - Preschool for All Only;
  - Park/Recreation Only;
  - School Age Program

Round 2 Funded **Programs** as a Percent of All Licensed Programs

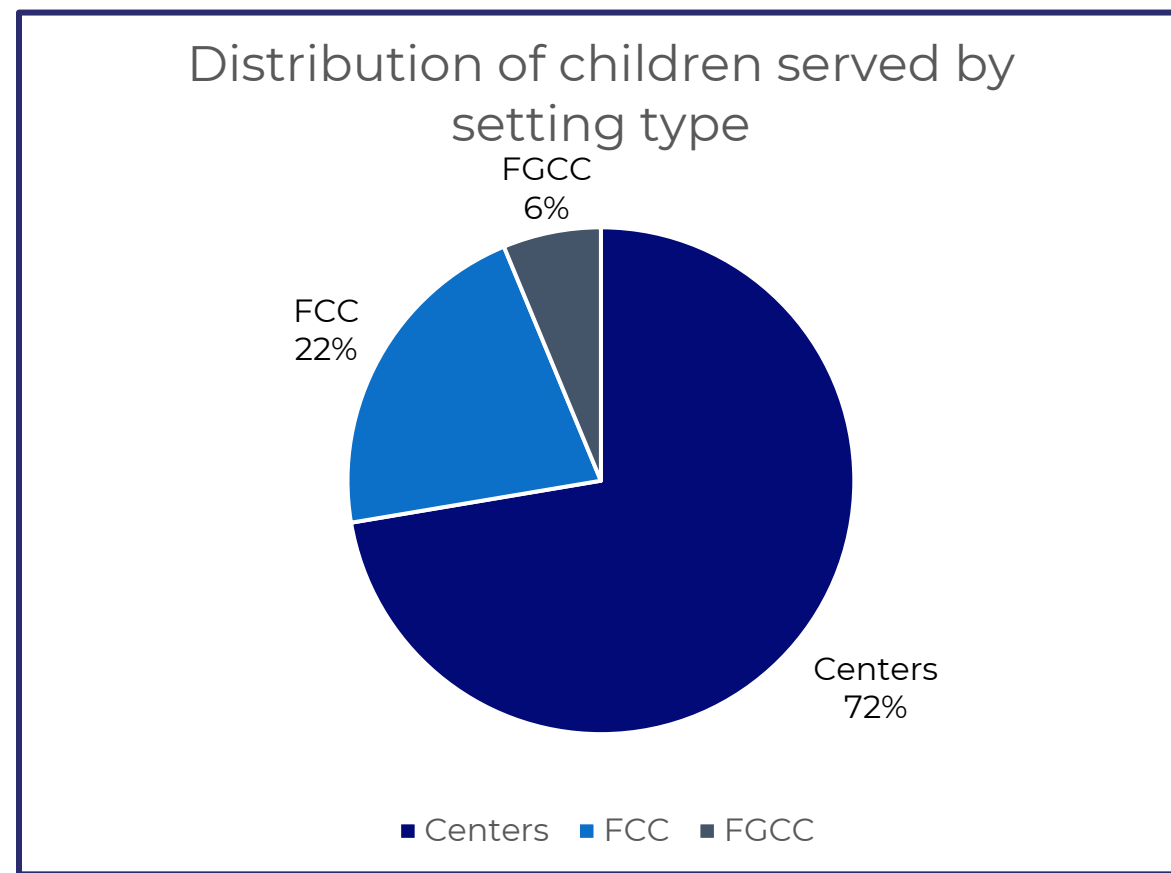


### Reach by program type

Centers	Family Child Care	Family Group Child Care
48% (+1% since 11/24)	44% (+1% since 11/24)	54% (+3% since 11/24)

## Smart Start Workforce Grants primarily reach children in center-based settings and those enrolled in CCAP.

- In Round 3, **106,892 children** have teachers receiving support for higher wages.
  - Centers: 77,337
  - Family child care: 22,870
  - Family group child care: 6,685
- In Round 3, **roughly 89,600 children enrolled in CCAP** are served by providers\* receiving Smart Start Workforce Grants.



\*Data notes:

- Includes the highest number enrolled throughout the past year, including classrooms without SSWG funding.
- Does not include site administered CCAP or DCFS Foster Care Child Care Payments.

# Raising ECEC Wages



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**For FY 25 Round 2, wages exceeded the wage floor across all groups and continued to rise for many assistant teachers in centers and homes.**

	Teachers/Leads			Assistant Teachers			FCC and FGCC Assistants		
Group	Wage floor (hourly)	Avg. Hourly wages: FY 25 Round 1	<b>Avg. Hourly wages: FY 25 Round 2</b>	Wage floor (hourly)	Avg. Hourly wages: FY 25 Round 1	<b>Avg. Hourly wages: FY 25 Round 2</b>	Wage floor (hourly)	Avg. Hourly wages: FY 25 Round 1	<b>Avg. Hourly wages: FY 25 Round 2</b>
Group 1A	\$19.25	\$21.18	<b>\$21.18</b>	\$18.00	\$18.47	<b>\$18.52</b>	\$18.00	\$18.40	<b>\$18.41</b>
Group 1B	\$18.50	\$19.83	<b>\$19.81</b>	\$17.25	\$17.53	<b>\$17.65</b>	\$17.25	\$17.88	<b>\$18.10</b>
Group II	\$18.25	\$19.24	<b>\$19.10</b>	\$17.00	\$17.24	<b>\$17.39</b>	\$17.00	\$17.61	<b>\$17.36</b>

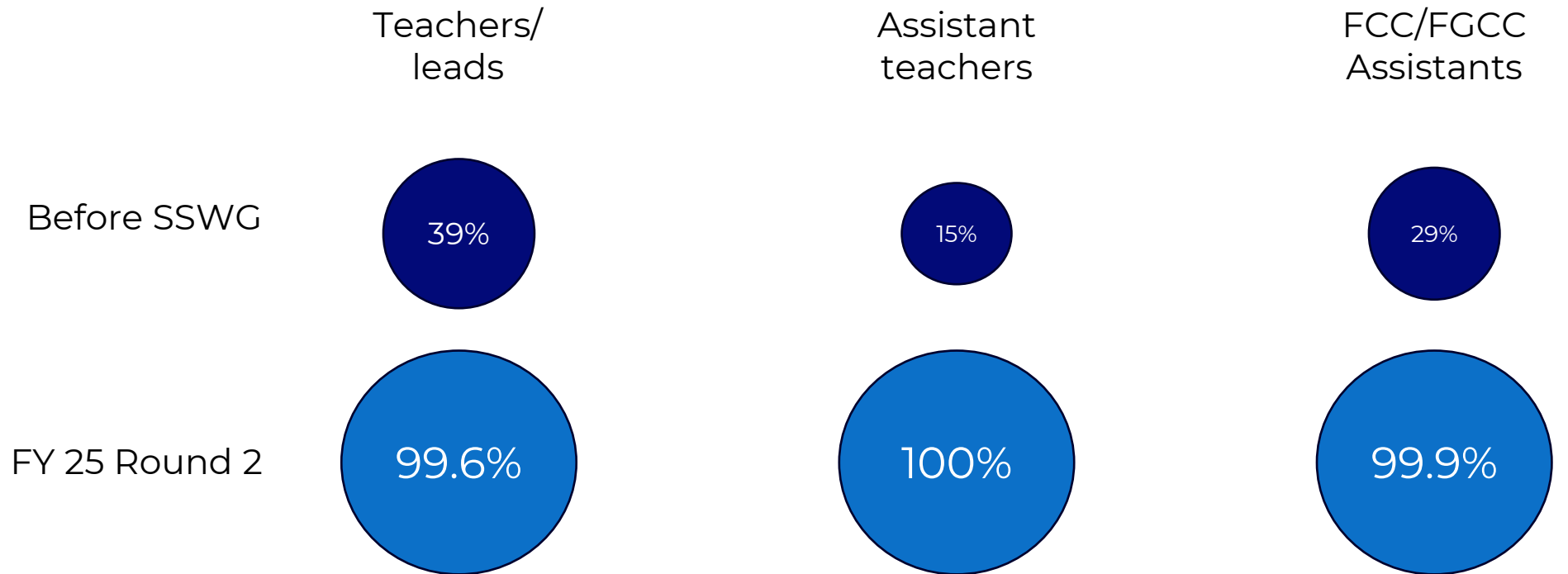


**Group 1A:** Cook, DeKalb, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, and McHenry counties.

**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

Across participating programs, reporting from FY 25 Round 2 shows that ECE professionals are now earning wages that meet or exceed the wage floor.

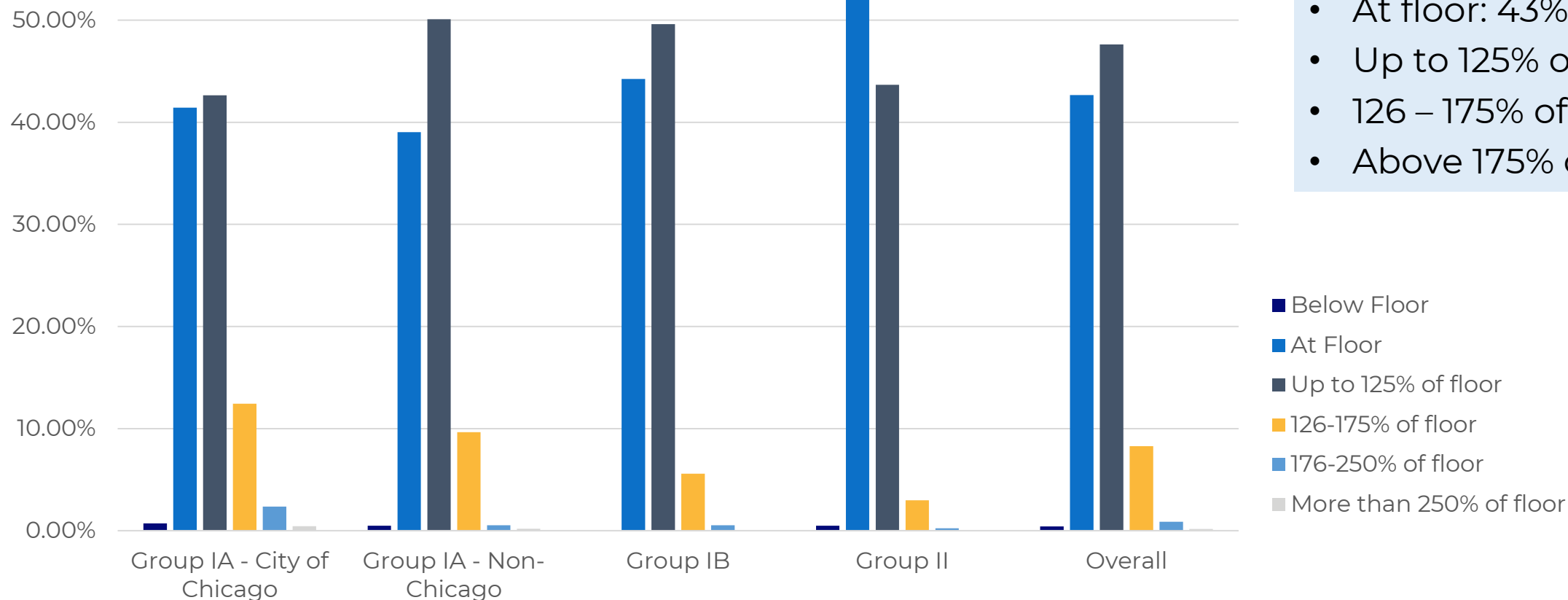


ECE professionals in SSWG classrooms or programs earning wages that meet or exceed the wage floor

## Across all regions, about 91% of lead teachers are making between 100% - 125% of the wage floor.

Wages of lead teachers in participating centers

Source: FY 25 Round 2 Reporting



### Average across regions:

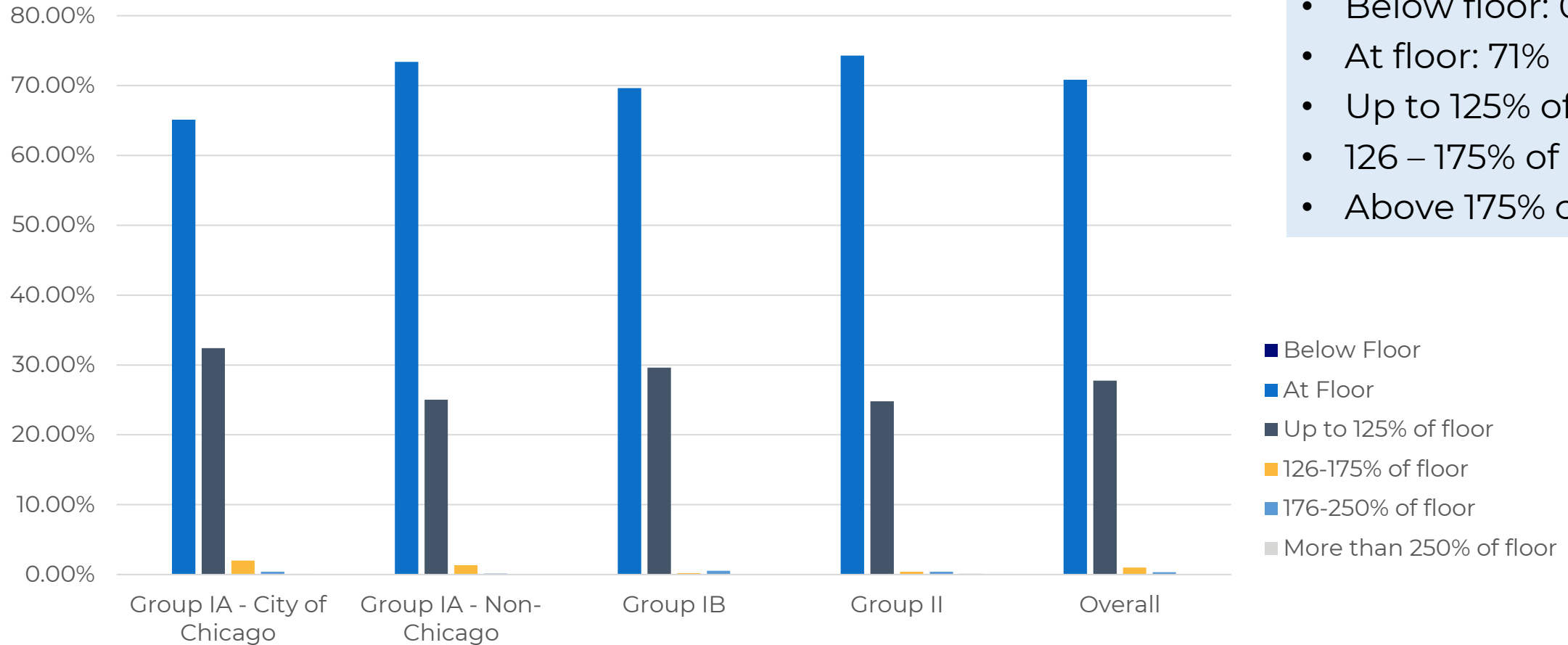
- Below floor: <1%
- At floor: 43%
- Up to 125% of floor: 48%
- 126 – 175% of floor: 8%
- Above 175% of floor: <1%

- Below Floor
- At Floor
- Up to 125% of floor
- 126-175% of floor
- 176-250% of floor
- More than 250% of floor

**Assistant teachers in participating centers are typically earning the wage floor, with 28% making wages above the floor.**

Wages of assistant teachers in participating centers

Source: FY 25 Round 2 Reporting



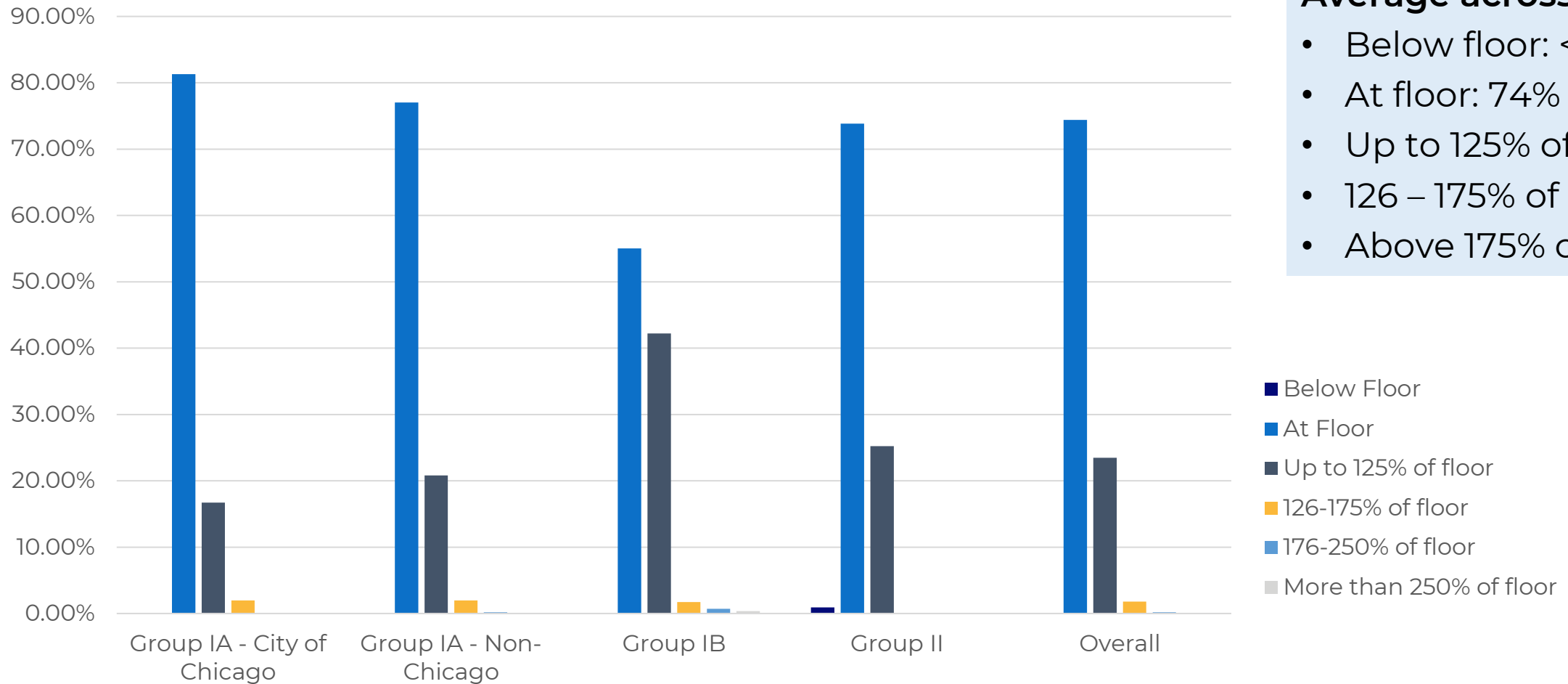
**Average across regions:**

- Below floor: 0%
- At floor: 71%
- Up to 125% of floor: 28%
- 126 – 175% of floor: 1%
- Above 175% of floor: <1%

# Smart Start Workforce Grants – wage impact for home-based assistants

The majority of assistants in participating FCC and FGCC programs (74%) are making the wage floor, with those in Group 1B slightly more likely to be making just above (up to 125% of) the wage floor.

Wages of assistants in participating FCC and FGCC



### Average across regions:

- Below floor: <1%
- At floor: 74%
- Up to 125% of floor: 23%
- 126 – 175% of floor: 2%
- Above 175% of floor: <1%

- Below Floor
- At Floor
- Up to 125% of floor
- 126-175% of floor
- 176-250% of floor
- More than 250% of floor

## Small group discussion

1. What patterns stand out to you in this most recent data?
2. Does this data reflect your experiences/what you are hearing from the field?
3. What questions does this data raise?

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# Smart Start Quality Supports



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The Smart Start Quality Support (SSQS) program helps *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 include:

- 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

**As of July 2025, current Smart Start Quality Support grantees have had more defined opportunities and targets for quality improvement.**

In FY26, we are focused 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 from community engagement:**

- 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 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 (annually) 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 received targeted funding to support new quality improvement activities.

Programs were allocated **\$5,000 per classroom** and were required to meet the following expectations:

- Expectation 1: Participate in **Environmental Rating Scale (ERS) assessments** for at least two of their classrooms.
- Expectation 2: Administer **Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) assessments** for all eligible children (0 to 5) enrolled in their programs.\*

Release of the second half of the funding was contingent upon programs meeting all expectations in both areas.

### Quality Improvement Goals

- Establish a shared baseline of program quality
- Build staff and leadership capacity to use quality tools
- Use data to drive continuous quality improvement

*\*All eligible children refers to any child who did not receive a screening in any other program or setting.*

## Expectation 1: Participate in Environmental Rating Scale (ERS) assessments for at least two of their classrooms.

**As of Fall 2025, all programs met the goal of completing baseline ECERS and ITERS assessments.**

- Key impacts include:
  - Increase in programs applying for the next Circle of Quality or planning to using the assessment path
  - More connections between programs and CCR&R specialists in their regions
  - Expanded opportunities to use ERS tools for CQI efforts with participating programs
  - Staff in programs, including administrators, are more aware about the benefits, importance, and usefulness of assessments
  - Staff are sharing assessment information with other peer providers as an opportunity

“The SSQS process has been supportive and collaborative. The assessments and follow-up feedback helped us reflect, set goals, and improve classroom practices in ways that directly benefit children and teachers.”  
- SSQS center director

“The detailed feedback from our ECERS-3 and ITER-3 reports **transformed our classroom approach** from general improvement to **data-driven intentionality**.

By highlighting specific areas of effectiveness alongside clear opportunities for growth, the reports **helped our teachers identify simple, actionable ways to adjust their daily interactions and classroom environments**.

The metrics enabled our team to set and achieve targeted goals, visibly enhancing the overall experience and engagement of the children in our program.”

– *SSQS center director*

**Expectation 2: All lead teachers and administrators are trained to administer Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ-3) assessments; begin administration for all eligible children (0 to 5) enrolled.**

**As of January 2026, 392 teachers and staff have completed ASQ-3 trainings.**

- All centers met the ASQ training requirement for classroom leads and administrators, and several exceeded expectations with full-staff participation
- Key impacts include:
  - Teachers adopting strengths-based language such as “meeting milestones”
  - Every center is either administering ASQ-3 or has a plan to start in January
  - Taking the training encouraged teachers to want to administer assessments and engage parents in the process

*My major takeaway from the session is:*

- “That developmental screenings are most effective **when teachers and families work together.**”
- “ASQ3 is an important way to **gather all the information about the child** and **communicate with parents** to have a better idea where children are at developmentally.”  
*- Training evaluation comments*

“If I see a child not meeting their developmental milestones, **I feel more confident and have a better understanding** on how to approach the idea of **talking with the parents** to help get that child to meet their developmental milestones in life.”  
*- Training evaluation comment*

**The lessons from implementing the Quality Growth Incentive requirements will inform the priorities and focus for Smart Start Quality Support through the second half of FY 26.**

**Proposed activities for the second half of FY 26 include:**

- An additional ASQ training in April for new staff and for existing staff who have not yet participated
- Support programs to administer screenings with children and families
- Continued engagement in Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) activities
- Potential focus on ASQ: Social-Emotional, informed by participant evaluation feedback
- Increased emphasis on Program Administration Scale (PAS) assessments as a next step in quality improvement

## Large group discussion

1. What stands out to you from the information shared today?
2. Given our equity principles, which program design decisions should we reconsider, refine, or strengthen?

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# Public Comment

## FY 26 Meeting dates

- *Friday, Sept. 5, 2025, 11 AM – 1 PM*
- *Tuesday, January 27, 6 PM – 8 PM*
- **Friday, March 6, 2026, 11 AM – 1 PM**
- **Tuesday, May 5, 2026, 6 PM – 8 PM**

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## Next Steps

**Open Survey for Feedback:**

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

**We encourage you to lend your voice in transition engagement opportunities across various platforms at IDEC. Sign up for the IDEC newsletter to stay informed at [www.idec.gov](http://www.idec.gov).**



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Thank you!