

# SMART START

## ILLINOIS EARLY CHILDHOOD APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM



### Frequently Asked Questions (FY27)

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

The Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) Division of Early Childhood (DEC) began piloting an apprenticeship program to bridge and connect scholarship programs leading to credentials and degrees with on-the-job/real-world training and mentorship tailored to the context of the specific communities where apprentices work. On July 1, 2026, this pilot transitioned from IDHS Division of Early Childhood to the Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC). The program will incorporate child care program contracts, specifically to provide funding for participating centers for increased compensation based on staff qualifications. This unique component of IDEC'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 Illinois 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 10th 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 Child Care License.

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

Yes. Apprentices employed by an Illinois Child Care Licensed full-day, full-year child care program participating in the Smart Start Illinois 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](mailto:apprenticeship@inccra.org).

## 5. How do participating programs complete required monthly reporting?

Monthly reporting must be submitted by the 10th of the following month. For example, January expenses must be reported by February 10th. If the 10th 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@incrra.org](mailto:apprenticeship@incrra.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 Illinois Early Childhood Apprenticeship Program Salary Scale (below)

Group 1A <sup>^</sup>	Credential Level	Base Wage (Employer Contribution)	Required Wage Add-On	Target Hourly Overall Wage
Teacher	Professional Educator License (PEL) with an Early Childhood Endorsement	\$17.00	\$12.33	\$29.33
	Bachelor's + ECE Level 5	\$17.00	\$9.50	\$26.50
	Associate's + ECE Level 4	\$17.00	\$5.25	\$22.25
	ECE Level 2 or 3	\$17.00	\$3.75	\$20.75
	Illinois Child Care Licensing Minimum - ECE Level 1	\$17.00	\$2.25	\$19.25
Assistant Teacher	Associate's + ECE Level 4	\$15.48	\$5.27	\$20.75
	ECE Level 2 or 3	\$15.48	\$3.77	\$19.25
	Illinois Child Care Licensing Minimum - ECE Level 1	\$15.48	\$2.52	\$18.00

<sup>^</sup> Group 1A: Cook, DeKalb, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, and McHenry counties.

Group 1B <sup>^</sup>	Credential Level	Base Wage (Employer Contribution)	Required Wage Add-On	Target Hourly Overall Wage
Teacher	Professional Educator License (PEL) with an Early Childhood Endorsement	\$16.00	\$8.00	\$24.00
	Bachelor's + ECE Level 5	\$16.00	\$6.50	\$22.50
	Associate's + ECE Level 4	\$16.00	\$4.50	\$20.50
	ECE Level 2 or 3	\$16.00	\$3.25	\$19.25
	Illinois Child Care Licensing Minimum - ECE Level 1	\$16.00	\$2.50	\$18.50
Assistant Teacher	Associate's + ECE Level 4	\$15.00	\$4.25	\$19.25
	ECE Level 2 or 3	\$15.00	\$3.50	\$18.50
	Illinois Child Care Licensing Minimum - ECE Level 1	\$15.00	\$2.25	\$17.25

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

Group 2^	Credential Level	Base Wage (Employer Contribution)	Required Wage Add-On	Target Hourly Overall Wage
Teacher	Professional Educator License (PEL) with an Early Childhood Endorsement	\$15.40	\$8.35	\$23.75
	Bachelor's + ECE Level 5	\$15.40	\$5.85	\$21.25
	Associate's + ECE Level 4	\$15.40	\$4.85	\$20.25
	ECE Level 2 or 3	\$15.40	\$3.60	\$19.00
	Illinois Child Care Licensing Minimum - ECE Level 1	\$15.40	\$2.85	\$18.25
Assistant Teacher	Associate's + ECE Level 4	\$15.00	\$4.00	\$19.00
	ECE Level 2 or 3	\$15.00	\$3.25	\$18.25
	Illinois Child Care Licensing Minimum - ECE Level 1	\$15.00	\$2.00	\$17.00

^ 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. Can programs using multiple public funding sources participate?

Yes. Participating programs can request reimbursement for hours that Apprentices and staff work in a child care funded position. Programs using multiple public funding sources may participate, and staff may receive add-ons when the cost is charged to the funding source that directly benefited.

Add-ons cannot be paid for hours worked in Early Head Start, Head Start, Early Childhood Block Grant Funded 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.

Child Care provider sites are only allowed to participate in and receive funds from one of the three Smart Start Child Care Programs - Smart Start Workforce Grant, Smart Start Quality Supports, or Smart Start Apprenticeship - within a state fiscal year. Sites that receive funding from multiple sources in a single fiscal year may be required to return funds.

### 10. What are the consequences if an individual is determined to have submitted fraudulent, altered, or false documentation or information?

A program determined to have submitted fraudulent, altered, or false documentation or information may be banned from INCCRRA administered programs for a time period to be determined by the Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC). Any benefit received by or paid on behalf of the program as a result of fraudulent, altered, or false documentation or information must be reimbursed to INCCRRA by the program as determined by IDEC.

Staff employed by a program that has submitted fraudulent, altered, or false documentation or information will be unable to participate in INCCRRA administered programs while employed there.