

# Gov. Pritzker Launches Smart Start Tour With Visits To Springfield, Metro East, And Mount Vernon

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SPRINGFIELD - Governor JB Pritzker launched the ‘Smart Start’ statewide tour, visiting locations across the state to announce historic investments in early childhood education. Joined by local and community leaders, the Governor kicked off the tour with three stops at schools and early childhood centers in Springfield, East St. Louis, and Mount Vernon to highlight his administration’s plan to transform the state’s system of early childhood education and care.

Beginning with a \$250 million investment this year, Smart Start Illinois is a multi-year plan to provide every child with access to preschool, increase funding to childcare providers to raise wages and quality, invest in new and expanded early childhood facilities, and reach more vulnerable families with early support.

“Access to quality childcare and early childhood education yields better results for children and parents alike,” said Governor JB Pritzker. “It gives us the best return on investment of any government expenditure, and it sets our kids up for success in kindergarten, elementary school, and beyond — even yielding higher graduation rates. From home visiting services from birth to age three, childcare for infants as young as six weeks old, and pre-schools — Smart Start Illinois is a comprehensive plan to build one of the best early childhood systems in the nation.”

"Our historic investments in early childhood education and development address critical needs that will nurture children, support families, and strengthen Illinois for generations to come," said Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton. "The Smart Start plan will touch every level of early childhood development by improving access to quality care, providing more support to providers, and increasing wages and growth opportunities for workers who teach and care for our little ones. Thank you, Governor Pritzker, for your leadership and your commitment to our children."

Smart Start Illinois demonstrates the state’s ongoing commitment to children, families, teachers, and childcare providers. The \$250 million investment in FY24 includes:

- \$75 million additional for the Early Childhood Block Grant to put Illinois on a path to creating more than 20,000 new Pre-K spots for every child who wants one
- \$130 million for nation-leading Childcare Workforce Compensation Contracts that will stabilize providers and give childcare workers a raise
- An additional \$40 million for Early Intervention programs to enhance services for families and give providers a raise
- \$5 million to expand the Illinois Department of Human Services’ Home Visiting Program so more families who want it can receive this early support

In addition to Smart Start investments, other investments being made in the early Childhood Education Space include:



- \$100 million in capital dollars for early childhood providers to expand existing facilities and build new facilities
- \$70 million for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)
- \$12 million in new funding for scholarships and apprenticeships to expand the childcare workforce
- \$1.6 million to launch the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, a statewide literacy initiative to send free books to children from birth-through age five

“I’m thrilled to join Governor Pritzker today for the first stop in this tour,” said State Representative Joyce Mason (D-Gurnee). “As Chairperson of the house childcare and early childhood education committee, I am excited to learn directly from providers and families throughout Illinois. I look forward to collaborating with the Governor, early childhood experts, stakeholders and my legislative colleagues to help Smart Start become reality and to ensure that every child in Illinois has access to quality care, services, and early childhood education that will best prepare them for the future.”

“I am pleased to join Governor Pritzker in leading Illinois to be the best state to raise young children,” said State Senator Cristina Pacione-Zayas (D-Chicago). “Together with my colleagues in the General Assembly we will make historic investments to optimize early childhood development, support families, and bolster early childhood professionals. Delivering this message directly to providers and families will be crucial for gaining support to advance the proposal to victory.”

“Early childcare education investments set children up to be lifelong learners and put them on a path to great success,” said State Senator Doris Turner (D-Springfield). “We have to remove the barriers families face when deciding if they can send their kids to school or put food on the table. A strong investment in early childhood education can set up our youth for a brighter tomorrow.”

“As a mother and teacher, I know just how important early childhood education is to a child's trajectory,” said State Representative Sue Scherer (D-Decatur). “Studies show, time after time, that a child who does not have preschool or an equivalent alternative is behind their peers by the time they enter the third grade. I appreciate Governor Pritzker's commitment to historic funding levels of early childhood education and addressing the abundance of childcare deserts across the state.”

“Education is vital to the development of young people – and that starts years before kindergarten,” said State Senator Christopher Belt (D-Swansea). “As a former school board member, I have seen firsthand the grave reality that is education inequality. Making early childhood education more accessible for all students – regardless of their ZIP code or the color of their skin – will set them up for future success.”

The Smart Start tour began at District 186 in Springfield, a district the Governor visited earlier this year to highlight his administration's support for early childhood education throughout his first term and during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Today, the Governor once again visited Springfield's Early Childhood Learning Center to highlight expanded investments under his Smart Start Illinois plan.

The Smart Start tour then continued at Vivian D. Adams Early Childhood Center in East St. Louis, which serves 520 students ages 3 to 4 in their 26 pre-k classrooms. In the fall of 2022, Vivian Adams Early Childhood Center was awarded the ExceleRate Gold Circle of Quality, demonstrating they are meeting or exceeding quality benchmarks on learning environment, instructional quality, and all program administrative standards, including group size and staff/child ratios, staff qualifications, and professional development.

The final stop of the day was at Spero Family Services' Bright Start Early Childhood Center in Mount Vernon. Spero provides community services to children ages 6 weeks to preschool including home visiting, counseling and wellness care, and foster care.

