

Grow, strengthen the state's early childhood system through an FY26 budget that includes increases in funding, some of which may be outlined in Year Three of *Smart Start Illinois*.

- **Increases, at a minimum, funding for the Early Intervention (EI) program by \$60 million.** Families in the EI program are facing historically high service delays, delays tied directly to an ongoing workforce crisis. A recent cost model produced by IDHS suggests the program is underfunded by nearly \$200 million and reimbursement rates must be increased by 95% to cover providers' cost and time fully. Additional funds would allow IDHS to issue a substantial reimbursement rate increase to providers, which would reduce service delays for families.
- **Increases, at a minimum, funding for maternal and child home visiting programs by \$5 million.** Additional funds would allow IDHS to expand programming, increase salaries for the existing workforce, and improve some of the state's core infrastructure components.
- **Increases, at a minimum, funding for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) and Smart Start Child Care by \$170 million.** Additional funds would allow IDHS to direct more resources to its nation-leading Smart Start Workforce Grants while also managing CCAP's growing caseload, among other program improvements.
- **Increases, at a minimum, funding for the Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) by \$75 million.** Additional funds would allow ISBE to increase grants to existing programs, particularly those serving infants and toddlers and those run by community-based organizations. It would also allow ISBE to expand slots so more children can access infant-toddler and preschool services.
- **Increases, at a minimum, funding for the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) by \$15 million.** Additional funds would allow ISAC to issue scholarships to more students entering or working in the early childhood workforce. Demand for scholarships greatly outweighs supply, as evidenced by the FY25 application process.

Support legislation to improve the licensing process for child care providers. Child care providers have consistently raised concerns about the ability of DCFS to license and monitor child care programs effectively. A handful of common-sense fixes to the licensing system are needed to improve the experience for providers and to create a smoother handoff between DCFS and the new Illinois Department of Early Childhood, which will assume licensing and monitoring responsibilities in FY27.

Support legislation to create an advisory committee on preschool special education. Not all preschoolers with disabilities have access to high-quality inclusive early childhood services provided in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). And there is no formal body through which families, LEAs, providers, and advocates can wrestle produce recommendations for how to improve early childhood special education services. Legislation is needed to require ISBE to create a committee of its *Advisory Council on the Education of Children with Disabilities* focused on preschool special education.

Support legislation to create the Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program. Robust paid family leave polices give parents the opportunity in the first weeks of life to focus on their role as a parent and on the well-being of their child, particularly when affordable, quality infant care is in low supply and licensed child care is not available until a baby is six weeks old. Illinois is falling behind other states in providing this life-changing benefit to families with young children.