

SMART START

EARLY CHILDHOOD APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM



Frequently Asked Questions (FY26)

1. What is the Smart Start Early Childhood Apprenticeship Program?

The Smart Start Early Childhood Apprenticeship Program is a pilot program of the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) Division of Early Childhood (DEC). DEC is piloting this apprenticeship program to bridge and connect scholarship programs leading to credentials and degrees with on-the-job training and mentorship tailored to the context of the specific communities where apprentices work. The program will incorporate child care program agreements, specifically to provide funding for participating centers for increased compensation based on staff qualifications. This unique component of DEC's Apprenticeship model complements existing efforts underway to upskill staff through scholarship programs by materially supporting employers with funding for increasing compensation therefore, incentivizing child care program directors to support their staff in going back to school as well as bringing a new generation of caregivers and teachers into the workforce.

2. What are the components of a federally registered Apprenticeship program?

All federally registered Apprenticeship programs must include business involvement, structured on-the-job training, related instruction, rewards for skill gains, and national occupational (industry-recognized) credential.

3. What are the responsibilities for programs participating in the Smart Start Early Childhood Apprenticeship Program?

Participating programs must:

- Pay salaries or wages at or above the program minimum salary scale for all registered Apprentices and other staff reported on monthly spreadsheets.
- Submit monthly payroll reports on time (by the 15th of each month).
- Identify site-based Mentor(s) to support program Apprentices.
- Participate in additional data collection efforts to support project evaluation.
- Maintain an Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFSS) license.

4. Is there financial aid available to assist registered Apprentices with completing college coursework?

Yes. Apprentices employed by an Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFSS) licensed full-day, full-year child care program participating in the Smart Start Early Childhood Apprenticeship Program may utilize the Gateways Scholarship Program. This individual-based scholarship opportunity for professionals working in early care and education provides financial assistance for early childhood education and child development (ECE/CD) coursework and degrees offered through participating colleges and universities dependent on available funding.

The scholarship will pay:

- 100% of the apprenticeship pilot recipient's tuition
- Up to \$250 in book costs per class
- Debt Relief – up to \$1,500 at accredited Illinois Colleges or Universities

For more information, email apprenticeship@inccra.org.

5. How do participating programs complete required monthly reporting?

Monthly reporting must be submitted by the 15th of the following month. For example, January expenses must be reported by February 15th. If the 15th falls on a weekend and/or holiday, reports are due the next business day. Late initial reporting may push payments to the end of the following month. All submissions must include the reporting spreadsheet as well as supporting documentation for all expenditures. Acceptable documentation includes non-editable payroll reports directly from a payroll system, paystubs, receipts, and/or other relevant supporting documentation.

Reporting and documentation should be submitted via the webform link located on the private Apprenticeship webpage. Any questions regarding the program should be directed to apprenticeship@inccrra.org.

6. Who should be included on monthly reporting?

All federally registered Apprentices should be reported monthly, regardless of their status or whether they receive an add-on to their pay rate through Apprenticeship funding. Any additional staff members who are receiving an add-on should also be reported.

7. How are staff pay rate add-ons calculated?

Add-ons are fixed and based on the Smart Start Early Childhood Apprenticeship Program Salary Scale (below).

To determine the fixed add-on rate, the appropriate assumed wage for the corresponding position and group should be subtracted from the required wage scale minimum.

For example, a Teacher from Group 1B has an assumed hourly wage of \$16.00. Per the Wage Scale, a Teacher with an Associate's Degree and an ECE 4 from Group 1B is required to be paid a minimum rate of \$20.50 per hour. When the assumed hourly wage is subtracted (\$16.00) from required scale minimum (\$20.50), the fixed add-on rate for that Teacher is \$4.50.

Base Wages (Employer Contribution)			
2024-25 Assumed Wages	Group 1A*	Group 1B**	Group 2***
Site Director (<i>median wage for each region</i>)	\$20.00	\$20.00	\$20.00
Assistant Director/Other Non-Classroom (<i>median wage for each region</i>)	\$19.55	\$18.49	\$18.00
Teacher (<i>median wage for each region</i>)	\$17.00	\$16.00	\$15.40
Teacher Assistant (<i>minimum wage for 2024-25</i>)	\$15.48	\$15.00	\$15.00

Wage Scale (Required Minimums)				
	Credential Level	Group 1A*	Group 1B**	Group 2***
		Target Hourly		
Teacher	Bachelors + Professional Educator Licensure (PEL)	\$29.33	\$24.00	\$23.75
	Bachelors + ECE Level 5	\$26.50	\$22.50	\$21.25
	Associates + ECE Level 4	\$22.25	\$20.50	\$20.25
	ECE Level 2 or 3	\$20.75	\$19.25	\$19.00
	DCFS Minimum - ECE Level 1	\$19.25	\$18.50	\$18.25
Assistant Teacher	Associates + ECE Level 4	\$20.75	\$19.25	\$19.00
	ECE Level 2 or 3	\$19.25	\$18.50	\$18.25
	DCFS Minimum - ECE Level 1	\$18.00	\$17.25	\$17.00

*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

8. What is the minimum required pay rate?

The minimum hourly pay rate for Apprentices and staff is determined by position, highest earned credential, and degree level. The minimum base pay rate for Apprentices and staff can be no less than Illinois state minimum wage.

9. Is braided and blended funding allowed?

Yes. Participating programs can request reimbursement for hours that Apprentices and staff work in a child care funded position. Add-ons cannot be paid for hours worked in Early Head Start, Head Start, Preschool for All, or Prevention Initiative funded positions. Apprentices and staff fully funded by those programs are not eligible for reimbursement through the Apprenticeship program. If a staff member's time is split, only non-Early Head Start/Head Start/Preschool for All/Prevention Initiative hours are eligible. Programs must maintain timesheets or payroll coding to support pro-rated reimbursement. No double-funding of the same hour is allowable.